

EXPRESSIVE MEANING IN MUSIC: GENERALITY VERSUS PARTICULARITY

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The dilemma referred to in the title occurs in many contexts concerned with expressive meaning in art, and especially music, which suggests that the issue it raises will be central to any complete theory of musical expressiveness. One notable attempt to resolve the paradox of simultaneous generality and particularity in music is in Aaron Ridley's book *Music, Value and the Passions*. I show why I consider his account unsatisfactory and then propose my own resolution of the paradox. It takes the form of distinguishing between two distinct notions of generality (which I term 'generality' and 'abstractness') and of particularity ('specificity' and 'concreteness'), and of constructing two relatively independent oppositions: the *concrete* versus the *abstract* and the *specific* versus the *general*. Finally, I show that a description of music's expressive meaning as abstract, but specific, rightly captures what is usually thought about music, and does not entail any contradictions.

I. INTRODUCTION

THERE is an understandable tendency, when discussing the expressive meaning¹ in music and its relationship to our emotions or feelings, to conceive of this meaning as unusually vague, general or abstract. An example of a simple version of this view is furnished by Joseph Swain:

A passage of music could have a semantic range that is just like that of any word in a language in its essence, only much broader in its scope.²

¹ The term 'meaning' should not be understood as confined to the linguistic meaning (or as necessarily associated with conventionality, referentiality or the like) and thus the phrase 'expressive meaning in music' does not carry the implication that musical expressiveness has a linguistic character. Compare, for example, the different senses of 'meaning' distinguished by Stephen Davies in *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell U.P., 1994), pp. 29–39.

² Joseph Swain, 'The Range of Musical Semantics', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 54, no. 2 (1996), p. 140. The use of the term 'semantic' with respect to music may be viewed as questionable, but this quotation is meant solely to furnish a fairly recent example of the sort of intuition as to the breadth and vagueness of expressive meaning in music that will emerge in due course as being one-sided.

Each one of those words, however, when isolated, has a far greater semantic range. A passage of instrumental music like the Mozart Quintet has a semantic range far greater still.³

According to a more discerning account, such as that espoused by, among others, Kendall Walton, an extreme breadth of significance of this sort, in any medium, whether music or anything else, could hardly account for our interest in what it conveys. As Walton pointedly remarks, the most universal story ‘about *personhood*’—something like ‘Once upon a time there was a person. The End.’—would also stand out for its excruciating lack of interest, its total vapidness.⁴ If the expressive meaning of music were always much broader than that of almost any words (excluding, perhaps, a few entirely general terms such as ‘sad’ or ‘joyful’), our interest in a medium that cannot convey more than this would be difficult to explain.

Indeed, in more perceptive accounts we invariably find that this intuition regarding the abstract character of music’s expressive meaning is accompanied by a second intuition, almost equally compelling and yet apparently opposed to the first, in that it consists of a recognition of the exceptionally precise and specific⁵ character of that meaning.⁶ As Walton, for example, puts it:

Music may well express the ‘dynamics’ of emotions with extreme specificity, in much more detail than can be done easily or at all in painting or literature. Music may not be able to distinguish between fury and fear, but it may portray *very precisely* the nature of certain (nonintentional) feelings or sensations one might have when one is either furious or afraid. . . . The difference between music and

³ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁴ Kendall L. Walton, ‘What Is Abstract about the Art of Music?’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 46, no. 3 (1988), p. 357.

⁵ At this stage I will use all of these terms to loosely indicate a binary opposition of a generic sort, which stands in need of further specification. The different authors I quote use different terms to capture this opposition (or perhaps to capture different aspects of it—but in every case it is always viewed as just a single binary opposition). On the one side we have, in principle, just three terms: ‘general’, ‘abstract’, or ‘universal’; on the opposite side, a greater variety: ‘individual’, ‘singular’, ‘particular’, ‘concrete’, ‘specific’, ‘distinct’, ‘definite’, or ‘precise’. Up to the end of the third section of this paper I will use these terms fairly loosely and interchangeably, in line with everyday usage. Only in the fourth section will I define more precise, technical meanings for some of these terms.

⁶ In fact, even Swain notices that ‘Given the proper context, any musical passage may have a semantic content that comes quite close to the precision of a sentence’ (‘The Range of Musical Semantics’, p. 149). But the context he speaks about is in most cases supplied by words that accompany music or which may serve to predefine some fixed denotative meaning for a particular musical phrase. But this leaves music itself untouched: pure music remains, after all, entirely general and abstract. And when, with the help of words, music becomes more precise, it only ‘comes quite close to the precision of a sentence’, which still does not explain why we should need or value music, since it implies that at most it can come close to what words do fully as a matter of course.

the representational arts may lie less in the degree of generality of their semantic properties than in the respects in which they are general and the respects in which they are specific.⁷

As it happens, Schopenhauer had already diagnosed this sort of polarization into two contradictory descriptions of music, as is shown by the following key passages from his writings (*italics added*):⁸

Therefore music does not express this or that particular and definite pleasure, this or that affliction, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment, or peace of mind, but joy, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, peace of mind *themselves*, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature, without any accessories, and also without the motives for them. (p. 261)

It is just this *universality that belongs uniquely to music, together with the most precise distinctness*, that gives it that high value as the panacea of all our sorrows. . . . Accordingly, music . . . is in *the highest degree a universal language*. . . . Yet its *universality is by no means that empty universality of abstraction, but is of quite a different kind; it is united with thorough and unmistakable distinctness*. (p. 262)

For, to a certain extent, melodies are, like universal concepts, an abstraction from reality. This reality, and hence the world of particular things, furnishes what is perceptive, special, and individual, the particular case, both to the universality of concepts and to that of the melodies. *These two universalities, however, are in a certain respect opposed to each other*, since the concepts contain only the forms, first of all abstracted from perception, so to speak the stripped-off outer shell of things; . . . Music, on the other hand, gives the innermost kernel preceding all form, or the heart of things. (p. 263)

. . . music expresses in *an exceedingly universal language*, in a homogeneous material, that is in mere tones, and *with the greatest distinctness and truth*, the inner being, the in-itself, of the world, which we think of under the concept of will . . . (p. 264).

Even though he does not, after all, succeed in unravelling the mystery that appears to be attached to the idea of combining ‘the utmost universality’ with

⁷ Walton, ‘What Is Abstract about the Art of Music?’, p. 358. However, since Walton’s main goal is the explication of the different senses of music’s abstractness (which in his account can be summarized as: (i) lack of meaning or semantic content, (ii) high generality of semantic content, (iii) non-perceptuality), he does not follow up on the intuition of music’s specificity and precision and does not address the problem of the apparent contradiction between these features.

⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), vol. I, §52, pp. 261–264. Schopenhauer’s original opposition is between *algemein* and *bestimmt*. The first of those, rendered in the translation here as ‘universal’, might also be translated as ‘general’, which in this context could be even more appropriate. Meanwhile an alternative to ‘distinct’ as a translation of the other term might be ‘definite’, ‘determinate’, or ‘precise’. Indeed, it is the conceptual opposition between ‘general’ and ‘precise’ that is perhaps best suited to describing the tension that Schopenhauer finds operative within the meanings of music.

‘the utmost distinctness’, Schopenhauer surely deserves credit for insisting that we treat these two characteristics as inseparable. The problem we then face is not that of deciding which of the two competing views is correct, but what to do in the face of the genuine paradox apparently entailed by the thought that neither insight can be allowed to imply rejection of the other. In short, we find ourselves compelled to simultaneously accept two contradictory characteristics of musical meaning—something which, from a logical point of view, is unacceptable.

The aim of this paper is to resolve this apparent paradox. The paradox is one that tends to recur, more often implicitly than explicitly, in many of the contexts where the problem of the expressive meaning of art, and especially of music, is addressed. Whether it can be resolved, and how, is something that could reasonably be expected to have important consequences for other related issues, such as the question of the relationship between meaning in music and linguistic meaning, and consequently for the much-debated question of whether music can be regarded as a form of language. Thus it is no accident that questions about the general or specific character of meaning in music frequently crop up when it is compared with linguistic meaning. In such circumstances, as the foregoing quotations from Swain, Walton, and Schopenhauer indicate, questions like the following tend to be asked: ‘Which of the two is more general?’ ‘Which is more precise?’ ‘Which is more abstract?’ This line of questioning is even more evident in the following well-known and perceptive remarks of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy:

People complain that music has so many meanings; they aren’t sure what to think when they are listening to it; and yet after all, everyone understands words. I am quite the opposite ... even ... individual words ... have so many meanings, they are so imprecise, so easy to misunderstand in comparison with music. ... A piece of music that I love expresses thoughts to me that are not too *imprecise* to be framed in words, but too *precise*.⁹ So I find that all attempts to express such thoughts in words may have some point to them, but they are also unsatisfying ...¹⁰

This statement is fraught with the same dichotomy: the common perception that music is more indefinite, vague and abstract than language is restated, only to be rebutted by Mendelssohn-Bartholdy’s forceful assertion that music is far more precise than words.

⁹ Mendelssohn-Bartholdy uses the same term as Schopenhauer, namely *bestimmt*, translated there as ‘distinct’. Cf. also the previous note.

¹⁰ Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1833 bis 1847* (Leipzig: Herman Mendelssohn, 1864), pp. 337–338. English translation in Peter le Huray and James Day (eds), *Music and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1981), p. 457.

Further notable instances of this dichotomy can be found in the work of Susanne Langer and Deryck Cooke, although the problem of generality versus particularity is not explicitly stated in either case. Even so, in the case of Langer, the way in which her ideas are formulated points in the direction of both views at the same time.¹¹ Meanwhile Deryck Cooke, in the course of developing his well-known lexicon of musical meanings (in which, it may be supposed, individual semantic units are to be ascribed meanings that are essentially general in character, like individual linguistic terms), also states that ‘Of course, no words can ever describe precisely the emotion of this movement, or any other’¹² and that ‘The words ‘anguish’, ‘joy’, ‘despair’, and ‘obsession’ are only hazy ... symbols for the particular kind and degree of anguish, joy, despair, and obsession which Mozart expressed *precisely* in his Fortieth Symphony, and which we can only experience by listening to that work’.¹³ This sort of equivocation is not uncommon in debates about music’s expressive significance. Sometimes only one of these views prevails, and even when both are given equal status, the problem of the apparent contradiction between them, and the need to resolve this, is not addressed.¹⁴ One notable exception here is to be found in the work of Aaron Ridley. He does indeed take up this challenge, and attempts to give an explanation of both intuitions in the context of a single theory of musical expressiveness.¹⁵ Before giving my own proposed resolution of this paradox, I will therefore consider Ridley’s account, with a view to showing why it is unsatisfactory and why it does not after all resolve the paradox.

II. RIDLEY’S PROPOSAL

With reference to the broader framework of his proposal, Ridley writes: ‘I agree with the widely held view that any such account [of musical expressiveness] will include reference to the resemblance of certain passages of (instrumental)

¹¹ For the analysis of this dichotomy in Langer, which Lars-Olof Åhlberg characterizes in terms of there being both a ‘particularist’ and a ‘generalist’ tendency in her thinking, see the latter’s article ‘Susanne Langer on Representation and Emotion in Music’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 34, no. 1 (1994), pp. 71–72.

¹² Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (London: Oxford U.P., 1959), p. 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

¹⁴ Schopenhauer and Walton go slightly further in giving at least a hint of how they might be reconciled: Schopenhauer suggests that we distinguish between two notions of universality or generality, while Walton proposes that music might be specific in certain respects but general in others—see the quotations already given from these two thinkers.

¹⁵ Aaron Ridley, *Music, Value and the Passions* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell U.P., 1995), especially chs. 5 and 6 (hereafter *MVP*); and ‘Musical Sympathies: The Experience of Expressive Music’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 53, no. 1 (1995), pp. 49–57.

music to human expressive behaviour'.¹⁶ Ridley calls this kind of resemblance *melisma* (*MVP*, p. 75), and seeks to shed light upon the lack of particularity of musical expressiveness by comparing melismatic gestures in music with the expressive physical gestures of actual people. Whereas the latter are accompanied by an actual occurrence of emotion, the former are not:

... music is not the kind of thing that can have a state of mind to reveal; and certainly insofar as music may resemble melismatically a person's expressive gestures, or the qualities of a voice, these musical gestures—be they never so precise—can show neither the existence nor the identity of any material object [toward which an emotion might be directed], which is to say that they can never reveal an episode of emotion. (*MVP*, p. 116)

Consequently

... music may adjust its gestures ... without the precision and the particularity achieved thereby revealing any precise or particular state of mind—in the *marcia funebre* [of Beethoven's *Eroica*], for instance, nothing more precise than 'on the unhappy side, and also resolute'. (*MVP*, p. 117)

And finally he sums up:

I have argued that such [i.e. melismatic] expressiveness can be expressive of only general *kinds* of states of mind. Thus, if a piece of music is melismatically expressive of sadness, then it may be expressive of sadness in an infinitely particular way but still not, on the account offered so far, expressive of any particular sadness. The expressive gesture is an individual; the state conveyed is not. (*MVP*, p. 118)

These remarks, according to Ridley, provide an adequate explanation of our intuitions about the abstract and general character of musical expressiveness. But to make sense of the opposite intuition about its exceptionally precise and specific character, Ridley holds that we should consider 'music to be expressive not merely of, for example, no particular sadness in an infinitely particular way, but of *this* and *that* infinitely particular sadness' (*MVP*, p. 119).

The account that Ridley takes to be required here follows from his own 'weak arousal theory' of musical expressiveness, according to which the latter cannot be explained solely in terms of melisma: a 'sympathetic response ... provides a bridge from mere *resemblance*, which is what melisma is a form of, to *expressiveness* proper. Melisma is expressive if it is moving' (*MVP*, p. 134). Or in other words: 'to hear music as expressive is to have an experience of the

¹⁶ Aaron Ridley, 'Musical Sympathies', p. 49. Ridley cites Donald Ferguson (*Music as Metaphor* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960]), Peter Kivy (*The Corded Shell* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1980]) and Jerrold Levinson ('Hope in *The Hebrides*' in his *Music, Art, & Metaphysics* [Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell U.P., 1990]) as adherents of this view, and could also have mentioned Stephen Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression*.

music that has affective aspects such that the melismatic gestures are heard as being expressive of the state which, sympathetically, we experience' (*MVP*, p. 138). On such an understanding of musical expressiveness, its precision and particularity can be explained with reference to the precision or particularity that belongs to this or that particular feeling which the listener experiences sympathetically in response to the melismatic resemblances in music: 'Thus the expressiveness ... becomes a function ... of our own state of mind. And that state of mind does have particularity or precision just inasmuch as it is ours' (*MVP*, p. 135–136).

When assessing Ridley's thesis, a number of problems arise. The recurring statement, crucial to the proposal, along the lines of 'expressive of no particular sadness in an infinitely particular way', can seem confusing and almost paradoxical. The only hint Ridley himself gives as to how the phrase 'expressive in an infinitely particular way' should be understood is contained in the following quotation: 'The first eight bars of the *marcia funebre* constitute an extremely precise musical gesture—indeed an infinitely precise gesture: *any* change in the music would alter its character' (*MVP*, p. 115). Accordingly, the air of paradox surrounding Ridley's recurring, puzzling statement could be dispelled by rephrasing it as: 'infinitely precise (in the sense just explained) but still not pointing to any individual state of sadness'. However, Ridley's statement is definitely no longer acceptable if the term 'no particular' is replaced by 'general', as in 'only a general kind of state of mind conveyed in an infinitely particular way' (*MVP*, p. 135), because the term 'general' seems to be unequivocally connected with the notion of at least small changes making no difference and this clearly runs against the idea of *any* change being relevant, which corresponds to Ridley's clarification of the phrase 'in an infinitely particular way'. So it is not now clear how we could avoid a contradiction here.

On a more general level there are familiar objections to interpreting the meaning of music (or of anything else) as dependent on the feelings of the listener, objections that appeal to the subjectivity of the meaning construed thus, or to its non-inherence in the medium, or to its relativity, and so on. These, however, are familiar problems that must bear on any version of the arousal theory, rather than being specific to our issue of generality and particularity. If we assume that these problems are somehow surmountable through embracing a *weak* version of the arousal theory such as Ridley's, we are then faced with the following alternatives: either the sympathetic response of a listener only draws on the qualities already present in the infinitely particular musical gesture, or it is in some respects qualitatively richer. In the first case, the only thing 'added' to the musical melisma by the fact of a listener responding to it sympathetically is—so to say—the actual reality of the feeling. We might say that 'existence' is added to 'essence'. But in this case, given that the feeling of the listener is not qualitatively richer than the melismatic musical gesture that

occasioned it, there does not seem to be any reason for saying that the former is any more precise than the latter. In the second case, where the actual feeling is taken to be richer than the musical gesture, although this might constitute convincing grounds for asserting that it is solely the feeling in the listener that accounts for the precision of music's expressiveness, it cannot be acceptable. This is because it produces exactly the sort of account which is the target of the familiar objections against the arousal theory already mentioned: of non-inherence, subjectivity, and relativity. If the meaning of a piece of music depends on feelings of the listener that are qualitatively richer than whatever may be found in the piece itself, then any meaning thus construed will not be inherent in the music. If the qualitatively richer feeling is the only thing that is precise or particular, then music does not participate in that precision or particularity.

These considerations seem to suggest that appealing to the listener's feelings will not be more effective in justifying the precision of music's expressiveness than appealing to the infinite particularity of musical gestures themselves. But according to Ridley, 'being expressive of no particular state of mind in an infinitely particular way' explains only the intuition about music's abstractness or generality and not the one about its precision,¹⁷ so that the latter remains unexplained.

It seems that these formal considerations would suffice by themselves to show that in fact Ridley has failed in his attempt to accommodate both of the apparently opposing intuitions within a single consistent model. However, there are also outstanding questions raised by Ridley's account as it relates to the facts about our perception of music.

Firstly, Ridley does concede that 'our responses [to music] can be disengaged without altogether incapacitating our faculty of judgement: we can still recognise melismatic features and describe them (elliptically) as expressive' (*MVP*, p. 133), and states several times (e.g. *MVP*, pp. 137, 138) that music perceived and interpreted in this way, that is without involving any affective response (what Ridley calls robotic perception) conveys only general states of mind, devoid of precision and particularity, which, on Ridley's account, is warranted only by the occurrence of such a response. Yet it seems that precisely the group of listeners probably most inclined to engage in such a purely cognitive mode of perception—namely professional music critics and musicians—is at the same time capable of perceiving the expressiveness of music in the most detailed, nuanced, and precise way. If this is so, then it is a fact which points directly away from Ridley's diagnosis.

A further and not unrelated problem is the following: Ridley evidently holds that the most common, paradigmatic mode of perception is not the robotic but the human one, that is, one that does involve sympathetic

¹⁷ Cf. the quotations above and *MVP*, pp. 118–119.

responses, so that the expressive meaning of the music is made exceptionally precise and particular. But if this were to be so, then it would be difficult to explain the widespread occurrence of the intuition pertaining to the generality and abstractness of musical expressiveness, which if anything seems to prevail over intuitions about its precision and particularity, and which, of course, is also shared by those listeners willing to acknowledge a significant role for their affective responses to music.

Finally, in Ridley's account musical expressiveness is presented as being *either* general—if perceived purely cognitively on the basis of melismatic resemblances alone—*or* particular—if simultaneously accompanied by a sympathetic, affective response—but not both at the same time. Yet what is most distinctive and mysterious about musical expressiveness—as is affirmed, for example, by the sources quoted at the start of this text, and most notably by Schopenhauer—is that it is, in a sense, abstract or general, and *at the same time* also precise and specific, but presumably in some other, distinct sense. Since Ridley's account would seem to only allow for expressiveness that is, depending on the case, *either* general *or* precise in nature, but not both at the same time, it is perhaps not coincidental that he cites a different group of authors as a source for each of the two opposing intuitions (Schopenhauer, Langer, and Walton for the generality or abstractness of musical expressiveness, and Mendelssohn and Budd¹⁸ for its precision), even though all of the authors that he cites as the source of the first intuition do, as it happens, also give equal emphasis to the second intuition as well.

I think it should be clear from these considerations that Ridley's attempt to resolve the paradox has proved unsatisfactory, and that some alternative means of achieving this are required.

III. A NEW APPROACH—GENERAL REMARKS

My alternative account of how this paradox should be resolved will be based on the premise that the intuition to be explained is not simply that music is, in some instances of experiencing it, general and in some others precise, but that it is simultaneously general or abstract in some sense, and at the same

¹⁸ *MVP*, pp. 118–119. Ridley's reference to Budd in this context is based on the following quotation: 'much expressive music is heard as containing states of mind that create the impression of a personality' (Malcolm Budd, *Music and the Emotions* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985], p. 149). It does not seem to be clear that this statement unequivocally entails the precision of music's expressiveness. But whether it does or not, it should be stated clearly that Budd in fact represents a rare example of someone who argues explicitly against this intuition. This he does in his later book (which was probably not available to Ridley when he worked on his), *Values of Art: Pictures, Poetry and Music* (Allen Lane: The Penguin Press, 1995), in the chapter entitled 'Music as an Abstract Art', pp. 143–145, where he insists upon music's abstractness.

time precise or particular, presumably in some other, distinct sense. This necessitates an enquiry into how, in principle, the general (or abstract) could be reconciled with the particular (or precise)—an issue that raises fundamental questions about the nature of each of these. Picking up on Schopenhauer's remarks, we might suppose that the solution to this problem would involve distinguishing between two concepts of generality and, following on from this, two concepts of precision or particularity as well. The issue calls for a thorough analysis, and if, as a result, the ensuing discussion appears rather lengthy, it will, I hope, be justified by the importance of the issues at stake,¹⁹ as well as by the fact that any insights achieved into the expressive significance of music will, in all likelihood, be relevant to the other arts as well.

Before embarking upon this analysis, it may be helpful to spell out briefly the underlying assumptions about musical expressiveness that will form the basis of my account. In this respect we need not invoke any full-blown theory of musical expressiveness but just a single assumption common to the majority of such theories, to the effect that musical expressiveness in some way involves a form of resemblance between musical structures and certain phenomena associated with emotions and feelings. The two main traditions regarding what it is that music resembles originate, as do so many things in philosophy, in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. According to the first—which could be called the paradigm of externality (as indicated in *The Republic*, 399a–c and *The Laws*, 654e–655b, 669c)—it is human expressive behaviour, as manifested in the human voice, bodily movement or bearing, facial expression, and so on. Although this conception seems to have attracted more widespread support in recent times (see note 16), Malcolm Budd, amongst others, claims that its 'application is exceedingly narrow'²⁰ and sees the more important correlate of resemblance in 'internal' psychological states.²¹ In this way he subscribes to the Aristotelian tradition (*The Politics*, Book VIII, ch. 5, 1340a–b), which in

¹⁹ The question of the precision of musical meanings has direct consequences for other issues, e.g. for comparing the capabilities of music and language with respect to the widespread belief that the latter is ill suited to expressing our emotional life. Similarly, it has implications for the oft-discussed question of whether it is possible to compile an emotional vocabulary of musical expressiveness, and for the more general problem of whether music is a form of language (see Cooke, *The Language of Music*). The solution to either problem depends very much on the issue of music's precision.

²⁰ Budd, *Values of Art*, p. 157.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 147. See also Jerrold Levinson, who principally subscribes to the first conception, yet who at the same time proposes to reclaim 'the relevance that the dynamic and phenomenological dimension of an emotion's inner aspect, and not just its behaviourally constituted aspect, can have' ('Musical Expressiveness', *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* [Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell U.P., 1996], p. 114). Aaron Ridley, in his later book, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P., 2004), also discusses the arguments in favour of both the externalist and internalist positions (pp. 73–74).

turn could be called the paradigm of internality. Other advocates of this position in the not-so-distant past have included Daniel Webb, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, Arthur Schopenhauer, Eduard Hanslick, Caroll Pratt, Susanne Langer, and Kurt Koffka, to name but a few. For the purposes of this paper we do not have to decide what the correlate of resemblance is, which means that our solution should be acceptable to adherents of any theory that appeals to resemblance.

As Ridley rightly observes (*MVP*, p. 75, 82–83), such resemblances need not be intended, and we may add that the relationship need not be underpinned by any convention to the effect that one of these elements (that is, the music) denotes the other, either. All we need assume is that one of the elements involved in the resemblance sometimes brings the other element to mind.²² For the purposes of this paper, I find it convenient to use the term ‘symbol’ in a very loose and broad sense to cover all phenomena of this kind. So whatever has meaning is called a symbol. There is no reason why such a notion should preclude intentional or conventional symbols, as they obviously also have the property of putting one in mind of whatever they symbolize. In addition to this, whenever the element of resemblance is involved, as, for example, it typically is in the case of pictorial representations, graphs, diagrams, or many other kinds of symbol, I will speak about iconic symbols.²³ The usual objection, that resemblance is symmetrical whereas the symbolic relation is not, can be met by the (almost equally unoriginal) appeal to the interest of the perceiver. If we, on the basis of a resemblance, see a horseman or a snowman in clouds, then it seems legitimate to say that they symbolize or represent a horseman or a snowman for us. But we are in no way ‘obliged’, by the same token, to be put in mind of some cloud when looking at a horseman or a snowman.²⁴

With this notion in place we may say that the only assumption we need is that musical expressiveness is connected with music’s being an iconic symbol of feelings, which amounts to no more than saying that music does in fact resemble some aspects of feelings—be it their external expressive manifestation in human behaviour or some sort of internal aspect—to such an extent that

²² In the case of music this ‘being put in mind of something’ need not even manifest itself on a fully conscious level—it need only make possible an association with some emotional quality or other. Cf. Ridley, *MVP*, pp. 79–80.

²³ I have deliberately chosen a designation which may at least be seen as being incongruent with, if not contradictory to, the usage of Peirce, who distinguishes between symbols and iconic signs. I have done this in order to emphasize that I do not seek to draw on Peirce’s notion, let alone the specific elaboration it receives in his theory. Of course, both notions, Peirce’s and mine, must somehow be related, as they both refer to resemblance. But I just want to have some primitive, generic notion, and so am using the term ‘iconic’ for lack of a different one.

²⁴ Cf. further remarks with respect to music, e.g. in Kivy, *The Corded Shell*, pp. 61–62.

we tend to be put in mind of these feelings when listening to it. It is probably clear that using the term 'symbol' to cover musical expressiveness in this sense does not imply that the latter, understood as music's meaning, is not grounded in its inherent properties, as is the case with purely conventional symbols.

Having settled these questions of terminology, we are ready to move on to an analysis of different senses of the general and the particular.

IV. CONCRETE—ABSTRACT—SPECIFIC—GENERAL

Instead of following Schopenhauer's suggestion that we distinguish between two types of generality or universality (cf. the quotation given earlier), I shall begin with a complementary distinction between two concepts of individuality or particularity. On the one hand the latter can refer to singularity or oneness, on the other hand it can also refer to the concreteness of individual existence.

A symbol, even if it is able to bring to mind a given individual object accurately and precisely, will never be able to cover every aspect of that object's real existence.²⁵ This means that as far as their meaning is concerned, symbols can never be individual in the latter of the two senses indicated above.²⁶ At the same time, according to the intuition of music's generality, it does not express any particular, individual feeling and may apply to a number of these. As I shall try to argue, the same could be said about a great majority of, if not all, iconic symbols: they may potentially relate to a number of individual objects. This means, their meaning cannot be individual in the former sense, the one connected with singularity or oneness, either.

If we wish to avoid the conclusion at this point that every iconic symbol necessarily possess a general meaning—in other words, if it is to be at all possible to uphold the intuitive thesis that the meanings of at least some of them are precise or particular—then we will need a concept of precision or particularity of meaning that does not automatically imply singularity. In short, we must not assume that a multiplicity of possible things that might be conveyed by a symbol always implies its generality. In our search for more adequate formulations of the concept of 'particularity', we may turn to Susanne Langer's concepts of concreteness and specificity, outlined in her essay 'Abstraction in

²⁵ With respect to proper names in language, which on certain interpretation might be thought to constitute a counterexample, cf. note 41.

²⁶ Terms such as generality, precision, abstractness, specificity and so on obviously apply to the meanings of symbols and not to the symbols themselves qua entities (i.e. not to the carriers of meaning). So whenever phrases such as 'general symbol', 'specific symbol' and the like are used here, they should be understood as standing for 'symbol with general meaning', 'symbol with specific meaning', and so on.

Science and Abstraction in Art'.²⁷ However, to be of use these still need to be properly defined, since Langer herself does not go beyond rather vague suggestions as to what they mean and how they differ from one another.

For the sake of ease of presentation, I will provisionally use the word 'concrete' to characterize the sort of meaning that encompasses all aspects of something as it really exists. Such meaning can only be viewed as an ideal case because, as has already been pointed out, no symbol can cover all aspects of what it conveys.²⁸ A picture, for example, does not show what the other, hidden side of the represented object looks like, or how that object smells, or how much it weighs. In fact, a whole range of its further attributes are missing. Hence, in theory at least, any representation of an individual object, even one produced with maximum accuracy and attention to detail, could refer equally well to other objects if their differences were confined to aspects not covered by the representation. A picture of a given house could well be taken to represent another house built in accordance with the same plans as long as the backgrounds, which in all likelihood are not identical, are kept out of view. Mr X's electrocardiogram could as well be a chart of company Y's share price fluctuations, or a graph of the changes of temperature and atmospheric pressure in a certain place. In none of these cases, however, are symbols with general meanings involved. To grant them that general status—since they could, in theory, refer to more than one object—would result in all iconic symbols becoming general, and in the concept of the general itself becoming redundant in this context. I will call the type of particularity which belongs to iconic symbols, and which is not connected in a necessary manner with individual reference, *specificity*. Yet the question remains of how to distinguish specific symbols from general symbols if the issue of the singular or multiple character of what is conveyed is no longer able to serve as a basis for the distinction. I will return to this problem later. Before doing so, however, it will be useful to elucidate more fully the newly introduced concept of specificity.

As defined above, specificity is a halfway house between the concreteness and the general. The really existing object can be viewed either in the totality of its existence, or selectively, in some of its aspects. Abstraction consists in bracketing out some of the object's properties. But despite the exclusion of—for example—the colour or size of the object, its abstracted shape (for example, an outline showing a concrete person) may still be specific rather than general. It is to this kind of symbol that we shall apply the notion of specificity from now on. Our hierarchy of terms will thus appear as follows: the

²⁷ In Susanne Langer, *Problems of Art. Ten Philosophical Lectures* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), pp. 163–180.

²⁸ Towards the end of this section a final, slightly different definition of 'concreteness' will be given, which will cover not only idealized but also real cases of meaning.

concrete occupies the bottom end of the spectrum. It seems to be specific and absolutely non-abstract; moreover, it is the exclusive repository of singularity and oneness *sensu stricto*. Abstraction leads to the loss of concreteness, but not to loss of specificity. The majority of iconic symbols are of this kind: they are abstract (and thus non-concrete) but specific. In the next stage, generalization produces concepts that are general, non-specific, and non-concrete. The three levels can be described by means of all the terms used so far, in the following way:

1. concrete, non-abstract, specific, non-general
2. non-concrete, abstract, specific, non-general
3. non-concrete, abstract, non-specific, general

What this arrangement shows beyond doubt is that two binary oppositions are in fact operative here: concrete versus abstract (manifested by the joint appearance of the concrete and non-abstract and vice versa) and specific versus general. An identical alignment of terms can be found in the conclusion of Langer's essay 'Abstraction in Science and Abstraction in Art': '... many people stoutly maintain that art is concrete and science abstract. What they should properly say—and perhaps really mean—is that science is general and art specific'.²⁹ And we might add: both science and art are abstract, and at the same time neither is concrete. Hence, this pair of opposites fails to highlight any significant difference between them.³⁰

We should now return to the question of the criterion for distinguishing between general and specific symbols, since the potentiality for single versus multiple references cannot serve this purpose. But first of all we have to realize what kind of iconic symbols *are* general. To put the question in that way involves going against the relatively widespread belief that such symbols are inherently specific;³¹ it is therefore necessary to illustrate the point with examples that would show the inadequacy of this view.

²⁹ Langer, *Problems of Art*, p. 180.

³⁰ This remark will probably be clearer when our analysis is complete.

³¹ For example we may quote Langer: 'In the non-discursive [i.e. presentational] mode that speaks directly to sense, however, there is no intrinsic generality. It is first and foremost a direct presentation of an individual object.... In itself it [a picture] represents just one object—real or imaginary, but still a unique object' (*Philosophy in a New Key*, [Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1942], p. 96). In similar fashion, Neil McDonnell observes that, according to a widely accepted account of the difference between pictorial and linguistic representations, 'pictures are unavoidably specific in their reference, unlike words' ('Are Pictures Unavoidably Specific?', *Synthese*, vol. 57 [1983], p. 83). Moreover, Nelson Goodman, in his well-known book *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), after having declared that resemblance has nothing to do with representation, elevates specificity, which roughly corresponds to his notion of the density of the symbol system, to the position of being the defining criterion for representation.

It seems that some schematic diagrams and pictures can undoubtedly have a general meaning. Among representations that could plausibly be classified as general are the schematic black-and-white pictures sometimes found in dictionaries. Their purpose is to help define a word: for example, to show at a glance what an ocarina looks like, or where in the abdomen you may find the epigastrium. Yet in those instances—and, perhaps, by extension in the case of any iconic symbol—the supposition may arise that even if such a symbol is understood to represent something general, for example, man in general, and not some particular person, it is so only because we are dealing here with an exemplification, or, to put it differently, a representation of an individual human being, who, in the given contextual framework, is to be taken as an exemplary case that is supposed to represent all men. An argument of this kind tends to edge towards the conclusion that iconic symbols are inherently individual, even though they may sometimes be used to exemplify general concepts.³²

Since this view seems to be relatively widespread it will be necessary to analyse another example to demonstrate that iconic symbols can indeed possess general meaning. Let our example be a picture from a biology textbook, showing the structure of a cell. We do not for a moment assume that the picture refers to any particular cell; we would rather say that it is an expression of the author's general knowledge of cells. It is a kind of visually represented description that can be easily translated into words, for example as follows: the cell has an oval or elongated shape with a round nucleus whose diameter is approximately one-sixth of the cell diameter, two to four elongated, oval mitochondria (occasionally slightly bent like a boomerang), an endoplasmic reticulum in the form of a delicate network near the cell-wall, and so on. The picture can be treated as a representation of any cell which meets that description, that is, of any that does not significantly differ in any respect that could be regarded as essential, for example, shape, proportion, the number of elements. At the same time no similarity is required in the case of the non-representing aspects of the symbol, such as two-dimensionality—the cell's three dimensions being replaced by two in the picture—or absolute size, or the colours used, which are usually chosen solely to enhance the clarity of the picture. Consequently a small change to any aspect of the picture, or any change at all in respect of its non-representing aspects, will not affect its meaning. A student asked by a professor to draw a cell will not be expected to

³² This line of thought seems to clearly parallel Berkeley's critique of Locke's doctrine of general ideas, in which the former maintains that all ideas are always particular, and says: 'An idea, which considered in itself is particular, becomes general, by being made to represent or stand for all other particular ideas of the same sort.' (*Principles of Human Knowledge*, Introduction, §12) In the present context, however, our concern is not so much to answer the question of how any (iconic or linguistic) symbol could have a general meaning, as to just show that iconic symbols can in fact function (i.e. be used and understood) as general.

copy the textbook illustration with any extreme degree of accuracy: he need do no more than make a drawing containing each of the important elements of the cell. It is clear that the meaning of such a iconic symbol is as general as the meaning of the formally equivalent description given above.

This observation paves the way for the conclusion that small changes in an iconic symbol whose meaning is general do not alter its meaning.³³ So, for instance, in the example discussed above it will not matter if the size of the elements of the cell is altered by one or two millimetres, or if their position is slightly changed, or even if one more mitochondrion is added. By contrast, the meaning of a specific symbol is affected by every change, be it ever so small, that is introduced into an aspect that is represented in a specific way. So a touching-up of the lines of a black-and-white picture could well have the consequence that this picture no longer represents the same person. But if the picture is copied onto a blue background, it will still be the same representation.³⁴ This means that a non-representing aspect of a symbol may undergo considerable changes and at the same time the meaning of the symbol will not be affected. Hence the criterion we are looking for could be formulated in the following way:

1. A symbol has a specific meaning if it contains an aspect that is such that even the smallest change to the symbol with regard to that aspect results in a change of meaning for the symbol as a whole (in the case of visual representations this aspect can be shape, colour, size, or perhaps just the length or width, the number of elements, and so on; in the case of symbols of other kinds, many other traits may be relevant).³⁵
2. A symbol has a general meaning if it contains no aspect of the type described above, that is, all its aspects can undergo at least some degree of change without altering the meaning of the symbol as a whole.

Having made a distinction between the *specific* and the *general*, it is now necessary to look at yet another aspect of their relations with the concept of the

³³ What 'small' means will depend, of course, on the context: while in some cases only minute changes (though still greater than zero) may be permitted, in others considerable (though not entirely arbitrary) latitude may be allowed. If an aspect could be altered completely arbitrarily, it would mean that it would have to count as a 'non-representing aspect' of the symbol.

³⁴ This is said on the assumption that the picture is treated just as a visual representation of an object; if it were to be treated as an artwork, the change of background colour would of course have aesthetic significance.

³⁵ Of course, the property as defined here is not an inherent feature of a symbol taken as a physical object, but of the way it functions and is understood. A picture of a cell, described above as general, might also be taken in some other circumstances as a precise, faithful representation of a particular cell, in which case it should of course be considered specific.

abstract proposed here. It has been suggested that the process of abstraction leads from the concrete to the abstract, which is, however, at first still specific, and then that generalization leads from the specific to the general. It might seem therefore that the general corresponds to a higher level of abstraction. This statement is not exactly paradoxical, but neither is it very persuasive. After all, it is fairly easy to point out situations in which a high level of abstraction is not associated with generality or in which the general does not imply a high level of abstraction. For example, we tend to treat every abstract painting taken separately as having a specific meaning. On the other hand we do not consider words like ‘table’ or ‘dog’ abstract, although they are undoubtedly general terms. A consultant who concentrates his attention exclusively on the specific records produced by electrocardiographs and computer tomography may well be blamed for treating his patients like pure abstractions rather than concrete, living people. It is tempting to contrast him with another physician who does not spend much time on particulars in arriving at his diagnoses, but instead considers many aspects, but in a more general way, for example, by noting his patients’ looks, psychological condition, personal problems, and so on. In fact, there is no reason at all for the proposed conceptual model to be merely one-dimensional: generality does not always go hand in hand with a high level of abstraction, nor can it be said to automatically imply the latter.

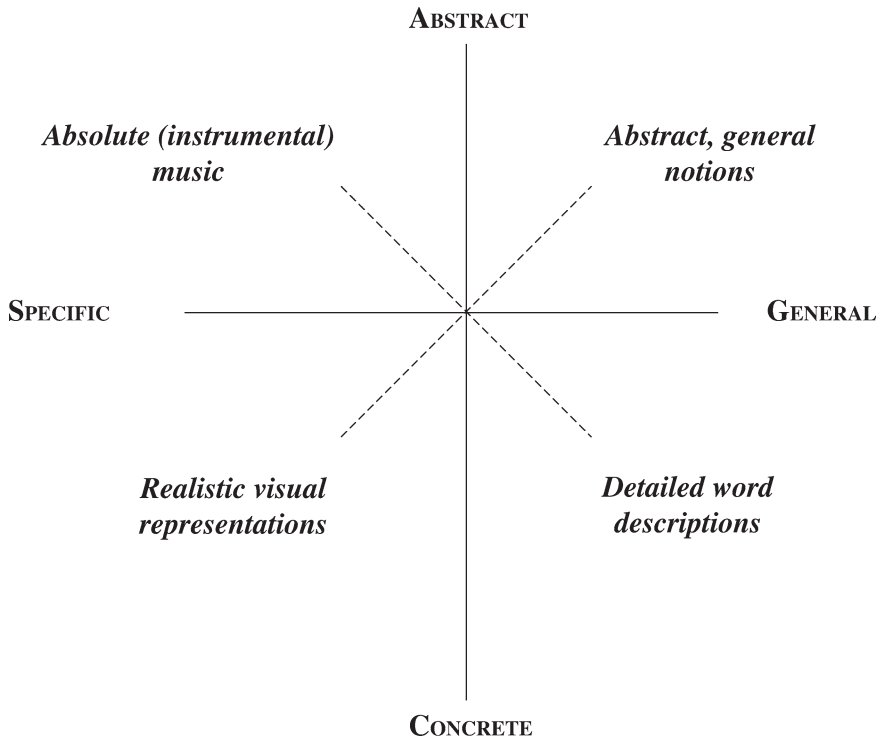
Any aspect of the symbolized object can be reproduced in the symbol in a specific or a general manner, or it can be left out. Whereas abstraction has been defined as leaving certain aspects out, generalization is best understood as the transition from a specific to a general representation of some particular aspect or other. To give a purely theoretical example, let us assume that a certain object contains four relatively autonomous aspects, which potentially can be reproduced in a symbol. In a visual representation these could be the shape, colour, absolute size, and relative position of the represented objects.³⁶ In the case of the representation of the weather pattern at X they would include temperature, precipitation, hours of sunshine, and a record of winds. In the latter example each of the four elements can be presented either in the specific mode, by means of a graph illustrating its variation over time, or in the general mode, namely as records of the average temperatures on successive days, of cumulative rainfall expressed in terms of a graded scale (for example, below one

³⁶ There is, of course, no absolute or general standard for how aspects themselves should be selected. Instead of size, we could just as well distinguish length and breadth, or treat outline and surface texture as two distinct aspects of shape, or introduce perspective as an alternative to positioning. My argument does not depend on either the way in which the aspects are distinguished, or the practical problems involved in their identification and individuation. The point of this remark is solely to make clear that a symbol may contain a number of significant traits which can be referred to—certainly with some degree of simplification—as represented aspects.

millimetre, between one and ten millimetres, and more than ten millimetres), and so on. In both examples the representation of any of the four aspects in the specific or general mode plus the alternative of leaving it out may be combined with any of the various respective treatments of other aspects. Among the resulting combinations there may be a situation in which one aspect is presented in the specific mode, while all others are simply absent; or, on the other hand, a situation where no aspect is presented specifically, but none is left out, and all of them are presented in the general mode. In accordance with our definitions, the first of the two situations produces a specific symbol, the latter—a general one. However, if abstracting is tantamount to leaving out particular aspects, the former—namely the specific symbol, which contains just one aspect—will be more abstract than the latter—the general symbol containing as many as four aspects. That conclusion seems to accord with the ordinary usage of these two terms. Even though a precise, specific graph illustrating the exact variation of wind strength over time could help us identify a place X more infallibly, this form of weather-pattern representation still remains more abstract than a general statement to the effect that X is neither too warm nor too cold, that it is not too windy, and that it has a lot of rain and not much sunshine. To sum up: a high level of abstraction does not imply generality, and neither does the implication work in reverse. The two are autonomous and unrelated features of a symbol. The level of abstraction will depend on the number of aspects left out in the representation, whereas the generality will depend on the treatment of those not left out. Of two symbols, one specific and the other general, the latter need not be the more abstract one, or, in other words, some specific symbols can be more abstract than some general ones.

As iconic symbols never have concrete meaning in the absolute sense of encompassing all aspects of actually existing entities, the term 'concrete' is no longer useful when talking about such symbols. However, it is possible to redefine the term slightly in order to give it a new use. In an earlier phase of this argument the concrete was opposed to the abstract, the latter being defined as the leaving out of certain aspects of the object in the symbol. This meant that while abstraction was gradable, concreteness marked just one end of the spectrum, that is, due acknowledgement and inclusion of each and every aspect. Now, by analogy with the notion of abstractness, we can modify the notion of concreteness in such a way that it, too, will be gradable. We simply need to redefine what we mean by 'more concrete' as what we have already meant by 'less abstract': that is, 'including a greater number of aspects'. Now the previous sense of the term 'concrete' will be rendered by 'absolutely concrete'. While iconic symbols are never absolutely concrete, some of them can be treated as more concrete than others. It seems that this terminological refinement also brings us closer to the ordinary use of this word, and in addition it will prove helpful in comparing the expressive potential of music with that of language.

Now it is possible to express the independence of the abstract and the general as follows: a symbol can be relatively concrete (not very abstract) and nevertheless general, just as it can be highly abstract yet also specific. This conclusion can be presented in the following diagrammatic illustration of the mutually independent character of the abstract and the general.



The basis for the positioning of all terms at various locations along the vertical concrete/abstract axis will be more fully clarified in the next section.

In summary it could be said that all iconic symbols are more or less abstract, that is, not absolutely concrete and thus not singular. Their precision can only be understood as a specificity that does not itself imply singularity. Depending on how many aspects are retained in the symbol, it can be more or less abstract (or, in other words, less or more concrete). At the same time, the symbol will also be specific or general, depending on whether any aspects are represented in a specific manner. Even a high level of abstraction, where many aspects have been left out, will not automatically exclude specificity, so long as at least one aspect has been cast into the specific mode. If, however, no aspects

whatsoever are reproduced in their specificity, the symbol will be general. But if a whole range of aspects are reproduced, even in such a non-specific way, such a symbol could still be less abstract (that is, more concrete) than some highly abstract symbols consisting of only one or two aspects that are nevertheless captured in a highly specific way.

V. SOLVING THE PARADOX

The analysis proposed here may already have suggested how the dilemma as to whether musical meanings are general (abstract) or particular (precise) can be resolved. With the more highly differentiated analytical means now at our disposal, we need not be misled by the crude dichotomy of the general versus the particular. From what has been said it is probably already clear that the solution now available is the following: musical meanings are not concrete; they are highly abstract,³⁷ but at the same time specific, and therefore not general. But let us proceed with the argument step by step.

In accordance with what has been said in the previous section, no iconic symbol is ever absolutely concrete: that is, all such symbols are (more or less) abstract, and music is no exception to this. Almost all authors agree that where music is held to convey feelings or psychological phenomena, it must also be acknowledged that it leaves out many aspects that are undoubtedly present in particular episodes of real emotion. Instead of the much-quoted formulations of Hanslick³⁸ to this effect, it may be just as useful to recall the following passage from Schopenhauer:

Thus the most direct [method of knowledge] is that for which music expresses the stirrings of the will itself, but the most indirect that of the concepts denoted by words. . . . From its own resources, music is certainly able to express every movement of the will, every feeling; but through the addition of the words, we receive also their objects, the motives that give rise to that feeling. . . . For only the passions, the movements of the will, exist for it [music], and, like God, it sees only the heart. . . .

But at the same time, all the human passions and emotions speak from this symphony; joy, grief, love, hatred, terror, hope, and so on in innumerable shades, yet all, as it were, only in the abstract and without any particularisation; it is their mere form without the material, like a mere spirit world without matter.³⁹

³⁷ This formal notion of abstractness as applied to music is not equivalent to any of the senses discussed in Walton's 'What Is Abstract about the Art of Music?' (cf. note 7 above), as he does not distinguish between the notions of abstractness and generality.

³⁸ Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, trans. G. Payzant (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), pp. 9–11; quoted, for example, by Ridley, *MVP*, p. 103; Levinson, 'Hope in the Hebrides', pp. 341–342; and discussed in, amongst others, Budd, *Music and the Emotions*, p. 21; Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression*, p. 209; Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 165.

³⁹ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. II, ch. XXXIX, pp. 449–450.

In other words, music does not say anything about the objects, motives, causes, circumstances, or situations in which feelings are actually experienced, or the thoughts or tendencies to act which may be inseparably connected with them. The fact that so many aspects of the phenomenon that we call our emotional life are ignored, and that music presents only ‘[the] mere form [of human passions and emotions] without the material’ or ‘[the] movements of the human heart’⁴⁰ indicates that, in respect of the terminology just elaborated, music must count as being highly abstract. Indeed, it is quite often believed to be so, and contrasted as such with the concreteness of words, which according to the conceptual framework developed here are themselves not absolutely concrete, but nevertheless are more so than is the case with music.⁴¹ For words can be relied upon to reproduce a great many of the various aspects of what is involved when we undergo emotions (their objects, motives, accompanying thoughts, circumstances, and so on) that are not reflected in music. Even so, they usually only do this in a rather general way, whereas, as has been shown here, the highly abstract nature of music in no way excludes specificity in conveying that aspect of feeling that is capable of being reflected in it.

In this way the chief points usually adduced in favour of the generality of musical meanings—notably, the inability of music to reflect many aspects of feeling, which implies that any given composition may be thought of as relating to a variety of particular episodes of feeling that may differ significantly in their unrepresented aspects—turn out to justify no more than the extreme abstractness of those meanings, which in itself does not contradict their potential specificity. This does not disprove the generality—and also does not yet prove the specificity—of musical meanings. But once the generalist suggestions have been disarmed, and interpreted as demonstrating only the abstractness of music, in a sense which in no way undermines its specificity, we are in a position to justify this specificity by drawing on the widespread intuition as to the expressive precision of music which, as we have seen, is present in many authors. In fact, many of them do lay the foundations for a formal argument to this effect, by reaffirming a commonly

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 450, 451.

⁴¹ Individual linguistic units are obviously general and more or less concrete, such as ‘dog’, for example, which in fact encompasses many aspects (alive, four-legged, middle-sized and many more) in a single word, or ‘red’ (just one single aspect). And compound symbols can be even more concrete than any single word, although they never become either absolutely concrete or specific. It might, however, be claimed that proper names are both absolutely concrete and specific. Two things can be said in response to this. Firstly, a proper name does not in fact convey the properties of its bearer in the way other symbols (iconic or linguistic, depictions or descriptions) do, i.e. without relying upon the prior acquaintance of language users with the symbol’s bearer, or on some prior description or depiction of it. Secondly, because of that fact, proper names are not usually considered a part of any natural language vocabulary—they do not figure in dictionaries. To use Frege’s distinction, albeit not following his own application of it, they may be said to possess reference, but no sense (of the sort that could be explained in a dictionary).

occurring feature of our musical experience: music (according to Schopenhauer) ‘becomes the material in which all movements of the human heart ... can be faithfully portrayed and reproduced in all their finest shades and modifications’⁴² or, as Langer puts it, it ‘can *reveal* the nature of feelings with a detail and truth that language cannot approach’.⁴³ By noting the fine differentiation and great precision of meanings—a feature closely connected to specificity—these thinkers do seem to be pointing in the right direction. True enough, language allows us to make any description more accurate. But this very fact makes it clear that the meaning of a description is never ‘fully accurate’: it is ultimately still general rather than specific. Music, by contrast, seems able to incorporate into its own form a very special and unique aspect of feeling. This is something that language, which depends on general concepts, cannot do. The German romantic Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder expressed it excellently in a colourful passage:

I shall use a flowing stream as an illustration. It is beyond human art to depict in words meant for the eye the thousands of individual waves, smooth and rugged, bursting and foaming, in the flow of a mighty river—words can but meagrely recount the incessant movements and cannot visibly picture the consequent rearrangement of the drops of water. Just so it is with the mysterious streams in the depths of the human soul; words mention and name and describe its flux in a foreign medium. In music, however, the stream itself seems to be released.⁴⁴

We may succinctly rephrase this statement using the terms introduced and defined in this paper in the following way: linguistic meanings are general and musical meanings specific, language is a non-iconic symbolic form which in essence does not have any property in common with what it symbolizes, while music is an iconic symbol which reflects certain distinctive forms associated with feelings.

Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, as can be seen from the comments quoted in the first section of this paper, viewed the relationship between the meanings of words and music in a similar way: he considered musical meanings to be more precise, more unambiguous than the meanings of words—in fact too precise to be expressed in words. The view that musical meanings cannot be expressed by words is not new: frequent repetition has made it almost a commonplace observation. Yet Mendelssohn’s justification of that incommensurability is strikingly different from the usual explanations, which stress the imprecise, vague, and abstract nature of musical expressiveness. Mendelssohn believes the reverse to be true: it is *music* that is too precise for *words*, not the other way round.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 451.

⁴³ Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, p. 235. In fact we find statements to this effect in the already quoted passages of Walton, Mendelssohn, Ridley, and many others.

⁴⁴ W. H. Wackenroder, *Phantasien über die Kunst* [1799]. Quoted in Oskar Walzel, *German Romanticism*, trans. A. E. Lussy (New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s sons, 1932), part I, pp. 122–123.

From the point of view of our analysis, Mendelssohn's position may be seen as an assertion of the inexpressibility of musical meanings, which are specific, in language, which is general. At the same time, I think that it is worth noting that the author of the *Songs without Words* never claimed that musical meaning was entirely inaccessible to words. He wrote, 'So I find that all attempts to express such thoughts [i.e. those expressed by music] in words may have some point to them, but they are also unsatisfying'.⁴⁵ The implications of this statement are clear: language's general terms may sometimes help us to get nearer to a grasp of the specific meaning of music, but will never express it precisely and exhaustively.

This sort of explanation of the inexpressibility of musical meaning through language is by no means in line with common opinion. Mendelssohn himself was aware that his views ran against the popular argument which associated ambiguity, imprecision, and abstractness with music rather than words, as we see from his own admission that 'People complain that music has so many meanings; they aren't sure what to think when they are listening to it; and yet after all, everyone understands words'.⁴⁶ The observation certainly sounds intuitively credible. Music is, in a sense, without doubt less definite and less unambiguous than words. On the basis of the distinctions worked out in our analysis it is possible to remove the contradiction that separates these two lines of argument and to admit the validity of both of them. The fact that words are in a sense more definite and unambiguous than music results from their greater concreteness (in the sense defined in the previous section): they are able to reproduce more aspects of feelings than music can, and, what is more, they reproduce aspects which are more public, more intersubjectively accessible. Music in that sense is more abstract and its meaning less definite. However, the aspect of feeling that is reflected in music is rendered in a specific—and in that sense a more definite, more precise—way, whereas everything that is expressed by words is, in principle, general. So a brief summing-up of the foregoing argument would look something like this: music is more specific, yet more abstract than words, while words are more general, but represent reality in more concrete terms. If this statement also sums up what we would be intuitively inclined to say about the relationship of musical meaning and the meanings of words, then one cannot help also noticing that the technical meaning of terms employed in the course of this analysis—'concrete', 'abstract', 'specific' and 'general'—are now very closely in line with their natural, everyday usage.

In the light of this interpretation, the claim of Mendelssohn's opponents that music is less precise than words is only an indication that it is less concrete rather than less specific, and this means that we are free to enlist the support of Mendelssohn's own insights as to the specificity of music.

⁴⁵ Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, *Briefe*.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

In fact, we can also provide a purely formal argument for the specificity of musical expressiveness. According to our formal definition a symbol has a specific meaning if, to put it in a nutshell, even the smallest changes to the symbol influence its meaning. But this is in fact exactly what the common intuition of specificity or precision of music is held to be—what Ridley, for example, says, when he describes a musical gesture as infinitely precise: ‘any change in the music would alter its character’ (cf. the quotation above). Moreover, he elaborates this further:

Two distinct gestures may bring to mind psychological states that we would describe in the same words, and yet we know that they do not stand for the same state: for one gesture, *this* gesture, reveals one state, and *that* gesture reveals another. And it is a failure of language (or of our own grasp of language) if we cannot capture that difference in words. (*MVP*, p. 115)

Or in a different formulation: ‘every piece of truly expressive music is ... expressive of something which is common to no other piece of music’.⁴⁷ So if we find such intuitions compelling, then we are already in a position to affirm music’s specificity.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is worth noting that, in the course of this investigation, Ridley’s notion of an ‘infinitely precise gesture’ (and probably also his related phrase, ‘expressive in an infinitely particular way’) has turned out to correspond to our formal notion of specificity, since the core meaning of both is that of any change, no matter how small, making a difference.

On the other hand Ridley’s phrase ‘expressive of a particular sadness’ means, for him, the bringing to mind of an actual episode of feeling—namely, the one which we experience sympathetically in response to the music—in the fullness of its actual existence. This apparently corresponds to our notion of the absolute concreteness of a symbol, in the sense of encompassing all aspects of something as it really exists, while Ridley’s phrase ‘expressive of no particular sadness’ corresponds to our notion of abstractness (which, however, in Ridley’s picture stands in simple opposition to absolute concreteness and thus is not gradable).

Consequently, it seems that our diagnosis to the effect that music is highly abstract but also specific can, at a first approximation, be expressed in Ridley’s terms as follows: music is expressive of no particular state of mind in an infinitely particular way. (Here the only difference is that our attribute ‘highly’ cannot be translated into Ridley’s terms—something which, as we shall see,

⁴⁷ Ridley, ‘Musical Sympathies’, p. 49.

turns out to be quite important.) But in Ridley's picture such a characterization only amounts to an explication of music's abstractness!

Nevertheless, it seems that Ridley's intuitions are, after all, quite close to the understanding of these matters developed here, but have been subjected to a different construal and a different elaboration. What is the source of this difference? It is, I think, the fact that Ridley equates a possible failure of music to conjure up a full-blown, actual episode of emotion (that is, in our terms, music's non-concreteness or abstractness) with generality—as we saw to be the case when he uses the terms 'no particular' and 'general' interchangeably and fails to notice that while the specificity (i.e. the infinite particularity of a gesture) is in fact consistent with the former, it is not consistent with the latter. He thus misses the opportunity of drawing two different distinctions: the abstract versus the concrete on the one hand, and the general versus the specific on the other. The only opposition which remains, for him, is that between the abstract (i.e. the non-concrete, which is equated with the general) and the concrete. Thus any chance of interpreting the intuition of music's expressive precision as its specificity (i.e. infinite particularity) is also lost, since the latter is seen as in line with both its abstractness and its generality. All that remains for Ridley is the option of giving an account of music's precision as something corresponding to what we have characterised as absolute concreteness. But as Ridley himself rightly intuits, no such absolute concreteness is displayed by expressive meaning in music, so he has been driven to look for it in the only domain where it can still be found: in the world of really existing individuals, in this case in the actual episode of feeling of a sympathetically responsive listener. But this is to move away from the music itself, in a way which I have already sought to suggest is problematic and unacceptable, for the reasons set out in the second section of this text.

Although Ridley's specific intuitions are close to those which underlie the account advocated here, his overall picture of expressive meaning in music is quite a different one. The fact that he only constructs one distinction prevents him, as we have seen, from being able to do justice to the intuition that music is somehow very precise and also, at the same time, very abstract. In this respect, Walton's suggestion⁴⁸ holds out better prospects than Ridley's for recognising the simultaneous precision and abstractness of music, along the lines of the idea that music's expressive meaning is general in some respects and at the same time specific in others. However, we ourselves did not pursue this option (in that, according to our account, music's expressiveness has been recognised to be, in principle, always specific, and so not at all general) because the suggestion of Schopenhauer has proved still more pertinent in this respect: that there are two sorts of universality, one of them 'united with

⁴⁸ See the quotation in the first section of this text, and also note 14.

thorough and unmistakable distinctness'. What was needed was to work out and formally elaborate the distinction between these two sorts of universality—something that Ridley (along with other authors) has not done, even though he seems to have come close to this with his formulation 'expressive of no particular sadness in an infinitely particular way'.

In order to conclude this comparison between Ridley's solution and the one proposed here, it should be stressed that this last formulation, interpreted as meaning that musical expressiveness is 'abstract (i.e. non-concrete) and specific', still does not do justice to all aspects of our account. All we can extract from it, with respect to the distinction between the concrete (or as Ridley calls it, the particular) and the non-concrete (which we have termed the 'abstract') is a mere binary opposition. Yet in our account the abstractness is gradable: it admits of various degrees. This point is especially important when characterising music, since a simple two-stage distinction would not distinguish between visual representation and musical expression. Both would simply be non-concrete, i.e. abstract, and specific, whereas the notion of a gradable form of abstractness allows one to point to the high degree of abstractness of musical expression and contrast this with the relatively low degree of abstractness (or high degree of concreteness, when this term is understood in its relative, non-absolute sense) of typical cases of realistic visual representation (though this is not to suggest that this is the only difference between these two).

Finally, let me note that the account of musical precision and abstractness proposed in this paper is applicable to any theory of musical expressiveness whatsoever, provided that it involves notions of resemblance of the sort mentioned in the third section of this text. Whether the affective response to music also plays an important role in such a theory is, moreover, something that has no bearing on this point, even though it is clearly a major point of debate for theorists such as Ridley and Kivy. As the account put forward here makes no reference to such a response, it should, unlike Ridley's version, be just as acceptable to supporters of any kind of arousal theory and to those who, like Kivy, think that the affective response to music is either absent, or at least immaterial to the explanation of musical expressiveness. In fact, the distinctions elaborated in the fourth section of this text can, I believe, also be usefully employed to make sense of many additional issues connected with different sorts of symbol, whether these be linguistic, pictorial, or of some other kind—but that would be another story.⁴⁹

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