

TCHAIKOVSKY VERSUS THE WESTERN CANON

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IN THE REAL WORLD, professional music critics and amateur audiences exhibit consistent disagreement in their evaluations of musical merit. In the somewhat smaller realm of philosophy of music, there are those who tend more towards a formalist, cognitive account of musical value and those who shy away from leaving behind or disparaging music's more tangible features. Like professional critics and amateur audiences, the two philosophical camps also tend to disagree in their evaluations of the same musical pieces, yet each remains hopeful of convincing the opposing side that the source of their disagreement is their choice of evaluative criteria. For example, in the ongoing debate between Bruce Baugh and James O. Young, Baugh argues that rock music has aesthetic criteria particular to itself, drawing the conclusion that it is impossible to judge rock music fairly according to the set of criteria normally applied to classical music. In his reply, Young not only accepts the existence of the particular aesthetic characteristics posited by Baugh, but claims that these features of rock music are also present in classical music, that they are already accounted for in that music's set of evaluative criteria, and that it is still possible to apply the same criteria to both types of music.¹

The disagreement between Baugh and Young is not simply about which evaluative criteria ought to be applied. Hence we ought not to agree with Theodore Grayck when he claims that "the recent debate between Bruce Baugh and James O. Young is largely beside the point" because it "does not matter whether rock music . . . shares the specific

values of any sort of traditional art.”² Regardless of the status of Gracyk’s larger argument for the possible incommensurability of evaluative standards, the debate between Baugh and Young is still important because it brings into fresh relief an old and almost intractable problem in philosophy of music, a problem which is also present in other areas of critical inquiry into the arts.

When comparing different critical evaluations of an artistic work we must first secure a common ground: the object of evaluation itself. When discussing music, however, this common ground exists less often than we think, simply because different listening styles (which frequently correspond to particular types of music and particular sets of evaluative criteria) can actually produce different musical objects. (Here “musical object” refers not to the score or the recording, but to the listeners’ internalization of the sounds and their synthesis of these temporally successive auditory experiences into a common totality—in other words, the end result of having the experience of hearing a musical work.) Two different people, having attentively listened to the same musical performance, may in the end each be evaluating a different musical object, thus making possible a disagreement over musical value which springs from something much deeper than our espoused choice of evaluative criteria.

In order to avoid the broader classical versus rock music debate, which Gracyk correctly characterizes as really being an argument about cultural tastes rather than evaluative criteria, it will be helpful to turn our attention to a limited example: one composition from a single musical tradition. It will also be helpful for this example to be well-known and, in order to draw out the difference between formalist evaluations and physicalist evaluations, we should choose a piece that has a significant amount of what we might call “visceral” as well as formal elements. There is an obvious candidate.

In Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture* there is a cannon. According to the score, the cannon ought to be fired nineteen times, thus ensuring a series of percussive effects which cannot be missed by even the most tin-eared audience member. In fact, if deaf people were to attend a performance of the piece it is likely that they would be able to sense, if nothing else, the percussive effects of the cannon; it is a sound so loud as to be capable of being “heard” by one’s entire body, not just the ears alone. In this way the cannon shots vividly remind us of the *duality of character* that typifies *musical sounds*, where a sound must be both physically present as a felt vibration and cognitively interpreted as a

little bit of music—it must have a physical effect on our bodies and then become a formal, ideal element “in” the musical object. Now, a formalist aesthetics of music emphasizes the ideal element above the physical while a physicalist aesthetics tends towards an opposite emphasis. In the case of the Overture, however, the cannon shots are clearly both elements of the musical work and *very* loud sounds with a pronounced physical effect, thus making it difficult to uphold the usual formalist distinction between the musical work as an *ideal mental object* and the so-called *mere sounds* which formalists generally characterize as the mere “substratum” of music, separable from music proper.³ The Overture’s percussive cannon effects, however, are loud enough to be *visceral effects*; they can be felt by the body, not just heard by the ears, and this gives them a transgressive character in so far as they forcibly remind us that music is necessarily experienced physically as well as cognitively.

The *1812 Overture* is probably Tchaikovsky’s best-known composition and, if we take popularity to be indicated by frequency of performance, it is certainly his most popular piece. Yet professional music critics have never attributed much merit to it, even though it is a favorite of amateur audiences. This discrepancy between its evaluation by the populace at large and its evaluation by professional musical critics makes it a doubly useful focal point for our discussion.

Critics have often been harsh in their evaluation of the Overture. “The sensational method of orchestration and the importation of a peal of small bells, suggestive of the Kremlin,” writes Edwin Evans, “has earned for this overture a popularity which, in the composer’s own opinion and that of many of his admirers, it does not deserve. True, it is a fine piece of musical construction, as such, but there is a lack of subtlety about the whole conception which jars on critical nerves.”⁴ The general tone of critical reception supports Evan’s description. Louis Elson, for instance, drew a playful connection between the loudness of the work and the lower classes. Writing with obvious irony, Elson calls the Overture “a sweet little slumber song” and proceeds to focus on its dynamic forcefulness. “On a second hearing,” Elson opines, “or rather a second deafening . . . the coda was as loud as the explosion of a powder-mill. Although not a barcarolle, the roar of the serf was plainly audible in its dynamite explosions. The fight between the Marseillaise and the Russian hymn came to an end in one round, the former being knocked out completely. . . . Altogether one can best sum up this remarkable musical earthquake by saying that it is sound and fury signifying—*something*.”⁵

While Tchaikovsky is unquestionably a great composer and a significant contributor to the canon of Western art music, it is also the case that the Overture itself has never gained enough critical acceptance to be considered a worthwhile part of that canon; at most, it is only present in the Western canon as an example of an inferior work. But how can the product of a great composer find itself excluded from critical acceptance? The obvious answer is simply that the work is not very good, as Tchaikovsky himself suggests.⁶ But what, then, do we make of the fact that the overture is an extremely popular work amongst the concert-going public? Are the popular audiences simply mistaken, wrong-headed, masochistic, or faulty in some other respect?

It would be too easy to claim that amateur audiences cannot recognize bad music when they hear it, or that the people who enjoy the Overture simply fail to prefer good music, or (even worse) that they are unmusical individuals. A better explanation is forthcoming if we account for the difference of the *listening style* employed by formalist critics and the style more commonly used by popular audiences. A hint of this difference is given in the last sentence of the quoted portion of Elson's review, where he tells us that "one can best sum up this remarkable musical earthquake by saying that it is sound and fury signifying—*something*." Elson's evaluation rests upon the idea that the "sound and fury" of the work is overwhelming, so much so that he compares it to a rather destructive natural phenomenon. According to Elson, the Overture is too noisy and overwhelming to be good music.

"Noise" is one of those underdetermined words capable of resisting a complete analysis. We can, however, survey the different senses that "noise" might have and make an educated guess as to which might be applicable from the perspective of the formalist critic. Theodore Gracyk, in his book aimed at presenting an aesthetics of rock music and thus an aesthetic that rescues certain types of noise from their pejorative connotations, presents three technical definitions of noise: (1) "any sound in the environment that interferes with human communication" or "any competing information that masks desired information"; (2) "any sounds which disturb or distract us"; and (3) "sound which threatens us with physical harm."⁷ I shall refer respectively to these as *interfering noise*, *distracting noise*, and *dangerous noise*.

What does Elson mean when he implies that the Overture is too noisy? He could mean that it suffers from interfering noise, that it has too many notes in play and so one has difficulty identifying its thematic

structure. He could also mean that it has distracting noise, that it lacks a clean, pure, or balanced sound—perhaps it suffers from a poor choice of instrumentation (the cannon?) which produces an overall sound that is unpleasant. Alternately, by calling the Overture noisy Elson could mean that it is simply too damn loud, that it is dangerous noise and exceeds the upper boundaries of any reasonable non-malevolent dynamic balance.

We can at least rule out the idea that the Overture is dangerous noise. While it is certainly loud, even very loud, it is not literally deafening or even painful. It is not, for instance, nearly as loud as some Who concerts, where noise levels have actually been physiologically harmful to the audience. Elson himself refers to “a second hearing” of the Overture, something he is unlikely to have subjected himself to if he thought his hearing (and thus his job) were truly at risk. It seems reasonable to criticize a musical performance for its physically harmful qualities (though one might consider the possibility of a masochistic musical aesthetic), but that is not what Elson is claiming here. His use of the term “deafening” is hyperbole, a rhetorical ploy intended to reinforce his judgment of the work.

It is quite possible, however, that Elson means to suggest that the Overture suffers from distracting noise. When he refers to “sound and fury,” he seems to be claiming that the Overture has sounds which are not musical, sounds which distract us from the musical sounds that ought to exist in the work. These distracting noises are “mere sounds” rather than music. It is also possible that Elson is pointing out interfering noise in the Overture. This would make sense of his claim that the Overture signifies something, but that it is not possible (because of the interference caused by unmusical sounds) to determine what exactly that something is. In other words, the thematic development of the piece is hindered or entirely prevented because of a bombardment of noise which obscures the “truly musical” sounds within the work.

From the perspective of the formalist critical tradition, then, the Overture, while not actually harmful to one’s hearing, suffers from either distracting noise or from interfering noise or from both. I suggest that the critics want to say that it suffers from both distracting and interfering noise. According to the predominant critical tradition in Western art music, the goal of a successful performance is to realize the structure of the work in (musical) sounds. (There are ongoing

debates as to whether music can reveal or incite or represent emotions, but that is not at issue here.) Both distracting and interfering noises work against this realization.

There are plenty of examples of distracting sounds within the Overture, but the cannon shots are the most dramatic and the most transgressive. One can easily imagine how a critic might see the cannon as a less-than-ideal percussive instrument, or perhaps not as an instrument at all. The percussive effects produced by the cannon are not comparable to those produced by any regular orchestral instrument (despite the fact that extra-forceful timpany playing is often used in place of the cannon in many performances). The mere foreignness of the sounds produced by the cannon could be seen as distracting. They are *unexpected sounds*, unexpected not because of where they appear in the piece, but rather because cannon fire is simply not the type of sound one expects to hear in Western art music. Insofar as the cannon fire is unexpected and foreign it acts to distract the critic, who is otherwise well-accustomed to a multitude of Western musical instruments, from what else is going on at that point in the work. For the critic inculturated into Western art music in its symphonic modality, hearing the cannon in the Overture is comparable to hearing a Chinese opera's *jingu* or some other unfamiliar instrument in the midst of a symphony—it just doesn't fit and this unfitness is distracting, or dissonant in the broader sense of the term.

Critical attachments of the term “noise” to the Overture refer to interfering sounds, too. Again, the cannon shots are the best example of this. At the moment of the explosions one simply cannot hear anything else at all. It is a sound so loud as to drown out all other sounds, at least momentarily. Thus the cannon shots interfere with the rest of the musical notes which critics expect to hear, notes which they depend upon in order to grasp the structure of the work and thus determine its artistic merit.

It is important to note that interfering sounds are necessarily distracting sounds, and that distracting sounds can also be construed as interfering sounds. If a sound interferes with the sonically unfolding structure of the work—the *signal*, to use telecommunications terminology—it tends to distract us from that sonic structure, just as static on a car radio tends to be disproportionately annoying when it draws attention to itself and away from what we expect the radio to give us. Conversely, sounds that distract us due to their qualitative character also diminish our ability to hear the thematic structure of the piece,

and thus by their distractiveness produce a kind of interference. The same holds true for sounds that are distracting due to their temporal position in the piece rather than their qualitative character. When we hear a note “out of place” we tend to be tripped-up, to lose for a moment the sense of where the work is going. This happens even when the note is not itself unpleasant or qualitatively inferior.

Upon due consideration, it seems that the categories of interfering and distracting noise can be conflated together. A sound that interferes with the signal is also distracting, and a distracting sound interferes with the signal by drawing our attention away from its development. Given the reciprocal nature of the two types of noise, I suggest that we simply refer to them together as *bad noise*. The remaining question, then, is how it is that the formalist critic perceives the cannon shots as bad noise while the physicalist audience member does not find those loud sounds to be noise at all.

We can answer our question simply by paying attention to the different types of sound which each listening style permits to enter into the constitution of the musical object. The formalist, who approaches music in a predominantly cognitive fashion, aims to glean a musical structure from the sounds presented by the performance. The physicalist, too, needs to constitute a musical structure from the same sounds. What is important is that in the case of the formalist style of listening certain sounds or aspects of sound are left out. In particular, the visceral effects do not enter into the musical object which is constituted by the formalist listener, while for the physicalist visceral characteristics of sound *are* partly constitutive of the musical object.

We might envision the difference between the two listening styles in terms of a filtering process. When the formalist hears and feels the cannon shots, he tries to filter out the physical, visceral properties of the sound in order to maintain his focus on the Overture’s formal structure, and ignoring a cannon is a difficult enough task to cause complaint. The physicalist’s filter, on the other hand, allows for the viscosity to pass through. Note that both the formalist and the physicalist experience the same sounds: it is not the case that one actually has a different sonic experience than the other. The experiential difference occurs in the constitution of the musical object, which is a kind of mental object with, we might say, “echoes” of its physicality.

The reason for the discrepancy between the formalist and the physicalist evaluation of the Overture has to do with the activity of listening. *Listening is not the same as hearing*. According to the account of

aesthetic internalization and subjective ontological production which I have (very generally) suggested, “hearing” refers to the auditory experience of sounds in time by a subject. “Listening,” on the other hand, refers to the conscious attentiveness paid by the subject to the sounds which result in a mental object that is, properly speaking, music in its concrete totality. (Here we must not forget, however, that the viscerality of sounds may enter into this object, just as remembered smells and tactile sensations are not “merely” formal despite having a purely mental existence.) We *hear* sounds, noisy and otherwise, insofar as we are embodied subjects who perceive the vibrations in the air that are the “material” component of sound; yet we *listen* to music in virtue of being historical, cognitive subjects who actualize musical objects (in the form of mental objects) from the sounds we hear. As Roland Barthes puts it, “*Hearing* is a physiological phenomenon; *listening* is a psychological fact.”⁸

There is no significant ontological difference at work in the activity of hearing: everybody perceives more or less the same sounds. But attentive listening may filter out certain sounds or certain types of sounds, as with the formalist listener who prevents his conception of the musical work from being “contaminated” by viscerality; or the listening process may incorporate physical sensations felt by other parts of the body besides the ears, as in the case of physicalist listeners who allow the viscerality of the cannon shots to become part of their musical object. The difference between listening styles produces a *real difference* in what is to be evaluated—the musical object—and we must account for this aspect of music in order to make sense of the stubborn, enduring evaluative disputes that typify philosophy of music and artistic criticism in general.

The difference that results from various listening styles cannot be underestimated as a causal factor in the production of the wide variety of evaluative conclusions given by auditors of the same sounds. Attentive listening and the filtering process that may accompany it works to produce *ontologically different musical objects*. In the case of the Overture, the formalist’s musical object does not incorporate viscerality—the formalist aims to listen with the ears alone, in order to better contemplate the cognitive subtleties of musical structure. The physicalist listener, on the other hand, does incorporate viscerality into the musical object in order to better appreciate the effects that sound may have on our embodied selves.

It should come as no surprise, then, that a formalist critic may not

appreciate the *1812 Overture* very much; or, for that matter, the works of Mahler. These are compositions with extreme dynamic balance and very loud, palpable sonic features; features that the formalist not only wants to filter out of the final musical object but may even experience as bad noise. The theories of Immanuel Kant and Eduard Hanslick, for example—not to mention formalist musical aesthetics in general—are predisposed in favor of an appreciation of the cognitive aspects of music rather than its physicality. Physicalist accounts of music, such as Bruce Baugh's and Theodore Gracyk's, emphasize viscerality, perhaps even at the expense of some degree of cognitive potential. These differences are not merely theoretical or a simple matter of conceptual difference—they are differences that result in the actualization of dissimilar musical objects as a result of the listening styles of those experiencing the sounds.

It is not my concern (at least in this essay) to argue in favor of one approach or the other. What ought to be of concern to us, rather, is the manner in which differences in musical objects (particularly those differences which *necessarily* arise from different styles of listening) color our evaluation of the artistic merit of a piece of music. It is entirely possible, and I suspect that it is necessarily the case, that the application of the same evaluative criteria to musical objects constituted by different listening styles will necessarily result in different evaluative conclusions.

It is important, also, to note that a full recognition of the potential for ontological difference in musical works does not lead us into a whole new realm of musical aesthetics. In fact, it brings us back full-circle to the initial attempts to account for musical beauty or other conceptions of value. In the long and polemical journey of musical aesthetics we have somehow forgotten the most fundamental question—the question of what, exactly, music *is*. We have allowed our presuppositions of “appropriate” aesthetic internalization to fade into the background of analysis rather than recognize the possibility of difference. We have tried, often and without success, to employ a universal set of evaluative criteria in order to reach consensus on musical value. If my account of the importance of ontological difference is correct, its most significant consequence may be that it forces us to recognize that such a consensus is simply not possible, and not just in music but in many other arts as well.

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1. For the debate itself, see Bruce Baugh, "Prolegomena to Any Future Aesthetics of Rock Music," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 23–29; James O. Young, "Between Rock and a Harp Place," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995): 78–81; Bruce Baugh, "Music for the Young at Heart," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995): 81–83. See also Stephen Davies, "Rock versus Classical Music," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57 (1999): 193–203.
2. Theodore Gracyk, "Valuing and Evaluating Popular Music," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57 (1999): 210.
3. Eduard Hanslick's conception of music, for example, emphasizes "an antimaterialistic view, namely, that music begins where those isolated effects [of sound] leave off" (Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution towards the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music*, trans. Geoffrey Payzant [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986], p. 52). Also see Geoffrey Payzant's helpful discussion of Hanslick in "Hanslick, Sams, Gay, and 'Tönend Bewegte Formen'," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 39 (1981): 45.
4. Edwin Evans, *Tchaikovsky* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 128.
5. Louis Elson, *Boston Daily Advertiser* (April 27, 1896); quoted in Nicolas Slonimsky's *Lexicon of Musical Invective: Critical Assaults on Composers since Beethoven's Time* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1953), p. 210.
6. It should be noted that Tchaikovsky didn't have a problem with the rather extreme dynamic balance of the Overture, a feature he apparently intended from the outset. His own self-criticism has a different basis: "The Overture," he explains in a letter, "will be very noisy. I wrote it without much warmth of enthusiasm; therefore it has no great artistic value"; quoted in Modeste Tchaikovsky, *Life and Letters of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky*, trans. Rosa Newmarch (New York: Vienna House, 1973), p. 390.
7. Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 104–5.
8. Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 245.