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Designs À La Grecque

Introduction

Kant's philosophical reflections on music, we are forced to believe, were not motivated by any particular interest in the subject on his part but, it seems apparent, merely by a desire to fill out the scheme, to which he wasn't even sure music belonged, that Paul Oskar Kristeller designated as "the modern system of the arts."¹ For what we quite naturally think of as "the fine arts," were only just beginning to be thought of as such in the eighteenth century. And as late as Hegel's *Lectures on the Fine Arts*, which is to say, the early nineteenth century, it was still an issue in some philosophers' minds, Hegel's and Kant's included, whether music, at least absolute music, really *did* belong to "the system."

In the eighteenth century, when music was talked about at all by philosophers and other "theorists" of the arts, it was almost always vocal music that was being talked about, even when that was not explicitly stated. And there wasn't any real problem with vocal music's membership in the family of the fine arts. For one thing, it had a poetic text, and there was never any doubt that *poetry* was a fine art: indeed it was the paradigm case. For another, what the fine arts were supposed to have in common, as their defining principle, was *representation*. And vocal music, since the end of the sixteenth century, had been understood as a representational art: it represented the passionate tones of the human speaking voice, as we have seen.

¹ See Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts (I)," and "The Modern System of the Arts (II)," reprinted in Peter Kivy (ed.), *Essays in the History of Aesthetics* (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 1992).

The bone of contention was pure instrumental music: music without a text, what came to be called “absolute music” in the nineteenth century. And it did not become a major philosophical issue until, at the end of the eighteenth century, pure instrumental music emerged as a major player in the game, at the hands of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. The problem was that it was difficult to see how, if representation was to be the defining property of the fine arts, that principle could apply to absolute music. For it seemed to have no plausible object of representation: the human voice seemed an unlikely candidate, although it was proposed from time to time; and there was no other in evidence to serve the purpose, if the human voice could not. (Storms and battles were pretty weak candidates.)

It is in the context of the debate over whether or not absolute music is one of the fine arts that we must view Kant’s philosophy of music as a whole, and his musical formalism in particular. And so I turn now to Kant’s contribution to it.

Form

It is one of the most obvious aspects of Kant’s entry into the debate over absolute music’s credentials as a fine art that he radically transforms it from a debate over how or whether absolute music can be narrative, or representational to a debate, with himself, over how or whether it can possess perceivable *form*. For form, in the Kantian system, is the bearer of *beauty*, and the fine arts, for Kant, are the beautiful arts: *schöne Kunst*. In other words, no perceivable form, no beauty; no beauty, no fine art, no *schöne Kunst*. This is, of course, the move to formalism that so characterizes Kant’s philosophy of art, and has been identified by many as the source of modern formalism, in music particularly and in the fine arts in general.

That Kant was the major source of formalism in philosophy of art I have no doubt. That Kant himself was a formalist, in the sense of someone who thinks form is the *only* art-relevant property, is totally false, as shall become apparent later on in this chapter. First, though, to the debate over musical form.

What is puzzling to all readers of Kant, when they come to the question of musical form, is the peculiar candidate Kant seems at least

to propose for it in the first place. For the musical reader, in any period of the modern era, musical form is taken to be the overall plan, the patterned sequence of events instantiated by a musical composition: sonata form, or da capo form, or theme-and-variation form, and so forth. It is the general outline of a musical composition, be it a whole composition or a movement in it. But for Kant, musical form seems to be the form of musical sound's "vibrating movements," as Kant calls them;² *Zitterungen*, in German:³ in other words, what we call, loosely speaking in colloquial English, "sound waves."

The question, then, of whether absolute music is a fine art, apparently turns out, for Kant, to be the question of whether we can consciously perceive the forms of these vibrating waves, or whether we merely perceive their effects on the auditory sense. Furthermore, it is a question formed in terms of a choice between music as a *fine* art, which is to say, in Kant's terms, a *beautiful* art, or what Kant calls an *agreeable* art. Interestingly enough, Kant does not seem to think that the choice is of very great importance. Here is what he says:

The difference which the one opinion or the other occasions in the estimate of the basis of music would, however, only give rise to this much change in its definition, that either it is to be interpreted, as we have done, as the *beautiful* play of sensations (through hearing), or else as one of *agreeable* sensations. According to the former interpretation alone, would music be represented out and out as a *fine* art, whereas according to the latter it would be represented as (in part at least) an *agreeable* art.⁴

Kant had no real conception of the significance absolute music had even then, and has now, for serious, reflective audiences. He would, I imagine, be quite astonished were he to see the commanding statue of Beethoven in Bonn, or the shrine to Mozart that the whole city of Salzburg has become. Clearly, he did not realize the importance of the philosophical issue he had raised.

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), 189 (§51). All quotations from the *Critique of Judgment* are from this edition unless otherwise indicated.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1959), 181 (§51).

⁴ Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, 190 (§51).

For us to understand both the terms in which Kant framed the question of whether music is a beautiful or an agreeable play of sensations, which is to say a fine or an agreeable art, we must for a bit get into some more or less picky Kantian minutiae. But it does have a philosophical payoff.

Kant's theory of beauty and the fine arts, in other words what we would call his aesthetics and philosophy of art, is put forward in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, which is Part I of his *Critique of Judgment*, first published in 1790, and frequently referred to, as I shall do at times, as the third *Critique*. It went through three editions in the author's lifetime, the significance of which will become apparent in a moment.

Fairly early in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, before he gets to his account of the fine arts, Kant writes, according to the first and second editions: "If we assume with Euler that colours are isochronous vibrations (pulsus) of the ether, as sounds are of the air in a state of disturbance, and—what is the most important—that the mind not only perceives by sense the effect of these in exciting the organ, but also perceives by reflection the regular play of impressions (and thus the form of the combination of different representations)—which I very much doubt—then colours and tone cannot be reckoned as mere sensations, but . . . as beauties."⁵

The reference to Euler, is to Leonhard Euler, the Swiss mathematician and physicist, whose work on color Kant is invoking here. And he is, apparently, denying the possibility that the form of Euler's vibrations, either in the case of color, or of sound, is such that one, as he puts it, "perceives by reflection the regular play of impressions . . ." That one could do that, with regard either to color vibrations or sound vibrations, he says, "...I very much doubt . . ." Thus, it seems, musical sound cannot be perceived as form, so music cannot be a fine, but must be an agreeable art.

There is a catch, however, namely, that in the *third* edition of the *Critique of Judgment*, "I very much doubt" is altered to read: "which I

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), 60 (§14).

still in no way doubt . . .”⁶ The reading of the third edition completely reverses the meaning of the sentence from apparently denying that we actually perceive sound vibrations cognitively, rather than just sensing their effect, to apparently affirming that that is exactly what we do. Which is the authentic reading? The version of the first and second editions certainly seems to make it a more plausible claim, at least if we are interpreting Kant correctly here. And in the absence of other textual evidence, that might decide us in its favor. But there are other considerations that support the reading of the third edition, and the Kant experts with whose work I am acquainted, who think about this textual problem, are generally in favor of it.⁷ In the past I have acquiesced in their judgment. But I will, later on, come back to consider whether we have really understood correctly just *what* Kant was saying here.

With this textual problem out of the way, at least for the moment, let us return again to the section of the third *Critique* where Kant tackles the question of whether music is a fine or an agreeable art. It seems to turn, remember, on whether we perceive the forms of vibrations of musical tone, Euler’s vibrations, cognitively, or whether we merely feel their effect.

One of the puzzling things about Kant’s mode of expression here which, by the way, is §51 of the third *Critique*, is that it evinces diffidence and uncertainty. If we accept the third edition reading of §14, then Kant can be understood as expressing more or less confidently that we do indeed perceive, cognitively, the forms of the individual musical sound vibrations. He says: “. . . I still in no way doubt [it] . . .”

But in §51 he is far less confident than that. He says: “we cannot confidently assert whether a colour or a tone (sound) is merely an

⁶ Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, p. 66 (§14). Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 70 (§14): “which, after all, I do not doubt at all . . .,” and Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 109 (§14), “about which I have very little doubt . . .”

⁷ See, especially, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., *The Notion of Form in Kant’s “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment”* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971).

agreeable sensation, or whether they are in themselves a beautiful play of sensations and in being estimated aesthetically, convey, as such, a delight in their form.”⁸ The indecision is expressed in the form of a kind of informal dilemma. On the one hand, Kant observes, it seems quite repugnant to common sense to think that we can perceive light waves or sound waves in the same way we perceive the waves of the ocean or ripples on a pond. For the velocity of these vibrations “in all probability far outstrips any capacity on our part for forming an immediate estimate in perception of the time interval between them . . .” And that being the case, “we should be led to believe that it is only the *effect* of these vibrating movements upon the elastic parts of our body, that can be evident to sense . . . and that, consequently, all that enters into combination with colours and tones is agreeableness, and not beauty, of their composition.”⁹

The word “composition,” *Komposition*, as it is used by Kant in the musical context is going to be an important issue in a little while. But as it is necessary to read the passage just quoted, the “composition” referred to is the composition, that is the structure, of the individual tones themselves, not the musical composition which might be made of them. This structure, of which the tones are composed, Kant is saying, seems not possible to perceive by sense in the manner in which we can see, for example, the waves that “compose” the ocean.

But on the other hand, Kant says—and here is the other horn of the dilemma—“we may feel compelled to look upon the sensations afforded by both [colours and sounds], not as mere sense impressions, but as the effect of an estimate of forms in the play of a number of sensations.”¹⁰

Now a dilemma, or “antinomy,” as Kant famously called some well known dilemmas, is supposed to be made up of two intuitively plausible theses, both of which cannot be true, or so it seems: for example, that there is free will, and that the universe is deterministic. The present one, however, presents, at least as it has been understood in the past, only *one* plausible thesis, namely, that we do *not* consciously perceive the form of the vibrations of musical sound. And it is the

⁸ Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, 189 (§51).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 190 (§51).

other, completely *implausible* thesis that, if the third edition of the third *Critique* is to be credited, Kant apparently was maintaining. But the experts seem agreed that the reading of the third edition is the correct one. For the moment (but only for the moment) I will let it stand, and get on with the argument.

Kant seemingly says in §14 that he is certain we do in fact perceive, cognitively, the form of the sound vibrations in musical tones. In §51 he says he is not sure whether we do or we don't, but recent commentators apparently think that the statement in §14 is Kant's true position. That being the case, we can conclude that Kant thought music was a fine art; because to be a fine art an art must be an art of the beautiful and to be an art of the beautiful it must have perceivable form. Music does have perceivable form, namely, Kant seems to say, in the sound vibrations of musical tone. Therefore, music has the necessary characteristic for being a fine art, an art of the beautiful. (It must also, of course, be an *art*, which is to say a man-made product, not a natural object, to qualify as a fine art.)

Alas, the case is not quite so simple. Here are two reasons why. First of all, in a series of lectures which Kant gave throughout his mature life, and published, in 1798, under the title *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, he states quite explicitly: "it is only because music serves as an instrument for poetry that it is *fine* (not merely pleasant) art."¹¹ And second, at the end of §51 of the third *Critique*, Kant says, apparently, that if the sound vibrations are *not* consciously perceived, then music will be an agreeable art "in part at least," suggesting that it will, if the vibrations *are* consciously perceived, be a fine art "in part at least." In short, Kant thought it possible that art could be fine art in one respect but not in another; and, I suggest, he thought music was one such art.

Given these two important qualifications, I think we can now state more accurately and plausibly what Kant was saying. Absolute music, music without a text, has one of two necessary (not jointly sufficient) features of the fine arts: it has perceivable form. But it lacks a second feature, namely, ideational content. Vocal music, on the other hand,

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Mary J. Gregory (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 114.

which is what Kant was talking about in the *Anthropology*, has both form and ideational content, the content being given by the text which music sets. So whereas vocal music is a fine art, having both form and ideational content, absolute music is “in part” a fine art since it has form, but in part not a fine art since it lacks ideational content.

This is, however, just a rough account of what Kant is claiming. More exactly, what he turns out to be saying is that absolute music does not lack ideational content: rather, it does have such content but, so to speak, not in the right way. Kant then was not a formalist with regard to the fine arts. He thought that a certain kind of ideational content, functioning in a certain way, was a necessary condition for the fine arts. And to understand how absolute music fails in this department, we must go briefly into the matter of *what* Kant thought the ideational content of the fine arts is, and how he thought it functions.

Content

The content of the fine arts that is peculiarly theirs Kant calls “aesthetic ideas.” He explains, “by an aesthetic idea I mean that representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. *concept*, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never quite get on level terms with or render completely intelligible.”¹²

Kant’s notion, as I read him, is motivated by these considerations. If the content of an artwork were merely what I would call its “manifest” content, susceptible of paraphrase, then there would be nothing special about it. You could get it from any number of other forms of expression, and that would leave artworks with no special role or function of their own. But our intuitions run in a different direction. We feel that artworks have ideational content in a very different way. We feel that their ideational content, unlike that of non-artistic means of expression, is somehow ineffable: you cannot express what an artwork “says” in any other form than that in which the artwork “says” it.

¹² *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, 175–6 (§49).

Artworks do indeed have manifest content, susceptible of paraphrase, and this content does indeed perform a vital function: it sets going a train of aesthetic ideas. What I have been calling the fine arts' manifest content, as Kant puts it, "stirs up a crowd of sensations and secondary representations for which no expression can be found."¹³ It is this "crowd of sensations and secondary representations for which no expression can be found," which is to say, the aesthetic ideas, that constitutes the art-relevant content of the fine arts: the arts of the beautiful.

But absolute music, too, on Kant's view, possesses both manifest content and aesthetic ideas that that content sets in train. The manifest content turns out, not very surprisingly, to be what we might call music's expressive or emotive content. For Kant bought into the eighteenth-century doctrine, particularly prominent in Germany under the title of the *Affektenlehre*, that is to say, doctrine of the affections, which made music out to be a kind of language of the emotions, which reflected the emotive tone of passionate human speech.

It was a notion fairly ubiquitous in the Enlightenment that human speech has an underlying emotive sub-text universal to the species. As Kant puts it, "Every expression in language has an associated tone suited to its sense. This tone indicates, more or less, a mode in which the speaker is affected, and in turn evokes it in the hearer also, in whom conversely it then excites the idea which in language is expressed with such a tone."¹⁴ The point is, then, that if the speaker expresses, say, anger in her speech, the angry tone of her expression will evoke, which I think is to say will arouse, anger in the hearer, empathetically, and this will then provoke the hearer to have the concept which that expressive tone is associated with, namely the concept of anger.

Music, Kant thinks, follows the very same routine; and, furthermore, it goes beyond it. For the end product in the case of music is not the concept of an emotion, or emotions, but a chain of aesthetic ideas stimulated by the concept. Thus, in Kant's words, "just as modulation [of speech] is, as it were, a universal [emotive] language of sensations

¹³ Ibid., 178 (§49).

¹⁴ Ibid., 194 (§53).

intelligible to every man, so the art of [musical] tone wields the full force of this [emotive] language wholly on its own account, namely, as a language of the affections, and in this way, according to the law of association, universally communicates the aesthetic ideas that are naturally combined therewith.”¹⁵

But, one is bound to ask, if absolute music possesses both form and an ideational content of aesthetic ideas, which are jointly sufficient for making an artifact a work of the fine arts, why does music not qualify? The answer, as I suggested earlier, is that it is not just that something initiate a train of aesthetic ideas, but how these aesthetic ideas *function*, that decides whether the train of aesthetic ideas is or is not a fine-art-making feature. And according to Kant the aesthetic ideas initiated by music do *not* have the proper function to make them fine-art-relevant. To understand this point, though, we must come to understand some of the basic machinery underlying the perception of beauty and what Kant calls the pure judgment of taste.

Taste

In the first part of his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, which he calls the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, Kant poses the following question. How can judgments of the beautiful, which are based merely upon our feeling of pleasure, and therefore like the kinds of judgment we call purely subjective, also be judgments that seem to demand universal assent, as if they were objective judgments, based on commonly held concepts? For, as Kant says, when someone “puts a thing on a pedestal and calls it beautiful, he demands the same delight from others.”¹⁶ But how can this demand be justified if the judgment is based merely on the judger’s personal feeling of pleasure? That is Kant’s problem, as it had been David Hume’s and others of his British predecessors’.

The answer to it that Kant gives is complicated, and fraught with interpretational difficulties. Fortunately, all that is necessary, for present purposes, is that we have the most basic grasp of the answer

¹⁵ *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, 194 (§53).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 52 (§7).

Kant gives. And that I will try now to provide avoiding, I hope, an over-simplification that might amount to misrepresentation of Kant's views.

Let us begin with an item of what might be called epistemological ontology. According to Kant, what we might call factual and conceptual judgments are the result of an interaction between two mental faculties common to all: our *understanding* and our *imagination*. There is no particular need, for present purposes, to know how this all works. What we do need to know is that Kant thought there is an activity that these two cognitive faculties, the understanding and the imagination, can mutually engage in, which he called their "free play," and which produces a felt pleasure in the person whose cognitive faculties are so engaged.

Furthermore, because this pleasure issues from the free play of *cognitive* faculties, which, on that account, must be faculties common to all human beings, since cognition is common, the pleasure itself is universally felt, when the pleasure truly has its source in the free play of these faculties, and not in some other bodily source, from which so many of our pleasures arise. The free play of the understanding and imagination can be considered, then, as a kind of sense, common to us all, a *sensus communis*, as Kant calls it.¹⁷ With regard to judgments of the beautiful, he says, "We are suitors for agreement from every one, because we are fortified with a ground common to all."¹⁸

How, then, are we to understand the perceptual process whereby we experience the pleasure of the beautiful? When I see things, for example, their perception may give me various kinds of pleasures; but it is quite possible that none of these pleasures is the pleasure of beauty: the pleasure of the cognitive faculties in free play that is the basis for a judgment that something is beautiful—what Kant calls a pure judgment of taste. The question then comes down to what kind of perception it *is* that thus engages the faculties of imagination and understanding. How does perception put them in free play?

The answer is—and here lies the heart of Kant's often misunderstood formalism—that when we achieve perception of the pure form

¹⁷ Ibid., 82 (§20).

¹⁸ Ibid. (§19).

of a perceptual presentation, untainted by an extraneous conceptual or practical interest in it, we then achieve a state in which our perception is completely purged of any personal idiosyncrasies, due to experience or physical differences. That being the case, we have a right to assume that *anyone* who has achieved this state will feel the same pleasure we do, because they too would have been purged of anything that makes their perceptual experience different from ours. But what has *form* do with this? Simply that when perception is pared down to this bare, skeletal state, all that remains to be perceived is the pure form of the perceptual presentation. Furthermore, that pure form of the perceptual presentation will be perceived by *anyone* who achieves this state; for he or she too will, as we have seen, have been purged of all personal interest in the object.

Kant had a characteristic way of expressing this thought that is famous and was of great influence both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He said: “*Taste* is the faculty of estimating an object or mode of representation by means of a delight or aversion *apart from any interest*. The object of such delight is called *beautiful*.”¹⁹ What Kant is describing has, since his time, been called, by aestheticians and philosophers of art, “disinterested perception,” and Kant himself refers to the pleasure that results from this kind of perception as “pure disinterested delight . . .”²⁰

What is particularly distinctive about Kant’s description of disinterestedness is the extreme to which he carries the concept. It is not merely that, in what Kant calls the “pure judgment of taste,” we are supposed to be indifferent to the nature of the object of perception; we are to be indifferent as well to its very existence—that is, whether or not it even exists. As Kant puts the point in one place, “Now, where the question is whether something is beautiful, we do not want to know, whether we, or any one else, are, or even could be, concerned in the real existence of the thing, but rather what estimate we form of it on mere contemplation . . .”²¹

What Kant is getting at here is this. If the sight of an object (say) is giving me pleasure because of the good use to which I can put it,

¹⁹ *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, 50 (§5).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 43–4 (§2).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 42–3 (§2).

then that pleasure is not the pleasure of the beautiful, and is, of course, bound up with the real existence of the object; it will not survive its dissolution. But if the sight of the object pleases disinterestedly, purely in virtue of the form of the perceptual presentation, then it matters not at all if I discover that the perception is a hallucination, or a dream, and the object of the perception non-existent. For the pleasure is in the form, and the perceptual presentation will have that form regardless of whether it is a veridical presentation or some species of illusion. It is this disinterested perception that activates the free play of the cognitive faculties that in turn produces the disinterested pleasure of the beautiful: a pleasure shared by all who achieve the requisite state, and which is the basis of the pure judgment of taste.

Is Music an Art?

With this basic and, I hope, not over-simplified account of Kant's position on the perception of beauty in hand, we can return now to the aesthetic ideas, and to the question of why they are not, in absolute music, functioning in a way appropriate to the fine arts. And to answer *that* question we must, of course, ask the prior question of how the aesthetic ideas function when they *are* functioning in a fine-art-relevant way.

It is clear that Kant wants a unified theory of fine art in which form and content are not two separate, unrelated features of artworks. He achieves this unity by claiming that the ultimate payoff of content, that is, of the aesthetic ideas, is the *same* payoff as that of formal beauty, namely, the free play of the cognitive faculties. And it is just this payoff that the aesthetic ideas in music lack. For whereas the aesthetic ideas in literature and the visual arts have their payoff in their interaction with the cognitive faculties, the aesthetic ideas in absolute music, for reasons I do not thoroughly understand, but at least have some glimmerings about, only have a bodily payoff: a sense of bodily well-being. Here is how Kant puts his point. Music is a "play with aesthetic ideas, or even with representations of the understanding, by which, all said and done, nothing is thought." Hence: "In music the course of this play is from bodily sensation to aesthetic ideas (which are the Objects for the affections), and

then from these back again, but with gathered strength, to the body.”²²

At this point the general outline of Kant’s philosophy of musical formalism can be organized somewhat along the following lines

First, Kant thinks, there are at least two requirements for being a fine art, besides the obvious one of being an artifact: that the artifact in question has perceivable form, and that it excite aesthetic ideas that eventuate in the free play of the cognitive faculties. Second, he seems to think, implausibly, that the form of the vibrations of air, of musical tones, is consciously perceivable, as is affirmed in the third edition of the third *Critique*, but denied in the first and second editions. Third, therefore, he thinks that music has one necessary condition for being a fine art: perceivable form. Fourth, music, for Kant, like the literary and visual arts, excites aesthetic ideas in the perceiver; but they do not engage the free play of the cognitive faculties. So music fails to fully qualify as a fine art. Fifth, music is, therefore, fine-art-like in one respect: it possesses perceivable beauty of form, but it is *not* fine-art-like in another respect—its aesthetic ideas do not stimulate the free play of the cognitive faculties. Sixth, in placing musical form in the form of sound vibrations Kant was taking an absurd position, which reveals that he had absolutely no notion of where true musical form resides, namely, in the formal structure of musical compositions.

But is Kant really maintaining the sixth, obviously absurd point? I used to think so. Now, however, I am not so sure.

Form and Composition

Consider the following passage:

The *charm* of colours, or of the agreeable tones of instruments, may be added: but the *design* in the former and the *composition* in the latter constitute the proper object of the pure judgement of taste . . . [T]hey make this form more clearly, definitely, and completely intuitable, and besides stimulate the representation by their charm, as they excite and sustain the attention directed to the object itself.²³

²² *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, 198–9 (§54).

²³ *Ibid.*, 68 (§14).

Two things about this passage are extremely important. First, most important, and most obvious, Kant is using the word “composition” here in just the way we would. He is clearly not referring to the composition of musical tones themselves, as he was in the passage quoted previously, but to the composition which musical tones are used to make. This is clear from his juxtaposition of *composition*, in music, to *design* in painting. Design is the large outline, the form, if you will, of a visual artwork. And if composition in music is being analogized to design in painting, then what Kant is referring to are the larger outlines of musical form, sonata, theme-and-variations, rondo, and so forth, even though he probably had no specific knowledge of the particulars of musical forms, and what they are called.

Second, but perhaps less obvious, Kant seems to be denying that the forms of the vibrations of either color or sound can be consciously, cognitively perceived; for he says that only the design of painting and the composition of music are “the proper object of the pure judgement of taste.” But the proper object of the pure judgment of taste is form; so if color and timbre are not its proper objects, as Kant seems to be saying, then it follows that their forms, their internal structure cannot be consciously perceived, a point I will return to in a moment.

Are there any other passages in the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment that directly suggest Kant’s grasp of larger musical form? The answer is affirmative, although the pickings are pretty slim. I will adduce one other for you, the only one I have so far turned up. But as we shall see, two passages that I have already quoted, and that others quote frequently, take on an entirely different complexion when read with the two passages in mind that I am now discussing.

The second passage I want now to adduce will, I hope, not only support my claim that Kant did indeed have at least some notion of musical form as we understand it, but also perhaps will present a side of the great philosopher few of us suspected was there. I am going to quote, in fact, a passage in which the Sage of Königsberg, no less, bestows upon us his instructions for entertaining at table. Kant begins: “Agreeable arts are those which have mere enjoyment for their object. Such are all the charms that can gratify a dinner party . . .”; and among these “charms” Kant includes “the art of arranging the table for enjoyment, or, at large banquets, the music of the orchestra—a

quaint idea intended to act on the mind merely as an agreeable noise fostering a genial spirit, which, without anyone paying the smallest attention to the composition, promotes the free flow of conversation between guest and guest.”²⁴

What catches our attention here is not simply Kant’s use of the term “composition” and the music’s being, as Kant puts it, “merely an agreeable noise.” When the musical composition is not attended to, he is saying, it functions as “merely an agreeable noise”: one of the agreeable arts, like “the art of arranging the table . . .” But when, however, we *are* attending to the musical composition, it must be functioning as something else, presumably as, at least in one respect, a fine art. And the difference must be that when we are paying attention to the composition, we are paying attention to the larger aspects of musical form; for it is form, as we have seen, that is one of the two aspects of art that together lift it above the agreeable and into the realm of the fine arts.

If the two passages just cited are to be read as I have done, then it appears that I must withdraw my earlier claim, in my previous writings, that Kant had no notion at all of musical form as we understand it, but thought of musical form only as the form of the sound vibrations of musical tones. It was a doubly doomed view: doomed because it paid no attention to real musical form, and doomed because it made the monstrously implausible claim that we can perceive consciously the forms of sound vibrations in the same sense that we can perceive the ocean’s waves or the ripples on a pond.

But even if it turns out that, as I have been arguing, Kant did recognize the larger aspects of musical form, there still remains the implausibility of his apparent view that we can perceive the form of the musical sound vibrations. Was he maintaining *both*? To that difficult question I now turn.

Vibrations Reconsidered

At this point I want to return to two passages I have quoted and discussed before. The first is the passage in §14 where Kant describes

²⁴ *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, 165–6 (§44).

what is happening when we do indeed consciously perceive vibrations of musical tone, according to the third edition, and the other is the passage in §51 where Kant, at least tentatively, entertains the hypothesis that we consciously perceive the vibrations, and again describes what is going on if we do. What I want to argue is that everyone I know of who has interpreted these passages, including myself, in my previous writings, has gotten them wrong; furthermore, when you get them right, they make perfect sense.

In §14, you may remember, Kant says, according to the third edition, "...I, still, in no way doubt..." that musical tones "are isochronous vibrations... of the air set in vibration by sound, and, what is most important, that the mind not alone perceives by sense their effect in stimulating the organs, but also, by reflection, the regular play of the impressions, (and consequently the form in which different representations are united)..."²⁵

The general consensus among Kant scholars, in which, in the past, I have acquiesced, has this passage affirming that sound, like color, is the result of Euler's vibrations, and, in addition, as affirming that we perceive by reflection the forms of the waves themselves, as we do the waves of the ocean or the ripples on a pond, following the third edition. I now think this may be wrong.

I begin with the premise that "perceiving" the vibrations of sound—Euler's vibrations—in the way we "perceive" the waves of the ocean or the ripples on a pond is patently false, bordering on the absurd. And if, in §14, we accept the reading of the first and second editions of the third *Critique*, we can save Kant from that seemingly outlandish position. We read him as very much doubting it.

Furthermore, philosophical considerations aside, it appears more likely that the third edition has the misprint. For if the clause was misprinted in the first edition, why was it not corrected in the second? That the misprint crept into the third edition, unnoticed, seems altogether more plausible. Kant was no longer around to notice and correct it.

But if we take Kant as saying that he very much doubted we can consciously perceive sound vibrations, then the paragraph following

²⁵ Ibid., 66 (§14).

this expression of doubt raises another problem. For Kant *seems* to be saying there that “pure” colors are beautiful (and the argument applies, *pari passu*, to sounds as well). As he puts it, “all simple colours are regarded as beautiful, so far as pure.”²⁶ If pure colors and sounds are beautiful, though, it must be for their consciously perceivable form, on Kant’s view. And so it would appear that Kant is *not* denying that we can consciously perceive, in colors and sounds, Euler’s vibrations. The third edition must be *echt*.

Notice, however, how Kant expresses himself here, which is to say, in the passive voice. He does not say that pure colors and sounds *are* beautiful or that *he* thinks they are beautiful. He says that they are “held to be beautiful,”²⁷ are “regarded as Beautiful,”²⁸ are “considered beautiful.”²⁹ In the German it is *für schön gehalten*. What I suggest we understand Kant to be doing, here, is saying that pure colors and sounds are, *mistakenly*, “held to be beautiful,” “regarded as beautiful,” “considered beautiful,” and offering an *explanation* for why this is so.

What does it mean for a color or sound to be pure? Kant writes: “But the purity of a simple mode of sensation means that its uniformity is not disturbed or broken by any foreign sensation. It belongs merely to the form . . .”³⁰ And I take Kant to mean by “It [which is to say, the “uniformity”] belongs merely to the form . . .,” not that it belongs to the form as consciously perceived but to the form as *cause* of the sensation. In other words, we have pure sensations of color when the forms of the vibrations have their effect on us unperturbed by *extraneous* sensations; and we have impure sensations of color when the unperceived cause of the sensations, i.e. the vibrations, are affected by *extraneous* sensations. And the same is true of pure and impure sensations of sound.

So pure sensations of color and sound are like perceptions of the beautiful in that they are free of extraneous influences. And for that reason we mistakenly take pure sensations of color and sound to be

²⁶ *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, 67 (§14).

²⁷ *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Guyer and Matthews, 109.

²⁸ *Critique of Judgment*, Bernard, 60, Meredith, 67.

²⁹ *Critique of Judgment*, Pluhar, 71.

³⁰ *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, 66 (§14).

beautiful. But they are not, because they do not possess consciously perceived form.

This, however, still leaves a problem in §51. For there Kant reintroduces the question of whether we do or do not consciously perceive Euler's vibrations in musical sounds. But on my reading of §51 the problem is more apparent than real.

First of all, as I read §51, although Kant does express the view that "we cannot confidently assert whether a colour or tone (sound) is merely an agreeable sensation, or whether they are in themselves a beautiful play of sensations . . .," the gist of the passage strongly suggests to me that Kant inclines to the former alternative, particularly, as he says, "If we consider the velocity of the vibrations of light, or, in the second case, of the air, which in all probability far outstrips any capacity on our part for forming an immediate estimate in perception of the time interval between them . . ." ³¹ Furthermore, that he at least entertains doubts here, as to whether we consciously perceive the Euler vibrations of sound, is quite inconsistent with the statement in §14, if the first and second editions of the third *Critique* are followed, that he "in no way" doubts it, but entirely consistent with the third edition reading of "I very much doubt" it.

This leaves Kant's final judgment on the question of whether absolute music is a fine art to be worked into the puzzle. The last sentence of §51 reads: "According to the former interpretation, alone, would music be represented out and out as a *fine* art, whereas according to the latter it would be represented as (in part at least) an *agreeable* art." ³² Which is to say, if we consciously perceive the forms of the Euler vibrations of the individual tones making up a musical composition, then we can call music, *without qualification*, out and out, a beautiful art: in other words a fine, not an agreeable art. But if we only perceive them in their effects on sensation, and do not consciously perceive their form, then we must conclude that absolute music is not completely an art of the beautiful, a fine art: it is, to be sure, in part an art of the beautiful, a fine art, in virtue of its large compositional forms; but it is as well, in part, an art of the agreeable because the individual tones that make up its larger forms

³¹ Ibid., 189 (§51).

³² Ibid., 190 (§51).

are themselves, as we perceive them formless, and therefore agreeable rather than beautiful in themselves. And, it should be added, the same would be true of paintings in color.

If I am right that in both §14 and §51 Kant is plumping for the conclusion that we do *not* consciously perceive the form of Euler's vibrations in musical tones, then Kant is also plumping for the conclusion that, in this respect, music is partly an art of the beautiful, partly an art of the agreeable, hence only in part a fine art (in this respect). Is this an implausible conclusion? Not at all. For all Kant is saying, in effect, is that the beauty of absolute music lies in its perceivable formal structure, not in its individual constituent tones. There is nothing absurd in the conclusion. It is wrong, I think, in denying that the individual tones of music can be beautiful; but being wrong is one thing, and being off the wall is another.

Thus it seems to me that in interpreting Kant in this way we are saving him from three absurdities in his account of music. We are saving him from the absurd notion that we consciously perceive the form of Euler's vibrations in musical tones. We are saving him from the absurd notion that music can only be a fine art if we acquiesce in the notion that the form of Euler's sound vibrations are consciously perceived in it. And, finally, we are saving him from contradiction by bringing §14 and §51 in line with one another.

Perhaps one further question is outstanding, at this point, with regard to the question of music as a fine art. Kant, after all, seems not to have had a very high opinion of absolute music. For even though it possess aesthetic ideas, their payoff is not a "cognitive" one but simply an enhancement of bodily well-being. The question can well be raised then, whether, even though Kant recognized works of absolute music as "compositions," not merely individual tones, whether he thought these compositions themselves can be perceived as formal structures worthy of the name of fine art, or whether they are merely, as the tones that compose them, agreeable not beautiful. Indeed, Kant's own example of musical background to a dinner party, where the *composition* is not attended to, but where the music merely provides an agreeable accompaniment to the meal and to conversation is an example of an agreeable rather than a beautiful play of sensations, by virtue of the fact that the sequence of sound sensations, even though

it does have consciously perceivable form, is not being experienced in such a way as to consciously perceive the form. Is this the canonical way of perceiving absolute music, on Kant's view? If so, then in spite of the fact that Kant recognizes the larger compositional forms of music, they play, on his view, no part in the listening experience, *as perceived forms*, and hence do not redeem music from the realm of the agreeable.

However, there is no reason to believe that Kant thought "background" music to dinner parties, where music is indeed an agreeable rather than a fine art, is canonical for music listening. Indeed the tenor of the passage is quite the opposite. Background music for dinner parties is "a quaint idea." And when he describes the listeners to music in this setting as not "paying the smallest attention to the composition . . .," he is surely paying such listening no compliment, and implying that there is a more serious mode of listening, namely, the mode in which we *do* pay close attention to the composition.

It therefore appears not only mistaken to deny Kant had acquaintance with larger aspects of musical form; it is mistaken as well that he thought musical form resides in the vibrations of individual musical tones. We all should have known better. But there it is.

All well and good. We have, by laborious, not to say pedantic argumentation and interpretation, reached the conclusion that Kant thought music without text fulfilled one of two necessary conditions for being a fine art: it possesses a consciously perceivable formal structure. And we have concluded as well that he meant by formal structure one of the things that we ordinarily mean by it: which is to say, the formal pattern of sounds that constitutes such structures as sonata form, rondo, and the like, as well as the internal patterns within these structures, and the larger forms—symphony, sonata, concerto—that the smaller forms make up, even though Kant never mentions any of them by name, and gives no evidence of knowing anything specific about musical structure or theory. But was Kant a *formalist* in music? And if so, can we determine in any detail in what his musical formalism consisted? The answer to the first question I think is a clear affirmative, and to the second, alas, an equally clear negative.

Kant's Musical Formalism

In a passage early on, in the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” long before, indeed, Kant gives his account of the fine arts in the “Analytic of the Sublime,” he describes music as a free beauty of form that “presupposes no concept of what the object should be”³³ (Kant is thinking here of the distinction between something's being beautiful in being beautifully designed or adapted to a purpose and something's being beautiful in appearance without regard to what the thing might be.) The relevant passage is as follows:

So designs *à la grecque*, foliage for framework or on wallpapers, &c., have no intrinsic meaning; they represent nothing—no Object under a definite concept—and are free beauties. We may also rank in the same class what in music are called free fantasias (without a theme), and, indeed, all music that is not set to words).³⁴

It is not clear what Kant means by free fantasias, but I presume he is thinking of the kinds of flourishes, scales, and arpeggios that characterize toccatas and fantasias of both the Baroque and Classical periods, and, as he says, are without discernable musical themes. But, in any case, what he means is really irrelevant to present concerns. For he shortly extends his point—that such free fantasias are without intrinsic meaning—to “all music which is not set to words”: that is to say, all pure instrumental music. And that, of course, is the relevant and vital claim.

Kant invokes numerous images to illustrate what he means by free beauty, those that are artifactual being examples of what we would call “decorative art”: “*designs à la grecque* [i.e. *Arabesque*-like ornaments], foliage for framework or on wall papers.” But beyond that, unfortunately, he tells us nothing further about what the special character of *sonic* “decoration” might be. That Kant apparently identified absolute music with the decorative arts will no doubt shock most music lovers whose objects of veneration are the instrumental works of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and their ilk. Perhaps their shock might be ameliorated somewhat if they were reminded

³³ *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, 72 (§16).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

that the decorative arts include not only wallpaper and woodwork but those magnificent Persian rugs that are sublime works of art with price tags on them appropriate to their status, as well as the decorations of the Alhambra and Alcazar, a point I shall return to in the end.

In any event, Kant's characterization of music without words, whatever its lack of detail, was, undoubtedly, a *formalist* one—but with an important proviso. For Kant, as we have seen, thought that music *also*, at least in a somewhat attenuated sense, had a content: an ideational content in the form of the capacity to arouse the human emotions, bring the ideas of them before the mind, with the result of setting in motion a train of what he called “aesthetic ideas,” whose main identifying characteristic was their ineffability. As Kant put his point:

by an aesthetic idea I mean that representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. *concept*, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never quite get on equal terms with or render completely intelligible.³⁵

Now if we put Kant's musical formalism together with his doctrine of the aesthetic ideas then we get the mixed position that the pure formal structure of absolute music, which, as Kant says, has “no intrinsic meaning,” arouses what I like to call the “garden-variety emotions,” those in turn initiate a train of ineffable “aesthetic ideas,” which have their ultimate payoff in the production of a physical sense of well-being: as he puts it, “gathered strength to the body.” Well, is this formalism cum arousal cum aesthetic ideas *really* formalism or not?

That Kant was the father of modern formalism, in music, and, indeed in all of the arts, is beyond question. That he was not a “pure” formalist, even in music, is clear enough. However, it was the formalist aspect of his position that has always stood out as its most characteristic and well-worked-out one; and it is *that* aspect that has been the influential one in nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetics and philosophy of art. The murky doctrine of music's “content,” in the *Affektenlehre* and “aesthetic ideas,” although puzzled

³⁵ Ibid., 175–6 (§49).

over by scholars, has had little if any influence on modern aesthetic theory, so far as I know, except perhaps in a very indirect way.

Furthermore, it can well be asked just what Kant's *non*-formalism in music amounted to, in real substance. For the aesthetic ideas are an *ineffable* content. And it is a nice question whether an ineffable "content" is any content at all.

Be that as it may, that Kant never quite bit the pure formalist bullet, when it came to absolute music, shows how deep and pervasive the ancient quarrel was and is. The bullet was, of course, bitten, famously, by Eduard Hanslick. And to that much discussed author I shall devote the next chapter with, I hope, something new to say. It is at any rate new to me.