

## Two Debates about Absolute Music

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Bonds's book, *Absolute Music*, is subtitled 'The History of an Idea'.<sup>1</sup> What his rich and complex narrative reveals, however, is that the expression 'absolute music' has served as a label for any number of different ideas. And although, in the précis introducing this symposium, he describes the topic of his book as '[a] debate about the essence of music', the book in fact chronicles a variety of different debates, not only about the essence of music, but also about the relative value of different kinds of music, the relevance of social context and other extra-musical factors to the understanding of music, the role (if any) which music should play in advancing social and political ideas, and more generally the extent to which music can legitimately be used for extra-musical or extra-artistic ends. *Absolute Music* offers a wealth of documentation and analysis to philosophers, musicologists and intellectual historians seeking to understand the background to these debates, at least some of which remain current today. The task of distinguishing the various ideas and controversies associated with the expression 'absolute music' remains, however, a difficult one, in large part because many of the people involved in these debates have themselves used the word 'absolute' – and related expressions like 'pure', 'isolated', 'autonomous', and 'self-sufficient' – in ways that are inconsistent or unclear. According to Bonds, Wagner himself – in whose writings the expression 'absolute music' first appears – 'defined absolute music at various times in at least three different ways: (1) as any

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* (Oxford: OUP, 2014).

music that served no purpose beyond itself; (2) as purely instrumental music; [and] (3) as a kind of music that could not be imagined, much less realized, in practice',<sup>2</sup> where the unrealizability stemmed from its being (in Wagner's words) 'bound to neither place nor time, nor presented by specific individuals under specific circumstances to individuals who are themselves specific'.<sup>3</sup> Wagner's own use of the term reflected different historical strands of thought about what amounts to purity or self-sufficiency in music, and it is not surprising that many of Wagner's successors were no more consistent in their use of the expression 'absolute music' than he was.

While it is not Bonds's aim in this book to clarify the various meanings associated with the term 'absolute music', he does offer some helpful tools for doing so. One of them is the distinction he emphasizes between absolute music as a kind of repertory, and absolute music as what he calls a 'regulative construct'.<sup>4</sup> In what follows I will attempt both to clarify and to build on this distinction, by highlighting two important debates which are associated respectively with the two concepts of absolute music which Bonds distinguishes. I will end speculatively with a suggestion about how these two debates are connected.

What Bonds calls absolute music in the repertory sense can be identified roughly with music not associated with a text. When Wagner used the term in the repertory sense, at least on Bonds's telling, he had in mind the contrast between instrumental music and music incorporating sung texts (Beethoven's Ninth being the paradigm of the latter),<sup>5</sup> and many writers followed him

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6 and 13.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 136-137.

in this.<sup>6</sup> Since then, the term has also come to be used as marking out one side of a division within instrumental music, with programme music on the other side;<sup>7</sup> arguably absolute music also excludes musical pieces with descriptive titles and music ostensibly written for a particular purpose, such as waltzes or funeral marches. In what follows, I will use it as marking out the more general contrast, on which the point of designating a work of music as absolute in this sense is to mark it off not only from programme music, but also from opera and song.

In contrast to the case of absolute music in the ‘regulative construct’ sense, there has been no debate about whether absolute music in the repertory sense is possible. While it might not always be straightforward to draw the boundary between absolute and non-absolute music, there obviously is such a thing as instrumental music without a programme, stock examples being Bach partitas and Beethoven string quartets. But there has been considerable debate about the value of absolute music in this sense, most famously the debate between Wagner and Liszt on the one hand, and Hanslick on the other, about whether absolute music was to be rejected or embraced. As Bonds documents, Wagner held that instrumental music had reached the limits of its potential as an art form and needed to be supplemented by poetry and drama. Left to itself, he thought, it remained disconnected from social and political concerns and, more generally, isolated in its own sphere, incapable of representing anything beyond itself or expressing thought or emotion. Hanslick agreed with Wagner’s judgment about the character of instrumental music but drew the opposite conclusion regarding its value. Like Wagner and Liszt, Hanslick thought of non-texted instrumental music as lacking in representational content and thus as disconnected from human concerns. But unlike Wagner and Liszt he thought of this as amounting not to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 138-139.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 218.

emptiness or sterility, but rather as something positive, a completeness and self-sufficiency which reflected music's highest calling.

That debate, about the value of absolute music in the repertory sense, is the first of the two debates I want to highlight. The second debate is about whether the participants in the first debate were right about the premise both sides took for granted, namely that absolute music in the repertory sense has the character of purity and isolation from human concerns which Wagner and Hanslick ascribed to it. It is in the context of the second debate that we should understand Bonds's notion of absolute music in the 'regulative concept' sense. To say that music is 'absolute' in the sense is to say that it conforms to what Roger Scruton has called 'an ideal of purity'.<sup>8</sup> This debate is complicated by the fact that the notion of 'purity' is itself amorphous, and different aspects of it come apart from one other. Does it imply, as on the first characterization of absolute music which Bonds ascribes to Wagner, that music which is absolute in the sense serves no purpose beyond itself, in particular no social or political purpose? More radically, does it imply, as on the third of these characterizations, that it is not created or performed by specific individuals in a specific social context? Or is the 'purity' a matter of its not being expressive of emotions, or of its lacking representational content? Since it seems plausible that music cannot serve a social purpose unless it has expressive or representational content, and since, as Wagner noted, the idea of an artwork completely disconnected from any particular time or place is a "phantasm",<sup>9</sup> the most central form of the debate would appear to be over the last of these options. So it would seem that at least one important way of understanding

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<sup>8</sup> Roger Scruton, 'Absolute Music', in Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edition (London: Macmillan, 2001), vol 1, 36-37, at 36.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Bonds, *Absolute Music*, 137.

Bonds's idea of absolute music as a 'regulative construct' would be to see it as the focus of a question about the extent to which music can, or perhaps must, express specific emotions, represent extra-musical scenes or situations, tell a story, or enact a drama. This has indeed been a lively topic of debate, as illustrated in the article by Gregory Karl and Jenefer Robinson which Bonds cites in his précis,<sup>10</sup> and if this is how we understand the debate over absolute music in the 'regulative construct' sense – roughly speaking, as a debate about whether music which is absolute in the repertory sense is also absolute in the sense of lacking expressive or representational content – then it might indeed be described, in the phrase from Bonds which I quoted at the beginning of this discussion, as a 'debate about the essence of music'.

What is the connection between these two debates? At one point Bonds seems to suggest that the first debate, about the relative value of absolute music in the repertory sense, depends on the second, since he describes Wagner and Hanslick as '[realizing that] the high ground in this debate [about value]... lay in defining the essence of music'.<sup>11</sup> But his own characterization of Wagner and Hanslick as agreeing on the purity and self-sufficiency of non-texted music, and disagreeing only about whether these features should be positively or negatively assessed, indicates that the debate about value is independent of the debate about essence. I would like instead to suggest a different, albeit more tenuous, connection. The connection emerges when we reflect on a striking but often overlooked fact about the contrast between absolute and non-absolute music in the repertory sense: namely, that non-absolute music is so much as possible. In considering the debate between Wagner and Hanslick about the relative superiority of music

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<sup>10</sup> Gregory Karl and Jenefer Robinson, 'Yet Again, "Between Absolute and Programme Music"', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55 (2015), 19-37.

<sup>11</sup> Bonds, *Absolute Music*, 218.

drama and purely instrumental music, we are liable to take for granted that there can be such a thing as drama set to music. But the possibility of music drama relies on the fact that words can be sung, not just spoken while music is going on, and that bodily movement allows not just of being carried out against the background of music, but of being performed *to* music. And this in turn presupposes that music as such lends itself to a certain kind of intimate association with words and expressive bodily movement, or, otherwise put, that there is a kind of natural fit between meaningful utterance and gesture on the one hand and music on the other.<sup>12</sup> So even though we are now unlikely to agree with Wagner that it is the ultimate vocation of music to be combined in a single form of art with poetry and drama, we might still acknowledge that it is essential to music as such that it has that potential. Regarding the first debate then, we can agree with Hanslick that instrumental music is a fully satisfactory medium in its own right, but still accept that it derives its value as ‘absolute music’ (in the repertory sense) from the same characteristics which also allow it to serve as a setting for words and expressive movement.

This thought about the first debate can perhaps help us find a middle ground on the second of the two debates. Suppose we share Peter Kivy’s view – the view challenged in the article by Karl and Robinson – that non-texted instrumental music cannot present a narrative or express any but the simplest kind of emotion.<sup>13</sup> We might still think that it is an essential feature of instrumental music in general (if not of any given piece of instrumental music) that it is such as to allow of being combined with a text, and in turn that it allows us to hear it, if we are so

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<sup>12</sup> A related idea is invoked by Rousseau in ch. 12 of his *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (1761); compare also Darwin's suggestion, in ch. 2 of the first edition of *The Descent of Man* (1871), that language evolved from rudimentary song (1871).

<sup>13</sup> See Peter Kivy, *Antithetical Arts* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), especially ch. 7.

inclined, as telling a certain kind of story or as expressing certain cognitively complex emotions. We might think, that is, that instrumental music lends itself to that kind of imaginative exercise in just the same way that it lends itself to being incorporated into narrative ballet or opera, and this potentiality reflects something intrinsic to music as such. Now we do not need to hear instrumental music in that way, any more than instrumental music needs to be supplemented by sung text or by a programme. We can, and often do, hear it simply as Hanslick's 'tonally moving forms'. But when we hear it in this purely musical way, we continue to hear its potential for being imagined as the expression of emotion or as the enactment of drama. Absolute music in the repertory sense qualifies, on this middle position, as music which is also absolute in the sense of lacking representational content. But our appreciation of it depends on our awareness of its potential for the non-absolute in both senses: its potential to be a vehicle for song or drama, and its potential to be heard as expressing human thought and emotion.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Thanks to Bernard Ginsborg and Daniel Warren for helpful discussion, and to Mary Ann Smart for insightful comments on an earlier version.