

Review: A Tract for the Times

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A tract for the times

IVAN HEWETT casts further light
on Roger Scruton's aesthetics of music

ROGER SCRUTON'S *Aesthetics of music* begins as a brilliant, intimidatingly thorough, rather dry exercise in analytical philosophy. It ends as a cultural tract for the times, a mystical rhapsody on the religious basis of art, and a scorching indictment of the twin evils of modernism and pop which have robbed music of its high purpose. To yoke together these two mutually hostile, if not downright incompatible, forms of discourse is a boldness that only Scruton would attempt. But he is bound to do so, given that for him the deepest roots of our being are implicated in even the simplest acts of musical understanding. He cannot begin, as many books on musical aesthetics nowadays do, by surveying the 'facts' of music across all cultures with the morally neutral gaze of the ethnomusicologist or postmodern critic. For a neo-Kantian like Scruton there can be no passage from 'is' to 'ought' – no analysis of the facts of music can justify its value in our lives, which can come only by making music an expression of man's moral and rational nature. This is achieved most visibly through the communal nature of music as manifested in tradition, about which Scruton writes so movingly. But this expression has an invisible, individual aspect as well, and it is the act of individual understanding that occupies the first two-thirds of the book, where Scruton elaborates his theory of 'metaphorical hearing'.

This kind of hearing directs itself to the surface of the music as it strikes our sense of hearing. But it is not the acoustic facts about that surface that matter. Music is not a real property of the sounds that make it, the way whiteness is a property of snow. It is an imaginative recreation of that surface in terms of metaphor. We hear things in musical sounds that no scientific instrument could detect there: things like gestures of opening or closing, the 'colour' of a sound, 'yearning', melodies, 'sour' dissonances, all embodied in vibrations that know nothing of sourness or yearning. Scruton first shows how this magical process begins at the simplest level of individual pitches, 'metaphorised' by us into tones, and with beats, similarly transformed into pattern of strong and weak, systole and diastole. From

there he embarks on a masterly ascent through line, phrase, harmony and form. The scope of the argument is immense, the musical sensibility acute and wide-ranging, the style a magnificently persuasive amalgam of passion and rigour. As the argument proceeds, the question as to *what* is metaphorised in music (or, to put it in more familiar terms, the problem of what the content of music consists in) becomes more tantalising, as the usual candidates are eliminated one by one. The gradually unfolding picture of 'metaphorical hearing' explains why music cannot represent things as paintings do, why music cannot tell us about the composer's emotional state when he wrote it, and why the idea that stormy emotions find their analogue in music that is literally stormy simply will not work. What then are we left with? The answer is ourselves. Music, like the dance, confronts us with a metaphorical image of our social being, but in music there is an added mystery. 'In music, all distance between movements is abolished, and we confront a single process in which multiplicity is simultaneously preserved and over-ridden.' Moreover, the gestures of music, unlike those of the body, 'are entirely unimpeded and can project themselves as far as they require for their quiescence'. In moving with those gestures, 'we imagine what it would be like, to live our lives completely.'

Scruton supports his theory with many hundreds of musical examples, about which he has penetrating things to say. Unlike most philosophers who have written about music Scruton clearly has an ear for it. However, these examples are not meant to be evidence for the theory, as their tendentiousness is blatantly clear. They all come from the Western art music tradition, with one or two jazz and Beatles songs thrown in for good measure. (Present-day pop appears only to be anathematised.) The reason for this soon becomes clear: it is in the Western tradition that tonality came into being and rose to a pitch of articulated perfection – and it is tonality that best allows the faculty of 'metaphorical hearing' to flourish. (Which came first – tonality, or the peculiar mode of hearing that it both needs and creates, is a question Scruton is careful to avoid.) So the examples are not so much evidence for the theory as an elabo-

The aesthetics of music

Roger Scruton
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ration of it. They are given in the same spirit as the equally copious quotations in Leavis's literary criticism, i.e., so that the author can point to them and say 'This is so, isn't it?' We are in an entirely human-made world of values, where to look for 'confirming' or 'falsifying instances' in the manner of the scientist is beside the point. To assent requires an effort of imaginative sympathy.

IT IS AN EFFORT magnificently rewarded by Scruton's book. But there is a problem with the notion of 'metaphorical hearing', namely its natural tendency to embrace all sounds, not just the tonal ones Scruton approves of. Why should our minds not seize on the burlblings of electronic music, or the dry tinkling of total serialism, and convert these into 'tones'? Scruton has to erect a bulwark against that unwelcome thought, and he makes an unobtrusive start in chapter 1 with an ingenious demonstration that unpitched noises and glissandos cannot be 'tones'. Later he follows it up by attacking modernist music, in particular serialism, on the grounds that the system used to create it cannot be discerned in the music's surface, and cannot therefore be 'metaphorised' into a genuine musical experience.

But this argument misconstrues the whole nature of musical technique. A composer uses a device such as a canon as a heuristic tool; he wants a piece to have a certain kind of sound, a certain expressive force and density, and chooses the best musical device to achieve that end. The canon by inversion in Bach's 'Goldberg' Variations sounds the way it does, precisely because the composer constructed it in a certain way. You cannot ultimately separate music from its construction; it makes no sense to say 'Imagine a piece of music with the self-same expressive force as the Bach, but which contains no canons'. The fact that the listener may fail to recuperate the technique from the sound of the music is neither here nor there; for, as Scruton himself states, the enjoyment of music has nothing to do with reconstructing the thought process that led to it. If that is true of music in general, then it must also be true of serial music such as Schoenberg's Suite op.29 and Pierre Boulez's *Structures*.

It might seem strange that Scruton spends so much time demonstrating the inaudibility of the 'grammar' of constructivist music, when he's already shown that we don't need to hear 'grammar' in music anyway. But it is all part of his stealthy project to restrain 'metaphorical hearing' from spinning out of control. Thus far, as we've seen, it's only partially successful; but Scruton has bigger cards to play. Up to now musical understanding has been seen from the point of view of the solitary listener, performing, within the privacy of his imagination, the mental alchemy of transforming mere vibrations into music. But this raises the

question: could an individual's metaphorical reading of a piece of music be wrong? If so, what are the criteria for separating a right from a wrong reading? Nothing internal to the act of metaphorical hearing will tell us, because, as we have seen, there is no objective correlation between sound and music (music is imagined, not perceived). This opens up a nightmarish prospect – that there are as many legitimate readings of a piece as there are listeners (the mirror image of that other equally nightmarish vision – that there are as many legitimate systems of musical composition as there are composers). To banish that dreadful prospect, Scruton has to anchor his theory in something that overarches and subsumes the individual. This is none other than that favourite refuge of the Romantic, Nature – meaning both the natural world and human nature. By human nature Scruton means not some abstractly defined set of needs and capacities possessed by all people in all places. This notion, dear to all those thinkers who believe in the 'perfectibility of man', from 18th-century rationalists to Marxist zealots, is anathema to Scruton, as it is to all conservatives. For him human nature is something hard-won, something nurtured over slow generations within a specific community. It follows that in the realm of art, human nature can express itself only through the forms sanctioned by that community, i.e., through tradition, and that individual talent can emerge and flourish only to the extent that it allies itself to tradition. (This reminds one of Eliot's famous essay 'Tradition and the individual talent', and indeed the beneficent shade of Eliot hovers everywhere over Scruton's book.)

It is now clear why the act of metaphorical hearing cannot be the purely cognitive, individual act it seemed to be at the outset. Any musical act, even one so solitary-seeming as listening, implicates the entire human being whose very essence is communal. This means that the act of 'metaphorising' music and the moral one of judging it, are really one and the same. And just as traditional forms of governance cannot be expressed through a codified constitution, so the act of musical understanding (and the act of musical creation it responds to) cannot be captured in a rule. (Note that the union of the aesthetic and the moral, which Scruton takes from Kant, receives a conservative twist which Kant probably would not have approved.) The word that best describes this union is taste, which Scruton defines as 'the sum of those preferences that would emerge in a well-ordered soul, in which human passions are awarded their true significance, and sympathy is the act of a healthy conscience'.

Taste is communally generated and approved; but alas, there are many communities, and their tastes do not agree. Why should the Western one – or, more exactly, the 19th-century bourgeois one –

be the model to which all other tastes should conform? For a conservative, it is quite legitimate to reply 'because that is the way we do things here'. But Scruton has a better card to play, something which will – to use a musical image – act as a vast ground-bass uniting the myriad twitter of individual and communal voices, tastes, imaginations. This is the notion that tonality is physically grounded in nature. In his chapter on tonality he tries to show how certain essential features of the tonal language, such as the fundamental polarity of tonic and dominant, are inherent features of the diatonic scale, a scale which itself arises unbidden from the facts of acoustics. Once that scale became standard its properties were bound to be discovered and explored – and the history of that process is the history of tonal harmony.

But is 'history' the right word for a process that is seen as the inevitable unfolding of something always there *in potentia*? Herein lies the whole problem with rooting tonality in nature. The instant you do that, you remove it from the happenstance and dynamism of human history and locate it in the fatalistic natural round of birth, growth, maturation, and decay. Transfer that language back to the human world, and you are bound to fall into the gloomy pessimism of thinkers such as Spengler, who cannot look anywhere in the modern world without finding evidence of a falling away from some former glory. The danger is there for Scruton. The picture he paints of the bourgeois tradition is so awe-inspiring, so moving – how can modernism fail to be a terrible disappointment? But he is determined not to be counted among the pessimists. The tradition of Western art music may have been obscured and scorned by modernism, and tonality vilely besmirched by pop music, but it is not dead, and it can be revived. To do this, composers will have to undergo the equivalent of 'prayers and fasting', and relearn the value of the simplest elements of tonality. Only then will they reconnect with their audience.

To blame composers for the excesses of modernist constructivism is reasonable enough. The trouble, though, is that Scruton's reverence for tradition has blinded him to something no less important – the notion of music as a craft. The craft of music, and the profession that practises it, has developed its own values and tastes, along with the techniques for realising them. These may well be in conflict with tradition. But we, the listeners, do not always rule in tradition's favour – otherwise how would music ever change? It is the composer's urge to innovate, quite as much as the tradition's tendency to conform, that has created the very Western tradition Scruton so reveres. To insist that composers abandon the pride of their craftsman's calling and wear sackcloth and ashes is throwing the baby out with the bathwater, and

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hardly a promising way to begin the renewal of classical music.

Hardly more promising is the idea of restoring tonality by *fiat*, as if modernism had never existed. The fact is that the sounds of modern music are now as much a part of our musical make-up as tonal sounds. In any case, the problems attending any attempt to ground tonality in nature are legion, the most obvious being: if tonality (of the goal-directed, hierarchical, firmly diatonic sort Scruton has in mind) is so natural, how has any musical culture been able to avoid it? Even a brief look outside Western music suggests that what 'nature' offers the ear is so vague and unconstraining that almost any system can be teased out of it. To take just one example, there are musical cultures in Southern Africa which acknowledge the octave but nothing else. The octave is divided into eight steps, none of which can be constructed from the 'natural' intervals of fourth, fifth or major third.

IN ANY CASE, Scruton has himself laid a fatal difficulty in the way of his project to recover a kind of tonal innocence. It has become a commonplace to say that tonality contains the seed of its own dissolution, that seed being the possibility of chromaticism. i.e., of harmonies containing pitches outside the principle diatonic scale of the piece. It is a commonplace repeated by Scruton himself; but in fact he's already given an alternative explanation of the phenomenon in terms of 'metaphorical hearing'. This, remember, is the process whereby we hear sounds as something – we hear them under a description – thereby transforming them from sounds into tones. Scruton insists that we do not perceive the thing that we hear in the music – which at once loosens the grip

of sound on tone, and allows the possibility that a 'description', i.e., a form of intentional hearing applied to one sort of sound, could be transferred to another. To take one example, the description 'cadence' was, in Renaissance times, closely allied to a small set of formulae. Over time this description was transferred to patterns of notes which diverged ever further from those formulae; until, in the end, the up-and-down swoop at the end of Schoenberg's *Erwartung* could be heard as a cadence. Surely it is this power of metaphorical hearing that accounts for the historical dynamism of Western music? Once out of the bottle, this genie cannot be put back; which is why the idea of a return to tonal innocence cannot work. Scruton tries to make plausible the idea of some primal *ur*-tonality by linking it to its unchanging basis in nature. But even if there were such a basis – which seems doubtful – musical history will not map onto natural history. Go back to the dawn of Western art music, and you find, not sweetly tonal hymn tunes. but plainchant and organum. There is no *ur*-tonality to go back to, only this or that style-laden one.

All this makes it most unlikely that Scruton's plea for a composer who will redeem the common tongue of music and thus 'redeem the times' will be met. But Scruton should not be reproached for failing to come up with a practicable plan of action. Aesthetics looks not for the *how* of art, but the *why*; it aims to be the artist's conscience. The *how* must come, if it comes at all, from the craftsman. It is enough that Scruton's book justifies, with great clarity and passion, our intuition that music springs from, and illuminates, the deepest parts of our nature. In an era when that intuition is eroded daily by the inanities of relativism and postmodernism, that is something to be seriously welcomed.

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