

# Why didn't Kant think highly of music?

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There are two main questions to be addressed when assessing Kant's remarks on music:<sup>1</sup> (1) How can we reconcile Kant's apparently inconsistent commitment to both expressivism and formalism with respect to music appreciation? (2) Why didn't Kant think very highly of music? In a recent paper, Samantha Matherne gives sophisticated and neat answer to the first question. She argues that Kant was committed to a position which she calls 'expressive formalism,' "according to which our appreciation of the formal structures of a piece of music must be guided by our appreciation of how those structures express affects."<sup>2</sup> We make a judgment of taste when we are attentive to how the formal structures *express* affects, whereas we make a judgment of sense if we merely focus on the affects themselves. However, Matherne's account does not give a satisfying answer to the second question: Since this type of attitudinal designation of appreciation of a work either as beautiful or as agreeable applies to the appreciation of other forms of fine art as well, we seem to be at a loss to find a conclusive answer to the second question.<sup>3</sup> My aim in this paper is to answer this question, not by challenging Matherne's account, but by putting her account into focus by placing it within my own overarching interpretation of Kant's theory of artistic beauty. I argue that, depending on which of the different attitudes we take towards objects, we can make either singular judgments or combination judgments of

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "music" in a restrictive sense. It refers only to instrumental music, because for Kant song is a combination of music and poetry, and opera is a combination of poetry, music, and painterly (theatrical) representation (KU, AA 05: 325.26-28). I follow the translation of Kant's works in the Cambridge edition: KU: *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Transl. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, ed. Paul Guyer. Cambridge 2000; Anth: *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. In: *Anthropology, History, and Education*. Transl. Mary Gregor et al., ed. Günter Zöllner, Robert B. Loudon. Cambridge 2007; V-Anth/Mron: *Anthropology Mronovius (1784-1785)*. In *Lectures on Anthropology*. Transl. Robert R. Clewis et al., ed. Allen W. Wood, Robert B. Loudon. Cambridge 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Matherne, Samantha: *Kant's Expressive Theory of Music*. In: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72/2 (2014), 129-145, 134.

<sup>3</sup> Matherne claims that we can judge music to be agreeable or beautiful according to the attitude we take towards it, just as we can judge "Claude Monet's Haystacks (1890–1891) as agreeable if his palette pleases [...] [our] eyes or as beautiful if the experience involves free play and disinterested pleasure" (137). So since the explanation she gives to how music can be both agreeable and beautiful art is applicable to all forms of art, it cannot be used as an explanation of why music is regarded by Kant to be inferior to all other art forms.

different sorts.<sup>4</sup> Music, unlike other art forms, lends itself more easily to combination judgments involving judgments of sense, and this constitutes one of the two reasons why I believe that Kant takes a derogatory stance with respect to music. The second and more important reason is grounded in the difference between music and other art forms:<sup>5</sup> In music, I argue, aesthetic ideas are communicated by taking advantage of existing associations, while in those artforms that Kant held in high regard (such as poetry and painting) genius not only breaks with the laws of association but additionally creates new associations. This, I propose, is why, according to Kant, music is not as rich a source for reflection and thereby cannot stimulate the enlargement of the cognitive faculties. Given that the enlargement of the cognitive faculties is the very standard that Kant uses in setting up the hierarchy of fine arts, this explains why he placed music at the bottom of his hierarchy.

Kant defines beauty in general as “the expression of aesthetic ideas.”<sup>6</sup> By analogy with the categorization of linguistic expressions into the word, the gesture, and the tone due to their uses in communicating thoughts, intuitions, and sensations, respectively, Kant thinks that it is possible to categorize the different forms of beautiful arts into three main categories: “the art of speech, pictorial art, and the art of the play of sensations.”<sup>7</sup> He places music under the third category. The idea behind this is the following: Depending on the different intonations used by a speaker, we can tell whether or not they are sarcastic, happy, excited, sad, angry, etc. This is the case because the tone used by the speaker “designates an affect of the speaker and conversely also produces one in the hearer, which then in turn arouses in the latter the idea that is expressed in the language by means of such tone.”<sup>8</sup> The modulation creates something like a “language of sensations,” to use Kant’s words.<sup>9</sup> By analogy with its linguistic equivalent, Kant claims, music expresses affects, which he defines as “the feeling of pleasure or displeasure in the subject’s present state that does not

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<sup>4</sup> This account bears resemblance to the conjunctive view, according to which we can make combination judgments of perfection and taste. This view is first suggested by Gammon, Martin: *Parerga and Pulchritudo adhaerens: A Reading of the Third Moment of the ‘Analytic of the Beautiful.’* In: *Kant-Studien* 90 (1999), 148–67, and is adopted and developed by Allison, Henry: *Kant’s Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment.* Cambridge 2001, and later further elaborated by Rueger, Alex: *Beautiful Surfaces: Kant on Free and Adherent Beauty in Nature and Art.* In: *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 16/3 (2008), 535-557. As an addition to this account, I am merely claiming that we can make further combination judgments, such as combination judgments of perfection, taste, and sense, combination judgments of taste and sense, and etc. For further elucidation of my account see Tuna, Emine Hande: *A Kantian Hybrid Theory of Art Criticism: A Particularist Appeal to the Generalists.* In: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74/4 (2016), 397-411, and Tuna, Emine Hande: *Kant on Informed Pure Judgments of Taste.* In: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 76/2 (2018), 163-174.

<sup>5</sup> With the exception of the art of colors, which Kant places under the category of art of the play of sensations.

<sup>6</sup> KU, AA 05: 320.10f.

<sup>7</sup> KU, AA 05: 320.27-321.01.

<sup>8</sup> KU, AA 05: 328.15-18.

<sup>9</sup> KU, AA 05: 328.20.

let him to rise to *reflection*” due to its suddenness.<sup>10</sup> Kant writes, “the art of tone puts that language [of sensations] into practice for itself alone [...] as a language of affects, and so, in accordance with the law of association, universally communicates the aesthetic ideas that are naturally combined with it.”<sup>11</sup>

An aesthetic idea in general is defined as the representation of imagination that is related to an intuition for which no adequate concept can be found.<sup>12</sup> What is unique about an aesthetic idea is that it can symbolically present its counterpart, namely the rational idea, for which no adequate intuition can be found.<sup>13</sup> Such symbolic presentation is possible due to a correspondence between the ways in which we reflect on aesthetic ideas on the one hand, and rational ideas on the other. In music, the aesthetic idea refers to “the form of composition of [...] sensations (harmony and melody)” created by means of

a proportionate disposition of them (which, since in the case of tones it rests on the relation of the number of vibrations of the air in the same time, insofar as the tones are combined at the same time or successively, can be mathematically subsumed under certain rules).<sup>14</sup>

The different movements within the composition can create different affects in the hearer but they all contribute to the formation of the central theme, which constitutes its dominant affect.<sup>15</sup> For instance, Mozart’s Symphony No.40 in G Minor has a highly emotional tragic affect overall, while its first movement has the affect of distress, the third anger. In this way, the composition (as the expression of the aesthetic idea) presents the idea<sup>16</sup> of a certain affect. The issue is that works of music can only present ideas of affects, in contrast with other forms of art, particularly poetry, that are capable of presenting rational ideas such as “the idea of reason of a cosmopolitan disposition.”<sup>17</sup> If we reflect on the way in which the first movement of Symphony No.40 is able to stimulate the affect of distress or urgency through its formal structure, i.e. by using a throbbing violin melody following the short-short-long rhythmic pattern repeatedly, then we are making a judgment of taste. If we merely focus on the affect it produces in us and judge our subjective state to be pleasing or displeasing, then the judgment would be of sense and we would be considering the piece agreeable or disagreeable. In the former instance, the piece is regarded as “the beautiful

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<sup>10</sup> Anth, AA 07: 251.16-19.

<sup>11</sup> KU, AA 05: 328.20-329.01.

<sup>12</sup> KU, AA 05: 342.15-17.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. KU, AA 05: 342f and 05: 351-354.

<sup>14</sup> KU, AA 05: 329.01-07.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. KU, AA 05: 329.07-10.

<sup>16</sup> Here I am using “idea” in the colloquial rather than the Kantian sense.

<sup>17</sup> KU, AA 05: 316.2.

play of sensations,” in the latter as “agreeable sensations.”<sup>18</sup> So, as Matherne suggests, attitudinal shifts determine whether a work is judged to be beautiful or agreeable.

I argue that the direct implication of this portrayal of aesthetic appreciation of music is that a judgment of sense needs to precede the judgment of taste, given that the latter reflects on the outcome of the former, namely its affect, and grounds it in the aesthetic idea which the composer had in mind and which is expressed in the work through her intentional act. In other words, without making a judgment of sense, without realizing the immediate affects a musical piece evokes in us, we should not be able to make a judgment of taste, as such a judgment is based on realizing the connection between these affects and the aesthetic idea. That is why Kant claims that “[i]n music [...] [the] play [of imagination] proceeds from the sensation of the body to aesthetic ideas (of the objects for affects,) and then from them back again, but with a united force, to the body.”<sup>19</sup> However, after the judgments of sense and of taste are successively formed, it is possible to differentiate between them, especially if one has delicate taste. One problem Kant sees with music is that an unsophisticated listener cannot easily make this distinction, and may even confuse one judgment with another. This explains why Kant claims that “music deserves to be counted as agreeable rather than as beautiful art”<sup>20</sup> even though we can form pure judgments of taste regarding it.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the unsophisticated listener, more often than not, would also be making a judgment of sense that is dependent on charms: For instance, she can find a violin sonata appealing just because she likes the sound of the violin. Kant thinks that combinations of judgments of sense (depending either on charm or emotion) and of taste are detrimental to taste.<sup>22</sup> He claims that other artforms, such as “[p]ainting [and] sculpture surely cultivate the beautiful; music does not do so that much [...]. It cultivates in that it spurs on the sensible power of judgment, draws [it] out from what is crude. It makes the heart soft and receptive to more delicate impressions, especially ideal charms and emotions.”<sup>23</sup> This explains partially why Kant didn’t think highly of music since these claims are followed by his derogatory remarks on music: “Those who greatly abandon themselves to music are superficial minds for the most part. One must therefore not let children learn music intensely.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> KU, AA 05: 325.18f.

<sup>19</sup> KU, AA 05: 332.22-24.

<sup>20</sup> KU, AA 05: 332.25f.

<sup>21</sup> The textual evidence for this claim is present in the sections on music, but the most persuasive evidence is located in §16 where Kant asserts that music without text is a free beauty (KU, AA 05: 229.31f).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. KU, AA 05: 223 and 05: 225.

<sup>23</sup> V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1331.15-20.

<sup>24</sup> V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1331.28-30.

Our higher propensity to make combination judgments involving judgment of sense in the case of music, in comparison to other artforms, partially explains why Kant didn't think highly of music. Nonetheless, I do not think that this sufficiently explains why Kant places music at the bottom of his hierarchy of fine arts in terms of culture.<sup>25</sup> The standard according to which Kant makes this hierarchy is "the enlargement of the faculties [of imagination and understanding] that must join together in the power of judgment for the sake of cognition."<sup>26</sup> According to this standard, he claims, music has the lowest place "because it merely plays with sensations."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, it "does not [...] leave behind something for reflection."<sup>28</sup> It leaves only transitory impression in the mind<sup>29</sup> "by which in the end nothing is thought."<sup>30</sup> It is hard to grasp this argument because Kant leaves the connections between these claims unstated. I argue that these reasons which Kant offers – as to why music has the lowest place in his ranking – make more sense once we acknowledge the fact that, according to Kant, in music aesthetic ideas are communicated by taking advantage of existing associations: He says, "the play of thought that is aroused by it [music] in passing is merely the effect of an as it were mechanical association."<sup>31</sup> It seems mechanical because tones and tonalities are already closely associated with certain affects in our minds, such as the association of c-minor with sadness. So the composer is not creating new associations but using already established associations between affects and tones. If music weren't using these already established associations, it would not be able to arouse those very affects. What makes this problematic? Since the composer communicates aesthetic ideas and thereby stimulates ideas by exploiting pre-existing associations, music does not leave much for reflection and cannot enlarge the faculties. To see why this conclusion holds, it is important to recognize the intimate connection Kant sees between the aesthetic appreciation of an artwork that brings new associations into play, and the enlargement of cognitive faculties.

In the sections on genius, Kant states that genius, which is required for producing beautiful art, not only possesses spirit but also taste. Spirit is the principle that animates the mind by purposively putting the mental powers into a free play in virtue of the symbolic presentation of rational ideas through aesthetic ideas. In §49, Kant asserts that in creating

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<sup>25</sup> This having been said, I think it definitely explains why Kant asserts, "it occupies perhaps the highest place among those that are estimated according to their agreeableness" (KU, AA 05: 329.29f).

<sup>26</sup> KU, AA 05: 329.26-28.

<sup>27</sup> KU, AA 05: 329.30f.

<sup>28</sup> KU, AA 05: 5:328.04f.

<sup>29</sup> These transitory impressions "are either entirely extinguished or, if they are involuntarily recalled by the imagination, are burdensome rather than agreeable to us," for instance, when a Justin Bieber song gets stuck in our mind after hearing it in a café (KU, AA 05: 330.6f).

<sup>30</sup> KU, AA 05: 332.07f.

<sup>31</sup> KU, AA 05: 328.08f.

aesthetic ideas, the imagination is productive and hence creative and/or inventive. It does not only break with the laws of association but also creates new associations. This freedom from the law of association also makes it possible for the aesthetic ideas to “strive towards something lying beyond the bounds of experience, thus seek to approximate a presentation of concepts of reason.”<sup>32</sup> Because, in creating aesthetic ideas, the genius not only breaks with the laws of association but further creates new associations not made by others, she displays originality. Since there is “original nonsense” she should display exemplarity as well: The work must be such that it can serve as a model to others.

In judging works of genius, Kant claims that the aesthetic idea gets added to the rational idea that it aims to present and “aesthetically enlarges the concept [of reason] itself in an unbounded way.”<sup>33</sup> Kant claims that this addition of the aesthetic idea corresponds to an addition of “that [which] is unnameable, the feeling of which animates the cognitive faculties and combines spirit with the mere letter of language” to the rational idea.<sup>34</sup> This means that the expression of the aesthetic idea, which is the work itself, arouses certain feelings, which recall to the mind the feelings stemming from reflection on a rational idea. This rational idea turns out to be what the aesthetic idea aims to present. It also makes us realize that there are several other representations, which arouse the same feelings in us, which can now be seen as different attributes of the same rational idea. Through these new associations the rational idea gets expanded and we find further pleasure in this expansion. In sum, (1) the works of genius aesthetically expand our conception of rational ideas by associating them with different attributes, and (2) they exceed our expectations concerning aesthetic ideas because the genius breaks with pre-existing laws of association in forming them. Due to (1) and (2), in appreciating works of genius our cognitive faculties are enlarged or expanded. Kant gives poetry as an example of an artform that accomplishes this type of expansion: He writes, “[i]t expands the mind by setting the imagination free and presenting [...] the one that connects its presentation with a fullness of thought to which no linguistic expression is fully adequate, and thus elevates itself aesthetically to the level of ideas.”<sup>35</sup>

Music falls short of accommodating this sort of enlargement or expansion of the faculties because, to begin with, the composer does not introduce new associations through their work. For instance, upon hearing Haydn’s Symphony No.94 in G Major we feel the affect of surprise, but it does not make us think of the affect of surprise in a novel way. Instead, the variations in theme by dynamic, rhythmic changes arouse the affect of surprise that we associate with sudden changes. Since music cannot present ideas other than that of

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<sup>32</sup> KU, AA 05: 314.21-23.

<sup>33</sup> KU, AA 05: 315.03f.

<sup>34</sup> KU, AA 05: 316.24f.

<sup>35</sup> KU, AA 05: 326.24-30.

affects, and does not express aesthetic ideas that are created through breaking laws of association, it does not give us much to reflect on. Hence, it cannot stimulate an enlargement of the cognitive faculties. This is the main reason, as I try to show, why Kant places music at the bottom of his hierarchy.

To sum up: While it is true that Kant didn't think highly of music, he had his reasons as I tried to demonstrate. First of all, he thought that it is easier to make combination judgments involving judgment of sense concerning music, in comparison to other artforms because in the case of music the judgment of sense precedes the judgment of taste. This propensity makes it easier for unsophisticated listeners to make aesthetic mistakes and also makes it harder for them to correct and improve their taste. Second, and most importantly, because composers express aesthetic ideas and present ideas of affects through pre-existing associations, musical appreciation does not lead to the enlargement of cognitive faculties. Given that the standard Kant uses in setting up the hierarchy of fine arts in terms of culture is the enlargement of the cognitive faculties, music is placed at the bottom of this hierarchy. By spelling out Kant's reasons for not thinking highly of music I wanted to show that there is a certain consistency in his reasoning.