

# The Perception of Music: Sources of Significance

Christopher Peacocke

*Representing one thing metaphorically-as something else is something that can occur in thought, imagination or perception. When a piece of music is heard as expressing some property F, some feature of the music is heard metaphorically-as F. The metaphor is exploited in the perception, rather than being represented. This account is developed and deployed to address some classical issues about music, including Wagner's point that the emotions expressed need not be those of a particular person on a particular occasion, and the widely accepted point that what is significant in a piece of music cannot be translated into any other medium.*

We can experience music as sad, as exuberant, as sombre. We can experience it as expressing immensity, identification with the rest of humanity, or gratitude. The foundational question of what it is for music to express these or anything else is easily asked; and it has proved extraordinarily difficult to answer satisfactorily. The question of what it is for emotion or other states to be heard in music is not the causal or computational question of how it comes to be heard. It is not the question of the social influences on how we hear music. Nor is it the question of the evolutionary explanation, if such there be, of the existence of such perceptions. It is the constitutive question, the 'what-is-it?' question, that is my concern here. It is a question unaddressed by purely syntactic analyses of music.

A correct answer to this constitutive question constrains all those other, equally challenging, empirical questions about music. I am going to propose an answer to the constitutive question, drawing on the resources of our current philosophy of perception and cognition within contemporary philosophy of mind. In the very tight space available to me, I will not survey the extant competing proposals, but simply offer my own suggestion straight out, while noting some points of contrast with other approaches.

My account is built from three components, or more strictly, from two components together with a certain conception of the way they are related to each other in the perception of music. My plan is to expound these components; to formulate the account built from them; to give some examples of what the account can explain; and to discuss very briefly its bearing on some classical issues about the perception of music.

## Three Kinds of Experiencing-As

The first component of the account is a classification that distinguishes between three different varieties of experiencing-as. The varieties are found in several different sense modalities, and I illustrate them first in the case of vision, to emphasize that some of the phenomena in question go beyond auditory experience.

The first variety of experiencing-as is simply that of experiencing the world as being a certain way, as when one sees a cat as a cat; or, maybe, if there is dappled lighting, experiences the cat as a small raccoon. It is part of what much contemporary philosophy of mind would count as the representational content of experience. There is such a thing as taking the content of this species of experiencing-as at face value. When I take such an experience of an object as a cat at face value, I judge of the object that it is a cat.

The second variety of experiencing-as in the visual case is experiencing something as a depiction of something else, the experience one has when seeing a drawing or painting of, say, the Hudson River. This is a distinctive type of experience—we are not here concerned merely with imagination or inference. But experiences of this type are evidently not to be characterized, at least straightforwardly, as representational content. In seeing the painting as of the river, it does not seem to you that there is a river in front of you. Taking your whole experience at face value does not involve judging that there is a river in front of you.

It is the third variety of experiencing-as which is of a general type that I claim is involved in the answer to our question about music. This kind of experiencing-as in the visual case is seeing something metaphorically-as something else. Take the painting by Zurbaran of a group of pieces of pottery shown in Figure 1.

Many people see the pots as a group of people. What does ‘seeing as’ mean in this kind of case? In having this experience, it does not look to a person who enjoys it as if there are people in front of him. Nor is the painting experienced as a depiction of people. It is, and is experienced as, a depiction of pieces of pottery. The classification that captures what is distinctive of the case is that it is a depiction of pieces of pottery that are perceived metaphorically-as people. The metaphor enters the content of the experience, but not as representational content, nor as what is depicted. A group of real pots could also be so experienced metaphorically-as a group of people. Depiction is not essential to the occurrence of visual experiences of this third kind.



**Fig 1.** Francisco de Zurbarán, *Pots*, 1636. Oil on canvas, 46 x 84 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. Reproduced with the permission of the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.



**Fig 2.** Caspar David Friedrich, *Solitary Tree*, 1822. Oil on canvas, 55 x 71 cm. Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Image courtesy of bpk/Nationalgalerie, SMB/Jörg P. Anders.

Metaphorical content, even in the visual case, can involve psychological notions in the content of the metaphor. We perceive Friedrich's painting *Solitary Tree* (Figure 2) as one in which the nearby tree is a person, isolated, saliently lacking features of a normal tree, in a psychologically gloomy part of a landscape that elsewhere is sunny and contains normal trees or subjects. Friedrich's painting is not to all current tastes, but this and many other of his paintings draw on the ability to experience something metaphorically-as another. (It is the very fact that this exploitation can become rather trite that is the explanation for why many do not find these paintings deep.)

The metaphorical content of experience is a kind of content of experience in its own right. It cannot be reduced to a combination of visual experience of some other kind with an element of imagining that something is the case. You can look at four selected objects on your desk, and also imagine that they are four people. This does not thereby give you the distinctive experience of metaphorically seeing them as four people, the distinctive experience you enjoy when you see four pots of the sort arranged as Zurbaran depicts them. It may or may not cause such an experience. That it may do so is already enough to show that metaphorical perception is distinct from perception plus imagining-that, since a cause must be distinct from what it causes.

The phenomenon of experiencing one thing metaphorically-as another is found in the other arts, and in architecture too. Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin contains a passage that comes to a dead end. Encountering the dead end is experienced metaphorically-as the termination of a life by a human intentional agency.<sup>1</sup> Another room is so dark that you cannot see your own feet, and there is only a tiny slit of light high above. It can be experienced

1 D. Libeskind, *Breaking Ground* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 84 (text), p. 51 (photograph).

metaphorically-as the situation of someone faced with unfathomable horrors, but who is still capable of experiencing a ray of hope.

## Metaphor in Cognition and in Music

The second component of my account is a conception of metaphor as essentially non-linguistic, as something cognitive that can be present in many different types of mental state and event. Metaphor can enter thought; it can enter imagination; and it can enter perception. We can think of life as a journey; we can imagine an atom as consisting of a star and orbiting planets; we can perceive modern windmills in a wind farm as an army of warriors. On this view, metaphor is not essentially linguistic. We have metaphors in language only because we need a device for expressing these mental states whose content involves metaphor. Understanding a metaphor expressed in language involves thinking or imagining whose content is a metaphor. There would be no metaphorical language if there were no mental states whose contents involve metaphor.<sup>2</sup>

Whenever there is metaphorical representation, whether in thought, imagination, or experience, there is some kind of isomorphism between two domains. It does not follow, and is not true, that to enjoy metaphorical thought, imagination, or experience is to think about, imagine, or experience a correspondence or isomorphism. It is one thing to think about or otherwise represent an isomorphism as such. It is another to exploit it in thought, imagination, or experience. Metaphorical thought, imagination, or experience exploits a correspondence, rather than representing it. When you think of life as a journey, various features of your representation of a journey are mapped onto your representation of a life. The mapping is exploited, rather than being thought about or represented. This is why, when you think or imagine or experience metaphorically, you appreciate the metaphor first. In more complex cases you may have to think hard about, and work out, what exactly the correspondence in question is if someone raises the issue.

The third and most important component of the account is the claim that when a piece of music is perceived as expressing the property F, then some feature of the music, possibly a relational feature, is heard metaphorically-as F. As the pots in Zurbaran's painting can be seen metaphorically-as people, the rising passage and the progression in Josquin des Prez's setting of the lines 'Caelestia, Terrestria, Nova replete laetitia' / 'Fills heaven and earth with new gladness' can be heard metaphorically-as the gradual filling of a space with gladness (Example 1):

Ave, cuius Conceptio,	Hail, thou whose conception
Solemni plena gaudio,	Full of great joy
Caelestia, Terrestria,	Fills heaven and earth
Nova replet laetitia	With new gladness.

This very general condition on hearing something metaphorically-as F does not restrict the expressed property F to an emotion, or even to the psychological. Some passages of a

---

2 I take the points of this paragraph to comport well with, and to help explain, some of the data and arguments, in E. Camp's 'Metaphor and that Certain "Je ne sais quoi"', *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 129 (2006), pp. 1–25.

41

lem - ni ple - na gau - di - o, Coe - le - sti - a, ter - re - stri -

lem - ni ple - - - na - - - gau - di - o, Coe - le - sti - a,

lem - ni ple - na gau - di - o, Coe - le - sti - a, ter - re - stri - a, -

lem - ni ple - na gau - di - o, Coe - le - sti - a, ter - re - stri -

48

a, No - va re - plet lae - ti - ti - a.

ter - re - stri - a, No - va re - plet lae - ti - ti - a, lae - ti - ti - a.

- No - va re - plet lae - ti - ti - a.

a, No - va re - plet lae - ti - ti - a.

Example 1. From Josquin's *Ave Maria*.

symphony may express the marshalling of resources and weapons in preparation for war. One section of Debussy's *La Mer* expresses the sun's rising over the ocean. Perhaps it is meant to express the perceptual effect of the sun's rising over the ocean, but that is still not an emotion.

If we use a highly generic notion of some feature of a piece of music representing something, it is important to distinguish within this highly general category between representation that depends for its effect on hearing metaphorically-as, and representation that does not so depend. One way it does not so depend is when the representation really does operate by perceived resemblance (and so goes via representational content), as with Mahler's ringing cowbells in his Sixth Symphony representing, of course, ringing cowbells. Another way representation may not depend on representation-as is illustrated by the representation of Russian and French forces by their respective national anthems in Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. Neither of these last two is a case of hearing something metaphorically-as

(metaphorically-as cowbells, or metaphorically-as Russian, whatever that might be). The very triviality of these representations highlights the importance of hearing metaphorically-as in music with real expressive significance.

An emotion can be a conscious state or event: there can be something it is like to experience the emotion. The subjective experience of a conscious emotion includes its affect. Often a piece of music succeeds in expressing a particular emotion by some of its features being perceived metaphorically-as having characteristics of this affect, either at a single moment, or in the development of the affect over time. The features may also be comparative. A minor chord, sounded by itself, outside any other context sounds sad. Many theories of musical expression have great difficulty with this simple case. The minor chord is nothing like a premusical human expression of sadness. There is no changing pitch contour of the music that in some way corresponds to the contour of a non-musical bodily or verbal expression of sadness over time. There is no changing contour of the single, isolated chord. If someone were to play the chord to indicate sadness, that will succeed only because the chord is already heard as expressing sadness.

Some theorists state that in cases such as the isolated minor triad, the association with sadness results from a convention.<sup>3</sup> But a conventional association by no means ensures that what is conventionally associated enters the conscious content of the relevant perception itself. If you are in the United States, there is a convention to drive on the right-hand side of the road, and you know it. It by no means follows that you experience someone driving there on the left as driving on the wrong side of the road. Rather, you may well just experience him as driving on the left, while also knowing that he is on the wrong side of the road. What we need a philosophical elucidation of is the way in which sadness enters the content of the experience of one who hears the minor triad, a specifically perceptual phenomenon. Even if there were a lawlike association between conventions and such experiences, that would not give us a philosophical elucidation of the constitutive issue of what it is to have that perceptual experience. Further, if that kind of perceptual experience is present, it seems that we have what matters for musical experience, be the conventions as they may.<sup>4</sup>

On the present account, however, there is a relatively straightforward account explanation of how the chord can express sadness. The relation of the perceived minor to its (unheard) major is perceived metaphorically-as an instance of the relation an emotion of sadness, a subdued emotion experienced from the inside, bears to a non-sad ordinary state of mind that is not subdued. The isomorphism in question is a mapping from the domain of moods (a normal non-sad mood, and sadness in this case) to the modes of major and minor. One of the literal relations of sadness to a normal mood is that of the

---

3 Thus Peter Kivy, in his *Sound Sentiment* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple U.P., 1989), pp. 77ff. and 83.

4 This is not to detract from Kivy's substantial contributions to our understanding of music, particularly in relation to human expression of emotions, a phenomenon I consider further below. What these points do mean is that Kivy has not given for cases such as the minor triad what he has succeeded in giving for those musical cases he classifies as involving experienced resemblance to a human expression of an emotion, namely an account of the distinctive nature of the perceptual experience involved.

former being more subdued than the latter. Under the isomorphism, this relation is mapped onto the relation of being the minor of the corresponding (unheard) major. In particular, the flattened third of the minor scale is heard metaphorically-as a more subdued version of the unheard major. Sadness enters the content of the metaphor which helps specify the content of the auditory perception of the minor triad. The perception of the chord as expressing sadness is possible only for someone who has some idea of what sadness is like from the inside.

Thinkers about music are sometimes puzzled as to what it is that is really sad when we apparently truly describe the music as sad. The music itself is not literally sad (it is not a mind); the composer need not have been sad when writing it, nor need it have been an expression of his or anyone else's imagined sadness; the performer need not be sad; the listener need not be sad. The notion of sadness enters only as an essential element of the intentional content, more specifically the metaphorical intentional content, of the perception of the music.

In giving this description of musical experience, I am aiming to give a literal description of an experience with metaphorical content. What I am saying does not imply that some things in principle defy literal description, or that some things can as a matter of principle (as opposed to our cognitive limitations) be described only by the use of metaphor in the description. We should aim to specify precisely and literally the metaphorical content of mental events of perception, imagination, and thought, when they have such content.

Both the range of properties of a passage of music that lend themselves to metaphorical experience, and the range of properties that can enter the content of the experienced metaphor, are very wide. The features that lend themselves to metaphorical experience may involve a location in the temporal development of a piece of music. This is possible because one section of a work may be perceived as standing in certain relations to earlier sections. Maynard Solomon says that one way of hearing Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* is as an expression of the dignity that can be found even in the humble.<sup>5</sup> This is certainly one way of experiencing the work. Doing so involves, as does the proper perception of any variations on a theme, hearing some of the relations in which the variation stands to the original theme.

The presence of a text in one form or another constrains the open-ended range of metaphorical contents that a piece of music, without text, may be experienced as possessing. Joseph Kerman is surely right when he says that in opera, the composer is the dramatist.<sup>6</sup> But the composer, even as dramatist, needs the text. The text, if understood, allows the hearer to have experiences with metaphorical content with a specificity practically unattainable in the absence of the text. Take the music of any great Schubert song, in particular some song that sets a strophic poem, and imagine the text removed. What remains is an interesting and engaging piece of music, but it cannot be heard with the same specific metaphorical content without the text. Consider, for instance, Schubert's song 'Am Tage aller Seelen' ('On All Souls' Day', D343) (Example 2):

---

5 Maynard Solomon, *Late Beethoven: Music, Thought, Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), chap. 1.

6 Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

**Langsam, andächtig.** *p*

**Pianoforte.**

Ruh'n in Frie - den  
Die sich hier Ge -

al - - le See - len, die vollbracht ein ban - - ges  
spie - - len such - ten, öf - - ter wein - ten, nim - - mer

Quä - len, die vol - len - det sü - ssen Traum, — le - benssatt, ge - bo - ren kaum,  
fluch - ten, wenn von ih - rer treu - en Hand — Kei - ner je den Druck ver - stand:

aus der Welt hin - ü - ber schie - den: Al - le See - len ruh'n in Frie - den!  
Al - le die von hin - nenschie - den, al - le See - len ruh'n in Frie - den!

*cresc.*

The image shows a musical score for Schubert's 'Am Tage aller Seelen'. It consists of five systems of music. Each system has a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is common time (C). The tempo and mood are 'Langsam, andächtig.' (Slowly, devoutly). The piano part starts with a dynamic of *p* (piano) and later *pp* (pianissimo). The vocal line has lyrics in German. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more rhythmic bass line in the left hand. The score ends with a *cresc.* (crescendo) marking in the piano part.

Example 2. From Schubert's *Am Tage aller Seelen*.



Ruhn in Frieden alle Seelen	May all souls rest in peace;
Die vollbracht ein banges Quälen,	Those whose fearful torment is over;
Die vollendet süßen Traum,	Those whose sweet dreams are past;
Lebensatt, geboren kaum	Those sated with life, those barely born
Aus der Welt hinüber schieden	Who have left this world:
Alle Seelen ruhn in Frieden!	May all souls rest in peace!

Liebevoller Mädchen Seelen	Souls of girls full of love
Deren Tränen nicht zu zählen	Whose tears cannot be numbered
Die ein falscher Freund verliess	Who, abandoned by a faithless lover,
Und die blinde Welt verstieß:	Rejected the blind world:
Alle, die von hinnen schieden,	May all who have departed hence,
Alle Seele ruh'n in Frieden!	All souls, rest in peace!

Hearing this song as an expression of sympathy, relief that the sufferings of others are over, is not an experience the composer could rely on the hearer as having unless the text were there. The same goes for the metaphorical significance of the strophic form in this particular example. That all the sufferings are released in the same way, through death, is a perceptible metaphor that can be heard in this form. With the text too, the specific metaphorical contents made accessible to the perceiver are greatly enhanced when we consider development over time. With a continuing text, we have the possibility of hearing music as expressing developing, and changing, personal character or historical situation, and their associated emotions; and, as Bernard Williams emphasizes in one of his most brilliant essays, changes in the music may capture changes in emotions and mood that the words do not.<sup>7</sup>

It follows that the relations between the words and the music is reciprocally beneficial. Each contributes something the other would not be able to do without it. The text fixes a proper subset of the metaphorical contents that can be heard in the music, and so requires the music to be heard in one kind of way rather than another. But the music, at least in the hands of a great composer, may express changes, developments, connections, and much else that are not in the text. A great composer's setting of a character's words may reveal the self-deception or wishful thinking behind the words she sings.

Yet these descriptions so far still understate the range of contents available to the metaphorical content of the experience of music. The heard content can itself involve open-ended generality. Of the many, many things to be heard in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, one is the emergence of order, unity, and strength in something built up from what were previously only fragments scattered in many different places. One may experience this metaphorically-as a process of emotional development. But in hearing it that way, one may also be aware of the process as being of a general type, with many possible instances. A political process, a creative process, an intellectual process may all be instances of a type that involves the emergence of order, unity, and strength in something constructed from previously scattered fragments. One type of skill in a composer is to get the listener to hear not just a particular metaphorical content, but also to hear a metaphorical content that

---

7 B. Williams, 'The Nature of Opera', in *On Opera* (New Haven, CT: Yale U.P., 2006), p. 9.

involves this generality. Susan McClary considers the first movement of Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto, in which the harpsichord, normally a mere member of the continuo, takes over the music and proceeds to long and wandering solo, and writes this of it: 'The possibility of virtual social overthrow, and the violence implied by such overthrow, is suggested in the movement.'<sup>8</sup> Some may smile at the specificity of the suggestion, but what is specific in it is an instance of something more general that certainly is to be heard in the music, that someone or something has rejected its conventional and recessive role, and has moved to the centre of attention, and is acting in a freer way, energetically, and without the usual restraints. Multiple more specific personal, institutional, intellectual, artistic, and political processes can instantiate this general kind.

The metaphorical content of musical experience does not come in a series of isolated atoms. Over time in hearing a piece, the listener builds up a series of structured memories of parts of the music, both early and recent. Much of the musical significance of a piece is available only to one who hears or appreciates the currently heard passage as standing in one or another particular relation to what has gone before in the same piece. The psychological and intellectual drama of the work emerges gradually and cumulatively. We can introduce the notion of the *experiencing musical subject* who is listening to the work in question. The experiences of the experiencing musical subject are not all of those of the actual subject who is listening on a particular occasion. The actual subject may have conscious thoughts and emotions about the bill he has forgotten to pay, about the tasks of tomorrow, about what happened earlier in the day. But we can distinguish that subset of his experiences that involve his hearing the work, and his laying down memories of it as the hearing proceeds, from these other intervening thoughts and conscious events. This subset we can call the history of the experiencing musical subject. The experiencing musical subject in a particular hearing of the work may be far from an ideal listener—he may miss much that is really there to be heard. Prescinding from the non-musical experiences is not the same thing as considering an ideal case.

The way in which the experiencing musical subject hears a passage of music may, and commonly will, depend on what precedes it in the musical work. There may be a dependence on what has just happened, as when a phrase is repeated at a higher pitch, with a greater emotional intensity. There may be a dependence on an immense amount that has gone before. When you hear the theme of Bach's Goldberg Variations repeated at the end of that work, after the thirty variations, you hear it as the same theme that you heard at the outset of the work. Any description of your experience that omits that point would be incomplete. But when you hear the theme after all the variations, you have a conscious appreciation of a range of possibilities of variation and development that need not have been present when you hear the same theme at the outset, and would not be present when you heard the work for the first time. At an intermediate level of reaching back, when a composer is setting a strophic poem using broadly the same theme for each stanza, there are structures within which the words and music are heard as placed.

---

8 Susan McClary, 'The Blasphemy of Talking Politics during BachYear', in R. Leppert and S. McClary (eds), *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1987), p. 41.

The idea of the experiencing musical subject is not merely a philosophical construct, but something psychologically real, something whose states influence conscious experience and the appreciation of music. It is plausible that at the subpersonal level, we open and build up a mental file specifically about the music, its content, and its development. A subject's current perception of the music can depend substantially on what is in the file, and how it is structured.

We can say that in some very broad sense, the ability to experience one thing metaphorically—as another involves imaginative powers. The approach I have offered is, however, one involving specifically experienced metaphor. Perceptual experience is to be sharply distinguished from imagination. Imagining something in the music is not in itself hearing something in the music. Equally, imagining something in a depiction is not the same as seeing something in the depiction. A child does not win a competition for finding the hidden snowman in the line drawing by imagining a snowman somewhere in the pattern of lines. The child has to see the depiction of the snowman there, and he has to see it as a depiction of a snowman. Thinking of some piece of music as an expression of grief, or as grief from the inside, or imagining it to be so, is not yet to experience it as having a metaphorical content involving grief. That is always a further step; and it is that further step of which music takes advantage.

Earlier I distinguished between exploiting a mapping or isomorphism, and thinking about that isomorphism. It can help to analyse further what is involved in this intuitive distinction. At least three things are plausibly involved when a mental state exploits an isomorphism:

- (1) At some subpersonal level, an isomorphism is detected between two domains, each involving objects, properties, and relations, and detection of this isomorphism involves setting up a correspondence between the mental representations of items in each of these domains.
- (2) The isomorphism is not just given by a list, but by a rule—as, for instance, when the temporal earlier–later relations of a journey are mapped onto the earlier–later relations of a life.
- (3) Under the correspondence of mental representations between the two domains, some representations of the metaphorically represented domain are copied to some special kind of storage binding them with their corresponding mental representations (of the representing domain) in the subpersonal state underlying an experience, imagining, or thought which has the metaphorical content. Thereby their content enters the metaphorical content of that mental state or event.

While features (1) and (2) of exploiting an isomorphism are symmetrical as between the two domains, the third feature involves an asymmetrical relation. Copying representations of one domain to special storage in what underlies a mental state involving representations from a second domain is to be distinguished from copying representations of the second domain to special storage in what underlies a mental state involving representations from the first domain. Thus, thinking of life as a journey is different from thinking of a journey as a life. The phrase 'some kind of special storage' is of course merely an empty box here, to be further elaborated by empirical investigation. But 'special kind' is still meant to impose

a certain restriction. Since metaphorical seeing-as, for example, is distinct from the first kind of seeing-as that we distinguished back in section 1 (representational seeing-as), the storage of the copied representations must be different from the kind that makes the subject see a pot as really being a person, as opposed to seeing it metaphorically-as a person.

If exploiting an isomorphism does have these three features, it provides a further explanation for some of the pre-theoretical distinctions we have already noted. These features provide for distinctions between the various destinations to which a representation may be copied. A representation concerning the metaphorically represented domain may be copied to what underlies perceptual experience; it may be copied to what underlies an imagining; or may be copied to what underlies a thought (a thinking). Different kinds of mental state or event may all have metaphorical content, but there is a common structure here to underlie all such cases.

If the features (1)–(3) are present when a mental state or event has a metaphorical content, they also vindicate the intuitive idea that the isomorphism in question, though real and mentally detected, does not itself enter the content of the mental state that enjoys metaphorical content. Detection of the isomorphism is causally active in producing that state with metaphorical content, but no representation of the isomorphism itself enters the content of the state to whose underlying realization various mental representations are copied. This is why one who enjoys the mental state with metaphorical content may have to work out consciously what the isomorphism is.

This treatment allows that metaphorical content may be simultaneous with a mental state that possesses it, as in our perception of the Zubarán painting, or it may be subsequent. In the latter case, the representations from the metaphorically represented domain are copied (in the distinctive way) to what underlies an already existing mental state, and thereby enrich its content. This is what happens when you read a Thomas Mann novella, which initially seems to you to be about a theatrical performer, but which you subsequently realize is also metaphorically about political developments in Germany and the public's reaction to them.

The present approach also stands in contrast with those who wish to explain the emotional content of music by saying that there is a musical language-like system that stands in semantic relations to various types of emotional state. The semantics of this language have yet to be written out. There are also general problems of principle with the view. One general problem is that metaphorical experience-as is found in other cases where it is quite implausible that anything like understanding of a language is involved. There is nothing language-like that has to be learned to see the Zubarán pottery figures metaphorically-as a group of people, or the isolated tree metaphorically-as a lonely and unhappy person. Another general problem is that even if there were some language-like semantic correlations to be learned, that would not by itself explain the distinctive character of our hearing something in the music. Knowing a semantic correlation with the emotions, and even hearing some music as having these proposed semantic properties, is not yet hearing something metaphorically-as joy or relief. (An utterance in a natural language that refers to an emotion is not thereby an expression of an emotion, nor need it be perceived metaphorically-as involving that emotion.) If this proposed symbolic system is meant also to have expressive powers too, then that further thing is precisely what needs explanation. The explanation of that further fact is not supplied by the symbolic system itself.

## Relation to the Vocal Expression of Emotion

There are examples in which we perceive some line of the music as having a pitch contour similar to the intonation contour of an utterance expressive of a certain emotion. Salient examples would be the vocal lines in Dido's lament in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, and in Pamina's aria "Ach, ich fühls" in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. These lines are heard as having similar contours to a vocal expression of grief and loss, to a non-musical lamentation. There are contours and timing characteristic of anger, sadness, and fear. There is some preliminary evidence that there is some uniformity of vocal expression of such emotions across languages and across cultures.<sup>9</sup>

For brevity of expression, I will say that a piece of music is V-related to a human expression of a certain emotion if it resembles a human expression of that emotion in some specified audible respect—pitch contour, timing, and the like. In this terminology, we can make the point of the previous paragraph by saying that in Dido's and Pamina's arias, the vocal lines are perceived by listeners to the music as V-related to human vocal expressions of grief and intense loss. Enthusiasts for comparisons between the role of perception in the various art forms may want to compare the V-relation with the perceptual relations involved in the appreciation of depictions and sculptures.<sup>10</sup>

Vocal expressions of an emotion are special cases of actions expressive of an emotion. Perceptions of the vocal expression of an emotion are special cases of perceptions of an action expressive of an emotion. It can help in classifying and understanding the phenomena here to step back for a moment, and to look at the perception of actions more generally, before considering how the perception of vocal actions fits into this category.

We can distinguish a spectrum of degrees of richness in how an event in which an agent is involved may be perceived by another. The event in which the agent is involved may be perceived as not an action at all—as when the agent's body tilts relative to the seat as the train speeds round a bend, or when the agent's body is pressed back against the seat as the train accelerates. At a first point along the spectrum lie the cases in which the event in which the agent is involved is perceived as an action, even if it is an action of a kind that the perceiver himself could not perform, because he has completely the wrong kind of body. We perceive the motion of a jellyfish rising through water by pushing water downwards as an action the jellyfish is performing, even though we could do nothing like it. At a second point along the spectrum are those events that we not only perceive as actions of the agent, but also perceive as actions of a type that we can perform ourselves. They are actions of a type that we would not have to reason about how to perform if we were to decide to perform an action of the sort perceived. Walking, moving a hand in some

9 See K. Scherer, R. Banse, and H. Wallbott, 'Emotion Inferences from Vocal Expression Correlate across Languages and Cultures', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, vol. 32 (2001), pp. 76–92. There are interesting limitations on the generality. According to the evidence presented by Scherer *et al.*, some means of vocal expression of an emotion seem to be specific to vocal expressions by those using Indo-European languages.

10 So the V-relation could be compared with what I called 'the F-relation' in my article 'Depiction', *Philosophical Review*, vol. 96 (1987), pp. 383–410 at 387ff. The F-relation involves being presented in a region of the visual field that is of roughly the same shape as the depicted object. When this F-relation is experienced, we have the distinctive experience of depiction. When the V-relation is experienced, we have a distinctive musical experience of the expression of emotion.

entirely new pattern, performing a new dance movement all fall into this category. At a third point along this spectrum, we see the action not only as one of a sort we could perform, but also as an action expressive of a certain emotion—of anger, fear, delight, surprise, suspicion.

The perception of vocal expressions of emotion exhibits a high degree of richness and discrimination. Vocal expressions of emotion are located at the third point along the spectrum in respect of how they are perceived. Not only are utterances perceived as actions (which they are); they are also perceived as expressive of particular emotions, and intonation contour, pitch, timing, and much else about an utterance can combine to produce this perception of the utterance as expressive of emotion.

There are ways of representing anger, fear, delight, and the other emotions that are available only to those who know what it is like to experience them. (Such a way of thinking of fear is not available to Siegfried as *The Ring* portrays him.<sup>11</sup>) These ways of representing are made available to a subject by his having a recognitional capacity for the emotion. It follows that one cannot perceive an utterance, or any other bodily action, as an expression of an emotion, when it is represented in one of these ways, without knowing what it would be like to experience the emotion.

That conclusion is drawn from very general premises. The connection between experiencing someone else's action as an expression of a particular emotion, as represented in one of these ways, and the ability to express one's own emotion in that way is closer than is captured in that very general reasoning. You experience the other's action that expresses an emotion not merely as an action caused by that emotion, but specifically as an expression of that same emotion. There is a link between your ability to perceive someone as expressing that emotion in their actions, and your ability to do the same. This link corresponds in a specifiable way to the link between seeing someone else's bodily action as of a certain kind, and your ability to perform an action of that kind, without further reasoning. In the latter, relatively simpler, case, there is a way *W* of thinking of the relevant action-type with this property:

You can see an action as of kind *W*; and when all is functioning properly, you can perform an action of the same kind *W* without further practical reasoning about how to do it.

Similarly, in the case of an action seen in way *U*, as expressive of a certain emotion, roughly the following holds:

You can see an action as of kind *U*, expressing the emotion in question; and when all is functioning properly, and you yourself are experiencing that same emotion, you could express it in an action of kind *U*, without any further reasoning.

In short, we have just as strong a conception of what perceived emotionally expressive action is like from the inside—from the point of view of the agent and subject of the

---

11 *Siegfried*, Act I, Scene 3. The libretto supports the view that Siegfried has not merely not experienced fear, but does not know what it is like to have it, since he describes it as a pleasure. These recognitional ways of thinking of the emotions, like similar ways of thinking of experiences and sensations, do not need to be grasped in order to use the words 'fear' and 'pain' with some minimal linguistic understanding. Siegfried can truly say, using the very word 'fear', 'I do not know what it is like to experience fear.'

emotion—as we do for bodily actions perceived in the ways distinctive of the third point on the spectrum of cases discussed earlier.

All these points have consequences for the perception of music, when some piece of music is experienced as V-related to a human vocal expression of some specific emotion. One consequence concerns the emotion-type involved when a piece of music is experienced as V-related to a vocal expression of that emotion-type. This emotion-type is inherited by the emotional content of the music itself, from the emotional content of the kind of vocal expression in question.

A second consequence follows from the fact that there is no intentional content  $p$  such that the vocal, non-semantic features of the expression are experienced, via the perception of emotion, as an expression of fear, delight, surprise, etc., in the specific content that  $p$ . Correspondingly, the music that is perceived as V-related to vocal expressions of an emotion is not thereby perceived as an expression of an emotion with a specific intentional content  $p$ . (It may be a musical expression of an emotion with a specific intentional content—e.g. that the subject has lost her lover—in virtue of something else, such as the text that is being sung, or the dramatic context in which the singing occurs.)

A third consequence is that in hearing the music as expressive of a particular emotion by virtue of hearing it as standing in the V-relation to an expressive action, there is correspondingly no such thing as hearing the music that way, but not knowing what it is like from the inside to experience the emotion expressed. The music may even enable the hearer to understand new emotional states (as John Greco remarked to me), but this would still be understanding from the inside, even though newly acquired. The music, properly appreciated, carries us all the way into the point of view of anyone represented in the musical world as having the expressed emotion.

The explanatory power of the phenomenon of perception in music of instances of the V-relation is limited in two respects. The first limitation is that some music has a metaphorical content that does not concern the emotions. We should remember the earlier example of a piece of music capable of expressing the unification and integration of diverse fragments. This content does not concern an emotion, and is not something capable of vocal expression (as opposed to statement) in the intonation-contour, timing, or other non-semantic aspects of an utterance. In such cases, the general account of musical significance in terms of perception with a metaphorical content gets a grip while perceived resemblance to features of vocal expression plays no role in explaining the significance of the music.

The other limitation is that even when a piece of music has an emotional significance, that significance is by no means always present by the music's being perceived as V-related to human vocal expressions. It is not as if we are constantly hearing a similarity to vocal expressions in such emotionally expressive works as the final, contrapuntal movement of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata (at least, I am not). The emotional content, when it is present, can come equally from the content of the perceived metaphor. There are indeed some famous instrumental passages which can be heard as V-related to human vocal expressions of emotions. The celebrated passage of the first violin part marked 'Beklemmt' in the Cavatina in Beethoven's B-flat String Quartet Opus 130 (Example 3) can be heard as V-related to a fragmented utterance that keeps starting and stopping, expressing, in less than ten seconds, at first a cautious hopefulness, which turns into puzzlement and dismay.

Example 3. From Beethoven's String Quartet in B flat, Opus 130.

But these instrumental cases are exceptional. It is no accident that the best and most numerous examples of hearing some part of a piece of music as V-related to an expressive utterance are provided by vocal music itself. When instrumental cases occur, they involve instruments that are perceptually most similar to the human voice.<sup>12</sup>

### Application to Some Classical Issues about Music

I now turn to consider the bearing of the treatment I have outlined on some much-discussed issues about the perception and expression of emotion in music. I start with a quotation from Richard Wagner: 'What music expresses is eternal, infinite and ideal; it does not express the passion, love, or longing of such-and-such individual on such-and-

12 String instruments played with a bow display this perceptual similarity. Stravinsky, writing of the Prelude in *The Rite of Spring*, said, 'I have not given this melody to the strings, which are too symbolic and representative of the human voice.' See the translation of Stravinsky's 1913 article reprinted in P. Weiss and R. Taruskin (eds), *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents* (New York: Schirmer, 1984), p. 238.



such an occasion, but passion, love or longing in itself. . . .'<sup>13</sup> This particular point is originally in Schopenhauer.<sup>14</sup> It is no doubt rare for Wagner and logical or semantic form to be mentioned in the same sentence, but so mentioning them is what we need to do to explain the phenomenon Wagner is rightly noting in this passage. When life is thought of as a journey, or a tree in the shade is perceived as an unhappy person, the thought does not have to be of a particular journey (such as the journey from Paris to Pisa), or of a particular unhappy person. The content of the metaphor can just concern a property, or a system of relations, or both, rather than these as instantiated in a particular individual. The same holds for the perceived metaphorical content of music. The logical form is: feature F of piece of music M is perceived by a particular subject metaphorically-as representing the property P. The property P would be specified in detail by a term with lambda-abstraction, a term that may but need not mention any particular individual or, as Wagner would say, occasion.

The passage from Wagner's writing continues: 'passion, love or longing in itself, and this [music] presents in that unlimited variety of motivations, which is the exclusive and particular characteristic of music, foreign and inexpressible in any other language'. The idea that what is significant in a piece of music cannot be translated into any other medium, format, or language, is common to a groups of theorists, composers, and commentators who would differ on much else. Charles Rosen gives a pleasing formulation which entails the point when he writes that music has a 'meaning although it does not transmit a message'.<sup>15</sup> If there were a message, it seems, it could be the same message in another medium or language.

The natural explanation of the untranslatability under the account I am offering is that in metaphorical thought, imagination, or experience, what it is that is thought of, or imagined, or experienced in a metaphorical manner is an essential component of the subject's mental state. If you change what it is that is experienced metaphorically-as something else, then even if you still have a mental state with metaphorical content, it is a subjectively different mental state. And if you just give the content of only one side of the metaphor, that is clearly cognitively something different from a conscious state whose content involves the metaphor.

One may try to describe, without mentioning the landscape and the tree's location, the mental state and situation of someone who corresponds to the isolated tree. It would always be an informative statement that any such description fully captures what is in the metaphorical content when the tree is seen as an isolated, unhappy person. Since it would always be informative, that by itself would be enough to show that no translation is possible. But the untranslatability goes far beyond that point. When we specify further the content of the metaphor, we reach that further content (e.g. that our unhappy subject is distant from others who are not so unhappy, and who are close to one another) only via the first term of the metaphor, the landscape as given in the picture.

---

13 Richard Wagner, 'Ein glücklicher Abend', *Gazette Musicale*, nos. 56–58 (1841), repr. in F. M. Gatz, *Musik-Aesthetik* (Stuttgart: F. Enckel 1929), quoted by S. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 3rd edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1957), pp. 221–222.

14 I thank Lydia Goehr for the point about Schopenhauer. See A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, in the translation by E. Payne (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1969), both at p. 261 in vol. I, and at p. 450 in vol. II.

15 Charles Rosen, *Frontiers of Meaning: Three Informal Lectures on Music* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), p. xi.

This is a general argument that mental states with metaphorical content cannot be reduced to mental states that do not involve metaphorical content. The untranslatability of music to other media or representations is a special case of this general point. This explanation also means, of course, that we must sharply distinguish the untranslatability claim from the claim, also present in Wagner's passage, that this phenomenon of untranslatability is unique to music. Under the explanation I am offering, it is not unique to music, but is rather present in any case of a vehicle with metaphorical content. The author of a piece of poetry appreciation of which involves grasp of a metaphor would also rightly insist on this untranslatability into another medium. No non-poetic medium can translate the effect of Goethe's famous short poem 'Über allen Gipfeln'.

An experienced metaphor involving a piece of music, a depiction, or a poem could be produced by something in another medium only if the essential characteristics of the mental states involved in the appreciation of the metaphorical contents were the same in perception of objects or events in the other medium—which in the nature of the case, they are not.

Über allen Gipfeln  
Ist Ruh,  
In allen Wipfeln  
Spürest du  
Kaum einen Hauch;  
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.  
Warte nur, balde  
Ruhest du auch.

We also have to distinguish sharply between translation of a linguistic expression of a metaphor and attempts to reduce a mental state with metaphorical content to familiar states that lack metaphorical content. The points I have been making do not entail that a metaphor expressed in English cannot, by and large, be translated into French or German. It can be translated. But understanding the English expression of the metaphor and understanding the French expression of the metaphor requires the thinker to be in the *same* mental state, of thinking of an F as a G, for the relevant F and G. It does not involve elucidating a mental state with metaphorical content in terms of states of some other kind. (Quality of translation of course always remains a matter of degree, given the different histories and cultures in which different languages are embedded.)

It is a fact that there are correct and incorrect, better and worse, ways of hearing a piece of music. Sometimes it is incorrect to hear the trio section of a symphony as a straightforward expression of joy of a sort expressed by any Viennese-style waltz. Sometimes it should rather be heard as involving irony, and as involving some psychological distance from the normal appreciation of a waltz. That will account for features of the music not otherwise explained. It will account for the exaggerated features of this particular waltz. It will also fit better with the represented psychological development emerging out of the successive metaphorical contents of the whole symphony to this point. The same goes for the perception of larger-scale structure.<sup>16</sup>

---

16 Compare J. Dubiel on hearing the structure of the first movement of Schumann's 'Rhenish' Symphony differently on realizing each stage of the exposition is immediately repeated, in his 'Analysis, Description and What Really Happens', *Music Theory Online*, vol. 6 (2000).

It may seem that in emphasizing the experienced content of music, and simultaneously distinguishing metaphorical content from representational content, we deprive ourselves of any hope of explaining a distinction between correct and incorrect, better and worse ways of hearing the emotional content of a piece of music. But this is not so. An experienced metaphor relies on the existence of a mentally represented isomorphism. The isomorphism can exist even if it is not mentally represented; which is what happens when a piece of music is not perceived correctly. To come to hear a piece of music better is to come to hear it as having a richer, more interesting or significant metaphorical content than one succeeded in hearing in it previously.

Finally, I note the bearing of this position on the idea, mentioned in some writers, that a passage of music can genuinely have an emotional significance that the composer himself does not appreciate, and did not consciously intend. We have emphasized that in appreciating a metaphor, either in thought or in experience, a subject exploits an isomorphism rather than thinks about it. The composer can in this respect be in the same position as the listener. Once a composer is exploiting in his music a perceivable metaphor for a certain psychological state, or a certain stage in a psychological or intellectual development, or whatever else may be in the metaphorical content, the composer may move on to compose new musical passages that seem right under that conception, even though he cannot say why. His compositional conception is governed by some perceivable metaphor he is exploiting, and other, sophisticated, hearers may be able to perceive in the new passages an emotional or representational significance the composer himself could not characterize at all satisfactorily in natural language if asked. This is not an inexplicable miracle if there is a psychologically real metaphorical conception that is governing his composition. A conception of musical expression as involving perceived metaphor is not merely compatible with, but can explain, the existence of this phenomenon. It is a phenomenon of cognition that our grasp of a concept can go beyond what we have so far been able to articulate.<sup>17</sup> The same applies in the domain of artistic expression. The composer's exploitation of a perceivable metaphor may have ramifications for his music that he has not so far appreciated. What is grasped may have consequences beyond what he or we can currently appreciate. We need to have better models of the mind, both philosophical and psychological, that accommodate and explain these phenomena.<sup>18</sup>

Christopher Peacocke  
Columbia University, New York and University College, London  
cp2161@columbia.edu

---

17 See, for example, chap. 4, 'Implicit Conceptions', of my *Truly Understood* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2008).

18 Predecessors of this talk were delivered in March 2006 at an Interdisciplinary Roundtable on Music in Columbia University, at the Henle Conference on Varieties of Perception at St Louis University in April 2008, and at the London Aesthetics Forum in May 2008. I learned more than I could possibly address in this version from exceptional commentaries on these three occasions from Paul Boghossian, Jose Luis Bermudez, and Paul Snowdon, respectively. My thanks also for discussions with Lydia Goehr and Brian Kane.