

## The Puzzle of Music and Emotion in Rand's Aesthetics

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There is much that I like about Ayn Rand's aesthetics. Perhaps most of all, I like the simple, bold and almost unarguably true claim that greatest art proposes a "sense of life" and conveys "metaphysical value-judgments." (In its bold simplicity, it is utterly unlike what I typically write.) This wake-up call, gracefully and fully expressed in Torres and Kamhi's fine book, is so appealing that I can scarcely believe that there would be much serious debate about it. I think one could reasonably depart far from (or at least quibble with) Rand's own view about the *best* sense of life and metaphysical value judgments, and still endorse her central claim.

There are nevertheless what I view as serious flaws in Rand's work, due in large part to indulgent excesses, an isolated, almost monomaniacal work ethic, and to autodidactic arrogance. One problem is that I do not think her novels are very good novels. I also would have believed that someone who has written such novels is likely to have a strange, even misguided, view of the purpose of all the arts. I would admit that her novels are a genus of literature, perhaps almost *sui generis*, and that they are, especially given her obvious intent, powerful and effective pieces of literature. However, I believe they belong to a genre that is closer to propaganda or sermon than to great art, something that is doubly shocking given her biography and wider political views. It seems to me that great art should propose or suggest values—make certain options clear to the experiencer of the work and themselves betray a creator with a wise and developed *Weltanschauung*—without clubbing the reader, viewer, or listener with it. Aesthetics is not homiletics. In other words, great works should

also respect the individual autonomy of experiencers to make their own judgments: they propose, even cajole, but they do not train. Put in terms that are more transparently derivative from Robin Collingwood, Rand's novels are more manipulative craft and philosophical treatise than they are novels.

Then too, I think that Rand has horribly misjudged the whole point of some modern novels, notably those of Thomas Mann. They do not offer, as Rand seems to assume, a model of ideal lives, so obviously twisted and indecisive that the portrayed lives are. This is such an unlikely and even silly suggestion that it approaches being interpretatively immoral. Instead, such novels offer readers a *negatives Vorbild*, a model of what the good life is *not*. Neither the mathematician Ulrich in Robert Musil's novel, nor the composer Leverkühn in Mann's, is intended to be a "realistic" figure. Rand did not discuss Musil, so far as I know, and Torres and Kamhi do not discuss her views about Mann—at least these names do not appear in their extensive index. Rand herself is apparently little capable of delicacy and obliquity, as Mann and Musil were, and so the only technique she often has is showing how heroes *must* be, contrasting them with sometimes cartoonish and patently negative characters, without any possibility of even a very foolish reader mistaking her intention. (In this heavy-handed respect, as is often remarked, and in betraying her attitudes even through characters' names, she takes her cue from Dickens.) She appears not really capable of sketching a vaguely attractive character, who, upon development—and requiring a reader's reflection—conveys the author's judgment as a sort of *via negativa*. It is this aspect of the novel, arising from autobiographical identifications or from sympathy, that gives our best novels their psychological wrenching quality: realizing that a somewhat attractive person has gone quite wrong. And with that, an ability for us as readers to think and change.

A still more beautiful example of the idea of this *negatives Vorbild*—hardly captured by the word "antihero"—is found in Michael Frayn's recent novel, *Headlong*. (Frayn is the author of the popular and subtle drama *Copenhagen*, now playing in London and New York.) The book's target is ultimately self-possessed academics, and

specifically art-loving academic philosophers. Its main character thinks aloud—a great deal, very cleverly, and with sustained (almost, one might say, profound) reflections on intellectual and cultural history. He seems exceptionally thoughtful and kindly. But overly thoughtful and kindly intentions often end up as quite cruel behaviors, and the intellectual patter is, one eventually realizes, self-serving and foolish drivel. It is a wicked send-up. But of precisely what? That requires thought from the reader! I thus do not see it as axiomatic that the major character in a novel must be obviously and truly heroic. (It is true that my proposal likely requires use of irony; there may be intrinsic moral difficulties—Kantian problems of universalization even—with irony, as Jedediah Purdy has powerfully articulated in the opening pages of his peculiar book, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust and Commitment in America Today* that is Randian in its earnestness.)

I have an odd but plausible idea. The experience of good art should always give the experiencers as interpreters something to do, something that mixes with their own individual views and experience, producing a result that even a mere experiencer can take pride in. This is not to say that great artworks must be chameleon-like, totally different to each viewer, and entirely "constructed": for the main points or direction may be the same in all valid interpretations. Great artworks simply bring out the most artistically sensitive and variable sides of those who experience them. Neither is it to say that an artwork is merely a puzzle, whose enjoyment consists in getting anything at all out of deliberately obtuse creations (rather like some experiences of Webern's music or Joyce's—or Barth's, Eco's, or Pynchon's—novels.) Anticipating and utilizing the experiencer's autonomy is merely part of a worthy artistic experience, not the whole of it. Such a view pays respect to the two individual agents in the artistic marriage, the creator *and* the experiencer. By this criterion, Rand is quite hopeless: she is anti-individualist regarding the one pole, and superhumanly heroic about the other. I don't see that Torres and Kamhi entirely appreciate this point—although one of the great merits of their book is that they remain at arm's length from seeing her aesthetics merely as an extension of her fictional writing

and values.

My own misgivings about Rand's art, which are at least posed by many readers who are eventually more sympathetic, would seem to suggest disaster for her theory of music. Her obsession with training her readers through the portrayal of obvious and unflawed heroes would seem to be helpless to grasp the artistry of "pure" music (without words or plot), since there can be no representations of people or actions, noble or otherwise (to borrow Aristotle's terminology). Furthermore, Rand seems to have had no formal training in music or understanding of its history and fundamentals, her works suggest little familiarity with music aesthetics (or conversations with those who are), as well as her having no sustained experience, apparently, with music from the interior side of performing it. Her Aristotelian anti-Platonism, and the lack of clear large-scale forms, of controlled working of motifs, in her fiction, would also seem to steer her account of music toward superficiality.

Instead, I think Rand's account of music is rich and subtle. In fact, unlike her account of literature, it is a remarkably pure working out of her aesthetic theory, relatively unblemished by her own peculiar artistic values and the swagger of her excessive self-assurance.

One extremely positive sign is that Rand's theory of music moves away from the extremely assertive style of her literary theory, in which artists assert their theory and values, and experiencers . . . gulp . . . accept them. In music, "one grasps the suggestion of a certain emotional state" (Rand, quoted in Torres and Kamhi 2000, 79). It is true, as Torres and Kamhi note, that Rand is not always consistent. At one point, for example, she suggests that music "induces" in listeners an emotional state (79). However, "grasping" suggests merely that one identifies or recognizes the emotion at some level (and not necessarily only intellectually), not that one has been *caused* to have it. However, Rand's voice here is notably more tentative and refined, and in multiple respects. A bit more in line with her objectivist-universalist leanings, she claims that all (presumably educated and neutrally receptive listeners) will hear the "same emotions" in music. This claim has been notoriously disputed (such

as in Hanslick's supposedly appropriate but diametrically opposed emotions associated with two settings of Glück's "Che farò . . ."). However, excluding the nebulous and difficult cases that are common to any theory about anything, and with the realization that what is being claimed is that there is *an* emotional state that is being expressed, such as possibly the agitation associated with joy or sadness, not that the emotional state is precisely the usual one people too readily and imprecisely associate with a musical passage, the claim seems plausible to me.

Exactly *how* music gets associated with emotions, and *which* musical figures are associated with *which* emotions, has been the subject of much—and to my mind largely ineffective and beside-the-point—speculation. These are psychological and anthropological speculations about ultimately empirical matters; what is important for philosophy is whether music is more than accidentally associated with emotions, and exactly what the nature of this "association" is. Rand adopts at one point the surprisingly formalistic notion that it is form or pattern in music that does this, and elsewhere reverts to the ancient Pythagorean homily (derived through Helmholtz) that it is unconscious counting or measuring of mathematical features. Torres and Kamhi tend to agree with Rand (and Kivy) that music's emotional expressivity is likely an extension of ordinary expressivity in terms of gesture and speech. Well, maybe. I find something valid in the idea that music succeeds in quite different and unique ways, and with a result that it is not merely intellectual "recognition" of others' emotion. Perhaps the bits and pieces of tonal perceptions, together with their illusions such as movement and similarity, themselves are so much like real emotions—in terms of a "shape," like a synthetic molecule can fool our taste buds into sensing sweetness like sugar—that we can, with the slight nudge of a willingness to accept the artistic emotions, experience them as emotions. Sometimes the arrangement of my more intellectualized concepts can seem to have a spatial arrangement, a geometry, in spite of not being physical things that are in space. (This is an old idea, going back to Plato, the Porphyrian tree, and Leibniz's "logical" space.) Perhaps by similar trans-modal devices, one can experience mere perceived and

organized sounds *as* emotions. (They will be, however, emotional contours without the distinctively cognitive objects that emotions typically have: yearning, mourning, even anger, without being directed at a precise target or intentional object.)

Rand's contribution to the fascinating, vast, and woolly theme of art and emotion, especially music and emotion, does not lie here. Instead, she views the genuinely artistic response not as constituted by this banal emotional one—"the music is sad"—but by our response (itself a further emotional response) *to* this emotional response. Hers is not a theory about emotion and art, but about meta-emotion and art. What matters, Rand claims, is not the feelings that art evokes but, as she puts it, how one "feel[s] about these feelings" (quoted in Torres and Kamhi 2000, 81).

There is the suggestion of a similar route in some of my own writings (among many suggestions), but Rand puts the matter extremely well. How does art, if at all, transcend the banality of actual emotions? What does it "do" with these emotions—for surely merely synthesizing artificial ones is not the goal of art, anymore than synthesizing or reproducing outer reality is?

However, it is at this point that I would wish that aestheticians and philosophers would just be still for a moment, and fully realize and confess how poorly we understand the life of the mind. We simply don't know what emotions, sensations, feelings, moods, and so on are: we don't know of what they consist, and how they relate to one another. We are in the position of eighteenth century chemists, or alchemists, convinced of the importance of the world we are talking about, and about the nature of some connections and associations, but using only the ordinary language of emotions (as Hobbes might have talked about "matter") and with no theory at all of how it all might hang together.

One of the better points in Torres and Kamhi's book ("Rand's Mistaken Hypothesis") is I think when they address just how seriously Rand's grand project fails, how her discussion of music is often inconsistent with some elements of her general theory of art—notably her thesis concerning the "re-creation of reality." I will put what I think is Rand's mistake less carefully than they do. One can

see theories of value in art, especially theories of great art, as being dominated by two poles of evaluation: substance or form. By "substance," I mean what the artwork says, including its themes, issues, promoted beliefs and especially, promoted values. By "form," I mean how the artwork says anything, the form the expression takes. Part of Rand's Aristotelian, anti-Platonic theory of art consists in emphasizing substance as the main purpose or value in art. The artful, beautiful language of Thomas Mann, hierarchically constructed in larger movements that resemble musical workings of motifs, mean nothing to Rand, since it has as its substance the expression of weak, neurotic, ineffectual protagonists. Artistically worthy substance appears to be missing (although I myself would argue that there *is* substance, obliquely and negatively projected.)

One might call this Rand's "substance over form" aesthetic thesis. That great, and even good, works must express beliefs and values about topics of central concern to human being seems to me an attractive hypothesis. My disagreement is whether this expression must always be by fist-pounding assertion. It is also obvious that there must be some elements of "form" of course, such as a novel's having developed plot sufficient to convey effectively the substance. But here, form is subordinated to the purpose of conveying—effectively asserting—substance. So, there exists "form" in art, but in the service of substance.

However, in music, things become especially problematic. It is unclear what the substance consists in, since music lacks the ability to assert any values or beliefs clearly and directly. Here, Rand retreats from her more prosaic view of substance, essentially as political speeches, to a view of emotional substance. It is an inner, psychological substance; it is not entirely clear how this works—and whether it is enough to save music from the charge of lack of substance and hence being mere entertainment. Certainly, merely producing emotions does not constitute this substance. Instead, it is something like experiencing them and sensing—or feeling—their appropriateness in a full human life. It is then clear why she would like music that projected some grandeur and confidence, such as Beethoven or her fellow St. Petersburg émigré, Rachmaninoff. Her great difficulty

is that music seems to succeed only through form: there is a far greater intermingling of *what* is communicated with *how* it is communicated than in the literary and representational arts.

My comments hardly do justice to Torres and Kamhi's survey of a quite full range of issues, even in their tiny chapter on music (and later in a section on the cognitive psychology of music). Their even more developed comments on literature and the visual arts, both about Rand's views, and their own theories about them, will provide me material to ponder for years. I must confess to a lingering attraction to the abstract works of Mark Rothko and Henry Moore, and am not totally convinced that Torres and Kamhi have dealt with them conclusively, although I share a dissatisfaction with what other critics—including Kramer—have said is there merit, especially Rothko. Just in case I am wrong, I have positioned a Bruegel opposite a Rothko in my otherwise bare Buffalo apartment.

Rand's views on music are worthy—surprisingly worthy—contributions to the continuing debate in music aesthetics, including on emotion and music. I believe they show her wrestling, with depth and vigor, over tensions and even contradictions in her own theory. She typically did not admit them openly, but it is a mark of her intellectual integrity that she did not by any means ignore or pass over them silently, either. It is likewise a mark of the merit of Torres and Kamhi's commentary that, although they endorse and develop Rand's views, they do not by any means ignore blemishes. While the discussion of the arts in general, and the application of Rand-like theories to the other arts, are perhaps their strongest contributions, their discussion of music is very fine indeed.

## References

- Torres, Louis and Michelle Marder Kamhi. 2000. *What Art Is: The Esthetic Theory of Ayn Rand*. Chicago: Open Court.