

Peter Kivy, *THE CORDED SHELL: REFLECTIONS ON MUSICAL EXPRESSION*.
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+ 167 pp. A review by John Hospers.

Music can express no specific feelings, alleged Eduard Hanslick a hundred years ago. "Music can reproduce phenomena such as whispering, storming, roaring, but the feelings of love and anger not at all. Definite feelings are unsusceptible of being embodied in music. The feeling of hope is inseparable from the concept of a happier state that is to come, and which we compare with the actual state. The feeling of sadness involves the notion of a past state of happiness... In default of them, no feeling can be called 'hope' or 'sadness.'... On excluding these conceptions from consciousness, nothing remains but a vague sense of motion which at best could not rise above a general feeling of satisfaction or discomfort... What part of the feelings can music represent? Only their dynamic properties. It may reproduce the motion accompanying a psychical action, according to its momentum: speed, slowness, strength, weakness, increasing and decreasing intensity. But motion is only one of the concomitants of feeling, not the feeling itself. Music cannot reproduce the feeling of love, but only the element of motion, and this may occur in any other feeling just as well as in love." (pp. 40-41, *The Beautiful in Music*)

It is Peter Kivy's aim in this book to give a sustained reply to such allegations. He sets out to justify descriptions of music in emotional terms. Not that all such descriptions of music can be accepted as true, or even tolerated as relevant: program notes and musical biographies abound in shameless arrays of emotional descriptions, usually without the slightest basis, often mixing accounts of the composer's emotional experiences with accounts of qualities presumed to characterize the music (and typically using the first as a basis for the second); on the other hand, there is music criticism by musicologists, employing the technical terminology of musical analysis and eschewing entirely any

reference to feelings or moods. Kivy attempts to take a middle course between these extremes, neither sanctioning the majority of descriptions of music in emotional terms, nor doing without them entirely. (Kivy speaks throughout of emotive descriptions of music, a term that seems to me strange. We speak of emotive utterances, such as "How marvelous" but it is clearly not these responses to music that he is analyzing. It is attempted descriptions to music that he is talking about, and descriptions are cognitive, not emotive. Descriptions of music containing reference to emotions I accordingly call emotional, not emotive).

The first basic distinction he employs is between saying that A expresses B and that A is expressive of B. (i.e., "Jones expressed his longing" vs. "The music is expressive of longing.") The face of a St. Bernard is seen by most people as expressive of melancholy, but this is in no way to say that it expresses melancholy, for the latter would imply that the dog feels melancholy, something which no merely human being is in a position to assert. To say that Handel expressed anguish in his aria "He was despised and forsaken" may be true, but since such a statement would have to be confirmed by doing things like consulting Handel's biography and memoirs, it is irrelevant to strictly musical criticism; whereas to say that the aria is anguished (i.e. is expressive of anguish) is to say something about the qualities of the music. It is only with "A is expressive of B" that Kivy is concerned.

But how are such attributions of feeling-qualities to the music to be justified? Kivy considers several positions, among the most interesting of them (largely unknown to critics and aestheticians today) to be found in a number of works written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One of the books' most novel features is its discussion of these views.

Some of these theories, says Kivy, are marred by the fact that they include reference to the feelings aroused in the listener as an essential part: the early eighteenth-century English musician Roger North, for example, held that sad music is sad because it arouses sadness in the listener (p. 21). But all such "arousal" theories, says the author, are mistaken. For one thing, the feelings aroused (when aroused at all) are boundlessly diverse, depending very often on the merest accident of the listener's biography; moreover, what is expressed and what is aroused may be very different: if I express grief, this may arouse pity. In any case, "sadness is a quality of the music, not a power of the music to do things to the listener" (p. 23).

One view that was current in the seventeenth century was that music acquires its emotional content from the spoken voice. The rise and fall, the dynamics and various intonations, of the human voice are expressive of various states of feeling, and the music that accompanies the (singing) voice takes on its various qualities by association with them, much as the moon shines by light reflected from the sun. Though this theory provides some interesting leads, the author rejects it, concluding that musical expressiveness has dimensions much broader than could be acquired merely from association with the human voice.

Similarly, the author criticizes the view of the eighteenth-century German aesthetician Johann Hiller which again relates musical expressiveness to speech: on this view, language (especially poetry) can be expressive of fairly precise and determinate feeling-states, whereas music, by contrast, is capable only of being expressive of a "generalized feeling, and must particularize itself through the offices of speech" (99). Music is a kind of formless, protean expressive clay, and its specific expressive properties are imprinted upon it by contact

with the text. But this view will not suffice either, says Kivy. For example, Hayden's masses are often criticized because the cheerfulness of the music is at odds with the seriousness of the text, and we could not note this disparity if we could not give an emotional characterization of the music quite independently of the text. Moreover, we often speak of the expressive qualities of the music matching the expressive qualities of the words, which indicates that their expressive qualities can be discerned independently of each other.

The most promising eighteenth-century theory of musical expressiveness is that of the German aesthetician Johann Mattheson, who held that (1) the aesthetic response is a cognitive response, a recognition of the emotional content present in it, and that (2) the structure of music bears a resemblance to the structure of man's emotional life. Thus, writes Mattheson, "Joy is the result of an expansion of our vital spirits; it follows naturally that this affect is best expressed by large and expanded intervals. Sadness, on the other hand, is caused by a contraction of those same subtle parts of our bodies. It is, therefore, easy to see that the narrowest intervals are the most suitable (p. 39).

This view is a strong precursor of the views of the twentieth-century views of Langer, Bouwsma, and Carroll C. Pratt. Pratt wrote (and Langer quoted him approvingly) that "music sounds the way emotions feel"; but, Kivy adds, it also includes the way we express emotions in gesture, facial configuration, and posture - "all the behavior with which the emotions are associated" (P. 40). What they all have in common, however, is the view that feelings are recognized as qualities of the music, rather than something we feel as a result of music's stimulation, and that musical passages resemble the manifestations of human feeling: we hear this complex musical line as expressive of

sadness because we hear it as a musical resemblance to the "gesture and marriage appropriate to the expression of our sadness" (p. 53). Kivy then goes on to criticize Langer for saying that the isomorphism of music to the life of feeling makes music symbolic of feeling, whereas she should have stuck to what Mattheson said, that music can be expressive of individual feelings. Isomorphism does not imply symbolism.

This general view of musical expressiveness, with which Kivy agrees, he calls the contour theory, because expressiveness has to do with the congruence of musical contour with the structure of expressive behavior. But now he superimposes on this a second view, which, he says, accounts for some (though not all) of our emotional attributions to music, which he calls the convention theory. The convention theory explains the expressiveness of music as a function of "customary association of certain musical features with certain emotive ones, quite apart from any structural analogy between them" (p. 77). For example, we speak of the anguished, restless quality of the diminished triad. By itself, the triad has no such quality, but during a long period in the history of our musical tradition, it is an 'active' chord; it has to go somewhere, lead to something." There are also chords, like the minor triad, which to contemporary listeners seems quite quiescent and even resigned but which once was heard as an active chord. In both cases the expressive qualities we attribute to the chords is at least partly a matter of convention determined by musical history.

Many conventions govern our perception of music, says Kivy; consider orchestration: "The romantically 'outdoor' quality of the horn and 'horn-fifths,' imparted by the association with the hunt; the 'peasant' quality of the oboe, when accompanied (as Hayden likes to do) with a drone, by virtue of its resemblance to

the bagpipe; the 'martial' quality of the trumpet... the religious quality of the organ... the solemn funereal quality of the measured beat of the kettle-drum (as in the Dead March from Saul, or the second movement of the Brahms Requiem)" (pp. 133-4).

The contour and convention theories together, says Kivy, account for our attributions of expressiveness to music. And this dual account of expressiveness explains why the Western listener cannot at once perceive the expressiveness in Oriental music. If the contour theory were the whole truth, we should expect to perceive expressiveness in the contour of the one music as much as in the other; yet we do not. But because of the conventional component, expressiveness is partly convention-bound: (a) bound to the conventions which govern expression-behavior in a culture, and (b) bound to the musical conventions that are prerequisite for appreciative listening (p. 87).

In what sense are these expressive attributions to be construed as "objective"? Not in the sense that musical passages are expressive intrinsically, without the presence of listeners; but rather in the sense in which we say that yellow is too gay a color for a funeral parlor, or that white paint will make a small room look larger.

A few final comments: (1) Kivy's is a lucid and eminently readable account, interesting both historically and conceptually, of musical expressiveness - flexible in that it gives scope to both the contour and the convention models, the account becoming more convincing as one reads and as the theory is applied to more and more specific passages of music, and as one after another bit of irrelevancy or pseudo-mysticism is progressively shucked off. What finally emerges has as much in common with recent accounts given by Tormey and Sircello, though Kivy does not hesitate to state his disagreements with both of them (pp. 102-103, 142-46).

(2) When it comes to specific emotions of which music is expressive, Kivy says, "That two critics should disagree about whether a theme is expressive of 'noble grief' or 'abject sorrow' does not worry me much" (p. 47). But if music can be expressive of specific shades of feeling as Kivy claims, then I submit that he ought to be worried about it, for the capacity of music to express specific shades of feeling is one of the most distinctive features of his theory (contrary to that of Langer).

(3) Like the radical skeptic in epistemology who denies from the start that there are such things as tables and trees and challenges anyone to prove to him deductively that there are, the radical skeptic will remain unconvinced by Kivy's endeavor to establish musical expressiveness. But to the mild skeptic, the one who merely says "Show me, I'm not convinced," Kivy has said a great many pertinent things to convince him that there are after all good reasons for saying that Monteverdi's song "Lasciatemi moriri" (quite apart from the words) is pervaded with grief and suffering - enough, at any rate, to give assurance to any musical critic or listener who may have been ashamed to use the language of emotions in his attempts to describe music.