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Aesthetics 2

Last week we began by asking the question "What is beauty?" and approached it by discussing whether what we understand as art ("What is art?" "Can anything be art?") is something internal to it. Two important positions were addressed. The first was a basic account of R.G. Collingwood's aesthetic theory that maintained that physical art was merely a trace of the authentic form known only to the artist who had produced it; the second that for something to be seen as art, it requires a cultural heritage – a background – against which it is possible to judge it.

We examined various objections to each – Collingwood's position suffers from the fact that physical traces of the genuine works of art are not the artworks themselves meaning that when we visit an art gallery or hear a concert we are not witnessing the art itself. Moreover, if the artist is the only person who can, in principle, possess the work of art then how do we know whether or not he is mistaken in identifying it from one day to the next and, as such, whether the physical manifestation is authentic? The cultural heritage position suffers from the objection that it does not allow for one-off pieces that might be accomplished by someone otherwise judged as artistically incompetent.

So where to from here?

This week I want to look at the roles of expression and authenticity in relation to ideas of beauty. Various kinds of human activity can be said to be exemplify forms of expression, as well as being answerable to concepts such as authenticity. Architecture can express certain ideas – indeed, sometimes it can be said to be internal to them (e.g. religious ideas expressed in the architecture of cathedrals). Similarly, gardens can be said to express different forms of thought; certain kinds of miniature stylized depictions of the natural world spring to mind – think, for instance, of Japanese rock gardens or romantic Victorian notions of the natural world exemplified in the carefully manicured parks and gardens of aristocratic estates of that time. (An aside: there is an interesting book on the philosophical relevance of gardens by the philosopher David Cooper entitled *The Philosophy of Gardens*.) Both architecture and gardens can be seen as forms of human expression – and, moreover, forms of expression that cannot find their outlet in any other way without corrupting meaning. Something similar can be said about other different art forms; poetry and music are expressive but it is difficult to conceive of either one being able to do replicate meaning afforded by the other. For example, the poem *The Lark Ascending* by George Meredith inspired Ralph Vaughan-Williams to write his famous piece of the same name. Anyone who has visited the South Downs on a sunny day in spring or early summer (areas around Devil's Dyke and the Cuckmere Valley are good spots) will understand what inspired both but one could not say that the kind of meaning internal to Meredith's poem is, somehow, replicated in Vaughan-Williams' music. Both however, can be said to nourish the idea of what they are treating in the same way that both poetry and music can nourish religious themes, such as the requiem (think of Mozart's marvellous unfinished work, for example). These are art forms that deepen our understanding – not in terms of acquiring knowledge but in terms of meaning.

A good place for us to start is with music, as it is an art form that is often claimed to combine both artistic expression and authenticity in its ideal form.

Music, like other forms of art, comes in many varieties and, as a consequence, has many different modes of performance; a lot of these require rehearsal. For our purposes, I shall concentrate on classical music largely because I am more 'at home' with it (I do enjoy other forms but my knowledge of them is more limited) and because questions of authenticity are more easily identifiable.

Let's first ask the question: what differentiates music from just noise? – Is it that it has a certain structure – a 'form'? A melody would seem to support an affirmative answer to this latter question. The Romanian conductor and philosopher Sergiu Celibidache (1912-1996) argued that for something to be music, the end had to be a function of the

beginning (and vice versa). Whilst this is clear in terms of a melody it is, perhaps, less clear that his argument works in relation to 20th century Avant-garde music; while some think that such music is 'just noise', others conceive of it as 'breaking new ground'. Composers have always broken new ground – consider, for example, the harmonies in the chorales of J.S. Bach in his St. John and St. Matthew Passions – and they have almost always been sneered at by some for doing so; Avant-garde music is just another example of when this has happened.

Nevertheless, even the most modern and controversial music has a beginning and an end and, as such, can been seen as bearing out Celibidache's position. It may just take a little time for the sceptics to become used to its form and, as such, for them to appreciate that what they are listening to is music (and that the beginning is a function of the end). On the other hand, it is conceivable that the sceptic's view might prevail and that what was initially marketed as music becomes seen as nothing more than an attempt at notoriety (for example). In this case, it would be impossible to for one to properly appreciate the end as a function of the beginning; rather, one would just be faced with a series of noises. It's a question of aspect-perception.

Two further points can be raised in relation to this. The first is that the background against which we understand something as music is largely determined by what we take the sounds that we hear to be (their meaning as expressive and so on). The second is that two people may hear two very different things in the same way that two people may see two very different things when they see a picture. – Someone who does not know what a rabbit is (and has never seen anything like it) will be unable to see it in Jastrow's ambiguous 'duck-rabbit' drawing; similarly, someone not assimilated within a culture will be unable to hear in its music what someone who has been brought up with it will hear. I cannot hear in Chinese and Indian music, for example, what I can hear in the music of Tallis, Bach and Vaughan-Williams. The same, of course, would work in reverse.[1] There is, then, a sense in which the cultural heritage argument is still credible.

So, should we see the musical score as merely something to be interpreted by the conductor? – And to what should such an interpretation be answerable? Should the conductor be aiming at an authentic performance? – What is an authentic performance?

The topic of authentic performance is a difficult one. Does authenticity reside with the composer's conception of the work (echoing Collingwood)? If so, we run into objections relating to whether or not the composer is mistaken in identifying that conception from one day to the next. Moreover, is an authentic performance always what the composer had in mind? – Could it not be the case that a conductor is more musical than the composer in the sense that he or she sees possibilities in the score where the composer did not? Then we come to the notion of authentic performance of historical works, ranging from the earliest polyphonic choral music through to 17th century orchestral music.

Let's begin with authentic performance based on what the composer intends. Are we to jettison what we hear as music in favour of what we believe the composer intends? If so, then the difficulties to be overcome in the realisation of the piece in a concert are not so much musical difficulties as they are practical ones relating to what it is possible for us to know about the composer's intentions. Similarly, in relation to authenticity of pieces written centuries ago, there are difficulties concerning the kinds of instruments on which the pieces would have been played and the different forms of temperament (tuning) that were customary. – For instance, stringed instruments habitually used gut (as opposed to metal) strings and, before Baroque times, were tuned to an A that was 435 vibrations per second (or thereabouts), as opposed to the concert pitch (and now standard) 440/s. This would have had profound implications in terms of both harmony and the kind of sound that

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[1] Cf. Wittgenstein, L. *Zettel*: 159-170 and Mulhall, S. 1990. p.26

was created by the instruments. Moreover, there are also ethical concerns raised in the quest for this kind of authenticity – some choral works were specifically written for castrati; the sound they produced was unique but it would hardly be moral to try to recreate such performances now!

However, the question needs to be raised as to whether any of these forms of so-called 'authenticity' can ever be achieved. An historically accurate performance (period instruments, correct temperament and so on) will not be heard by a modern audience in the same way it would have been heard by an audience of the time because the background against which we hear it – our culture – is very different. In the same way as someone from a different cultural background will be unable to hear in western music what they hear in their own, so we (as children of our times) will be unable to hear what was heard at the time in which the music was written – not merely for practical reasons but because what we make of such music will be very different; different in ways defined by the culture of our times.

The kind of practical authenticity we have been discussing was something that Celibidache argued vigorously against because it involved interpretation of a score as opposed to responding to the music. Expressive playing, for example, is answerable to how one is struck by what one hears. One does not interpret sorrow in a performance, for example; one hears it. The music is significant in this way (in the same way as one does not interpret a picture of a rabbit to be such – we see that it is). To clarify what I mean, consider the following thoughts.

If I shout at you from across the room, the tempo and volume of my speech, and how I enunciate words will vary according to (how I respond to) the conditions such as acoustic, the timbre of my own voice, where my interlocutor is and so on. All these things (and many others) necessitate that I have to change my expression according to what I'm confronted with if I am to be understood properly. If I'm in trouble, for instance, my expression will also reflect that. If I'm just asking for a cup of tea, the conditions are different again and so on. These ways of behaving – their significance for us (our recognition of them as meaningful in particular ways) – form a background against which we judge future behaviour. Thus we a have a slowly evolving web of meaning.

In an orchestra, the acoustical relations, the quality of the players, and the particular different sounds of their instruments are among the many dimensions that provide the conditions for a particular response and is something the conductor needs to understand.

Part of the conductor's work here is to create the greatest number of musical possibilities with the resources available through understanding the different sounds instruments make. I do not just mean differences between strings and the French horn, for instance (although that, too, is important), but between strings of the same kind such as the violins. – Each instrument sounds different, and each player, by virtue of being different in themselves (impetuous, phlegmatic and so on), will respond in a unique way to the sound of their instrument and what is going on around them. This affects, for instance, how they use vibrato and so on, and determines (or, rather, creates) dimensions of the performance such as tempo.

To merely interpret, even if one makes some concessions for the orchestral sound, ignores what the musical landscape demands. Musical expression is nourished by developing sensitivity in response to the conditions one is faced with; this is interdependent with understanding the character of the music and what it can mean. Implicit in this development is coming to terms with the conditions both individually and collectively; this includes understanding how each individual player or singer deals with them. Moreover, an individual conductor's response to these things will, because of his nature, be different to another's. That is why concerts should not (and cannot properly) be made on one or two rehearsals.

Of course, there are different realisations of pieces of music. Different people will see different musical possibilities and our judgements of each of the performances they create will form a cultural

background that provides the criteria for evaluation of further performances, and so on.

So where is the relation between all this and beauty? I will offer one possible answer.

The web of meaning that is created by the ways in which we are disposed to respond to one another – sometimes with certainty, sometimes with uncertainty, sometimes with anger, fear, sadness and so on – is interdependent with our ability to recognise things. We recognise music not because it is, somehow, independent of us (as Plato believed) but, rather, because it is part of the hurly-burly of human behaviour against which we see any action. It is no accident that music theory came after the recognition of music – if we did not already recognise music when we listened to it, what would give us so much as an idea that the rules of harmonising a Bach chorale, for instance, pertained to music (were in any sense musical)? Similarly, we recognise a smile on a person's face – we do not infer its existence from a configuration of their facial muscles. If things were the other way round, what would give us so much as the idea that such a configuration of muscles amounted to a smile?

And, I would tentatively suggest, the same is true for beauty. Beauty is not something which has a metaphysical reality (again, as Plato believed). Rather, it is something that is answerable to what we recognise, and its sense and significance is manifest by the position it occupies within the web of meaning created by human interactions.

To discuss questions of beauty is not to discuss it from the outside, so to speak. It is, rather, to participate in a form of life of which beauty is an aspect. – That there is disagreement about what counts as beauty (that it is, as it were, "in the eye of the beholder") is also part and parcel of the form of life of which it is a part. We learn what kind of property 'beauty' is in being taught the use of the word. Our learning of the word is the beginning of assimilation into a form of life in which there are beautiful things, in which beauty is a significant (sometimes deeply significant) property of some objects and sounds.