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Music vs. Noise

As my old physics book so aptly put it, “The line that separates music and noise is thin and subjective. To some contemporary composers it is nonexistent.”¹ When we hear a car drive by, we would probably not say, “Oh, that sounds beautiful!”, or even think that it is music at all, but some people might find it very musical indeed. The way dissonant/atonal music affects people changes with the individual and with the amount of exposure that individual has had to the music. It takes an acquired taste.

For example, the first time I listened to Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, I cringed. Even now, some moments of it catch me off guard and I become filled with a sensation of disgust and anguish, which I think is because the composer wanted his audience to feel those sensations. Schoenberg’s *String Quartet No.2* leaves my stomach feeling similar to the way it just felt a little while ago when I ate some organic black currant candy (which I wouldn’t recommend). Although at the same time this kind of music gives me a sense of enjoyment that I wouldn’t get from listening to Mozart or other classical composers. The need for something different and refreshingly new is satisfied by listening to Schoenberg’s and Stravinsky’s avant-garde music. Their music is also interesting in the fact that it is extremely difficult to tell where it is going, as these composers tried to break away from the predictability of their predecessors. Music of the avant-garde certainly is not boring, but that depends on the opinion of the listener.

It is very difficult to find any meaning in atonal music and some people may think that there is no meaning at all or that it is simply too hard to understand and is therefore uninteresting,

¹ Hewitt, Paul G. *Conceptual Physics* Seventh Edition. HarperCollins College Publishers.

similar to my approach to calculus. It is hard to tell whether or not the composer is necessarily trying to convey a meaning. Perhaps the only thing that some composers like Schoenberg and Stravinsky really want to show is that the possibilities for music are much broader and complex than it was thought to be before their time.

For example, the strict limitations of the sacred music used in the Catholic Church, especially during the medieval period, were due in part to the need to fulfill a sense of peace and sanctuary while people prayed and meditated. Atonal music is not peaceful, even when played softly it still gives us a feeling that there is something wrong. Nature warns us when something bad or dangerous is about to occur not with serene consonance but with a cacophony of harsh and dissonant sounds. Our instinct is to try to get away from these sounds, even when they are presented to us in musical form. That is why *The Rite of Spring* is not something that we are born loving, but rather, if we try, we can come to enjoy by experiencing it over and over again.

Familiarizing ourselves with these unknown sounds can help us to enjoy them, or to at least appreciate their applications. The fact that music doesn't always have to be pleasant opens up many doors for composers to explore. For instance, film music often uses very dissonant sounds in the context of what is going on in a movie. If something mysterious or suspenseful is about to happen in a scene, the composer can help increase the effect by the use of dissonance, even sometimes verging on noise, but if this scene had consonant music to support it instead it would seem very out of place. The hideous sounds of the shrieking violins in the shower scene of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* make us jump each time the bows strike the strings. If this scene had no music, as Hitchcock originally intended, it would have been much less suspenseful, never mind the possibility of consonant music in the scene.

There are many uses for dissonant sounds in music, but what most people want and expect is for it all to resolve into consonance. These words from an article by Jonah Lehrer describe the problem with Stravinsky but also the very feature that sets him apart artistically, “Music is a form whose meaning depends on its violation. Stravinsky’s music is *all* violation.”² Which is to say that his music doesn’t resolve, and that is what frustrates many people who listen to it.

At its premiere in 1913, *The Rite of Spring* should not have been expected to please the audience. All that could have been hoped for was that no one would be killed! Its innovation was torture in the form of music and it brought the audience feelings that they had never experienced musically, most of them became outraged by the ‘noise’. When music expresses anger and contempt, you can expect an audience that has never been exposed to it to do the same. Audiences typically show appreciation for pieces of music written by composers who in turn appreciate their audiences through their music. Stravinsky wanted his audience to discover beauty in the unbeautiful, to look into his work and find a reason for listening to it. The audience simply wasn’t ready for a piece so challenging. What his audience didn’t realize was that these emotions of anguish and frustration were not new to art. They had been expressed by many writers including Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*. Why shouldn’t these emotions be expressed in music if they have already been expressed in other forms of art?

Stravinsky’s ingenuity has helped shape the music we hear today especially the music in movies, one of the most important and influential types of music that we have at present. When I now listen to *The Rite of Spring* I can hear many ideas and motives that film composers have taken and used in their own music.

² Lehrer, Jonah. *Proust was a neuroscientist*. Boston and New York: Mariner, 2008.

Dissonance compliments consonance in that it gives us a contrast. If all music were perfectly consonant it would become boring very quickly. It is the dissonant noises in music that give it character. Music is sound and noise is sound; neither of which needs to be enjoyable. Is noise music? Stravinsky himself argues that it's not, writing with referring to the phenomenon of music, "I shall take the most banal example: that of the pleasure we experience on hearing the murmur of the breeze in the trees, the rippling of a brook, the song of a bird. All this pleases us, diverts us, delights us. We may even say: "What lovely music!" Naturally, we are speaking only in terms of comparison. But then, comparison is not reason. These natural sounds suggest music to us, but are not yet themselves music. They are promises of music; it takes a human being who is sensitive to nature's many voices, of course, but who in addition feels the need of putting them in order and who is gifted for the task with a very special aptitude."³ His argument is that music can only be made by a human, but to me that is not the case as other creatures seem to be capable of creating music. His definition of music is quite different from the definition the people of western civilizations had over a millennia ago when monophony was all that was used and accepted. In a hundred years, people might very well consider all sounds to be music since the definition is relative and always changing.

There are people who consider *Rock*, *Rap*, and *Metal* to be noise and yet there are others who only like to listen to these styles of music. The difference between noise and music is definitely subjective, and that is something I think most people can agree on.

³ Stravinsky, Igor. *Poetics of Music*. Harvard University Press.

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1. Hewitt, Paul G. *Conceptual Physics* Seventh Edition. HarperCollins College Publishers.
2. Lehrer, Jonah. *Proust was a neuroscientist*. Boston and New York: Mariner, 2008.
3. Stravinsky, Igor. *Poetics of Music*. Harvard University Press.