

## Kant's "Theory of Music"

OLIVER THORNDIKE\*

Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, USA

### Abstract

One thing to expect from a theory of absolute music is that it explains what makes it so significant to us. Kant rightly observes that *the* essence of absolute music is our affective response to it. Yet none of the standard 18<sup>th</sup> century theories, arousal theory and aesthetic rationalism, can explain both the universality of a judgment of taste and its subjective emotional content. The paper argues that Kant's own aesthetic theory of aesthetic ideas is on the right path for explaining the emotive significance of music, but that Kant does not further pursue this route because his interest in a "theory of music" is only peripheral to his systematic interest as a transcendental philosopher. For both philosophical and historical reasons, Kant does not have a "theory of music." Nevertheless, if we free Kant's conception of aesthetic idea and its restriction to *Geist* from the background of its 18th century humanism, then Kant's aesthetics of free play becomes a good theory to account for the broad variety of emotions in absolute music as a fine art proper.

### Keywords

Kant, Hume, Hutcheson, absolute music, paradox of subjective universality, arousal theory, aesthetic rationalism, aesthetic ideas

---

\* Email: [othornd2@jh.edu](mailto:othornd2@jh.edu)

## Introduction

### Paradox of Subjective Universality

In his famous 1757 essay "Of the Standard of Taste," David Hume presents us with the following paradox of subjective universality: on the one hand, judgments of taste are based on feeling. Thus, they merely seem to express personal preferences molded by the contingencies of individual human existence. On the other hand, we treat aesthetic judgments as if they were a matter of impersonal cognitive judgment, and so we demand that others agree with us. We think that there is better and worse aesthetic taste, as we criticize and praise each other's tastes. Thus, there is a paradox of subjective universality. The question arises how we can make sense of *normative judgments* that are based on *sentiment*? Kant's 1790 *Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment* purports to present a solution to this problem.<sup>1</sup> Meeting the 18th century demand that aesthetic principles be formulated in such a way as to apply to all forms of art, Kant presents us with one principle underlying all aesthetic experience. Thus, we may test his theory by applying it to a specific case: music.

To make room for normatively binding aesthetic judgments in music, the 18<sup>th</sup> century literature presents two theories: first, the arousal theory of emotions, which holds that tones express human affects either by convention or nature; second, aesthetic rationalist theories that put the mathematical structure of tones at the center. Kant discusses and rejects both theories. The question is whether his own theory of aesthetic ideas and the free play of our cognitive faculties can explain the beauty of sound. This question will be answered in the negative. Nevertheless, I think that Kant is on the right path for explaining the emotive significance of music. This paper falls into five parts: Kant's discussion of (1) the arousal theory, (2) aesthetic rationalism, (3) Kant's own account of free play and aesthetic ideas, (4) discussion, and (5) key takeaways.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is divided into two parts: *Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment* and *Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgment*. All references to Kant's works are in accordance with the *Akademie-Edition* Vol. 1–29 of *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften (formerly: Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften), Berlin: Walter de Gruyter (1902–). References indicate an abbreviation of Kant's individual work, followed by volume and page number of the *Akademie-Edition*. A list of abbreviations can be found at the end of this essay. Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992–). For reflections on the problem of how a subjective feeling can be universally valid see already the 1769-note R630 (Refl 15:274). At Refl 15:89, 109, 805, Kant refers to Sancho and the delicacy of sense, hereby directly referring to a famous passage in Hume's essay. For Kant's mature description of "subjective universality" see KU §8; 5:214-216, KU §36; 5:288f.; for a broader response to the aesthetics of British empiricism see KU *General remark on the exposition of aesthetic reflective judgments*, 5:278. An analysis of Hume's and Kant's contrasting positions is attempted by Kulenkampff (1990, pp. 93–100). Cf. Gracyk (2020, p. 24); Guyer (2014, pp. 434-5).

## 1. The paradox of subjective universality

### **Subjectivity: Arousal theory of emotions. Feeling, sentiment, affect**

**1.1** In §53 of the *Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment*, Kant presents an 18th century theory on how music arouses emotions in the listener. The passage begins with the words “if what is at issue is charm and movement of the mind” [*Reiz und Bewegung des Gemüts*] then one notices that music moves the mind in manifold and deep ways. This charm of music, “which can be communicated so universally, *seems* to rest on the following”<sup>2</sup>: (1) every expression in language has a tone that is adequate to its sense; (2) this tone designates an affect of the speaker; (3) music imitates the intonation of the human voice; (4) hereby arouses the passion that is commonly associated with it in the hearer; (5) music is thus a “language of the affects.”<sup>3</sup>

The first thesis for which I would like to argue is that Kant does not endorse this theory because it does not account for the universality of a judgment of taste. Why is this so? The arousal theory suggests that music alone –even though it is non-representational– has content after all, namely content that is derived from something external to the music, i.e., the modulation of speech, and that it is in virtue of this association between tone and affect that we can generally communicate about the emotive content of music. Kant concedes that it “seems” that the emotions that music arouses are thus felt universally. However, he is very clear on the point that we cannot make a legitimate claim to their universality after all, because they are derived from empirical association: music “speaks through mere sensations without concepts” [*Empfindungen ohne Begriffe*], does not “leave behind something for reflection,” is thus “more enjoyment than culture,” and the emotions it arouses are the product of “mechanical association.”<sup>4</sup> Kant discusses the arousal theory of music in terms of charm and movement of mind, which for Kant are non-universalizable empirical aspects of art, opposed to the *free* pleasure of *beauty* that is the product of a judgment of *reflection*.

One must not seek the pleasure in music in reflection.<sup>5</sup>

There is also a manifold of sensation and charm in music. Every tone is similar to certain expressions of the passions. Perhaps the pleasure in music arises from the similarity between the tone and the sensations that one likes to remember.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> KU §53, 5:328, my emphasis. “*der Reiz derselben, der sich so allgemein mitteilen last, scheint darauf zu beruhen...*”

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> KU §53, 5:328.

<sup>5</sup> “*Man darf das Wohlgefallen an der Music nicht in der Ueberlegung des Gemüths suchen.*” (VP 29:149, my translation; cf. §54, KU 5:330ff.)

<sup>6</sup> “*Jedoch ist in ihr ... eine Menge von Empfindungen und Reiz. Jeder Ton ist gewissen Ausdrücken der Leidenschafften ähnlich. Vielleicht entspringt das Vergnügen bey der Musik aus der Aehnlichkeit die die Töne mit Empfindungen haben, an die man sich gerne erinnert.*” (VL 24:358, my translation).

In these passages, just as in KU §53, Kant points to the manifold sensations and charm that are essential to our enjoyment of music. Kant labels this enjoyment "pleasure of sensation" [*reizt nur die Empfindung*], which his own aesthetic theory opposes to "pleasure of reflection" (i.e., the basis of a proper aesthetic judgment). "Charm" [*Reiz*] is a technical term for Kant. It denotes a relationship to subjective sensation. It is thus not surprising that Kant uses the phrases "mechanical association" and "law of association" in his discussion of music. For Kant, the arousal theory is an empirical theory based on association.

1.2 Even though the arousal theory is a widely held view in 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophy (various variants are discussed for example by Rousseau, Du Bos, Mendelssohn),<sup>7</sup> I like to suggest that Kant's summary of the arousal theory in KU §53 might come directly from Hutcheson's 1726 *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*. Since, to my knowledge, this connection has not yet been made in the literature, let me point out some key aspects of Hutcheson's theory of music to flesh out Hutcheson's significance for interpreting Kant.<sup>8</sup>

Hutcheson cites the contingent association of ideas as laying at the basis of many aesthetic disagreements. Thus, he says that "there is also another charm [*Reiz*] in music to various persons, which is distinct from the harmony, and is occasioned by its raising agreeable passions."<sup>9</sup> Let me explain.

On the one hand, pleasure of *harmony* is based on our inner beauty sense insofar as "the form itself" of music, its harmony, can be expressed mathematically.<sup>10</sup> Hutcheson's internal beauty sense is just as natural as the external sense of hearing. It is "antecedent to custom, habit, education, or prospect of interest."<sup>11</sup> "There is as necessary a perception of beauty upon the presence of regular objects, as of harmony upon hearing certain sounds."<sup>12</sup> So, harmony is the proper cause of aesthetic pleasure, because it alone can be asserted universally. Therefore, Hutcheson subsumes harmony under what he calls original or absolute beauty. Aesthetic disagreement is not possible here. Note that establishing the universality of taste is important for Hutcheson because he intends his theory of the sense of beauty to prepare the way for his theory of the universality of the moral sense.

However, there is also pleasure in music that is not derived from this universally communicable basis, but is rather based on contingent associations, which give rise to *agreeable passions*. It is this kind of pleasure that is based on contingent associations that

<sup>7</sup> See Le Huray and Day (1981). On this point see also Young (2020, p. 173).

<sup>8</sup> Hutcheson's significance for Kant's moral philosophy has already been pointed out by Henrich (1957/58, pp. 49-69). Other authors have noticed similarities between Hutcheson's and Kant's aesthetic terminological distinctions, without further pursuing the relationship. See for example, Allison (2001, p. 394n58). I am here offering Hutcheson's importance for understanding Kant as a proposal.

<sup>9</sup> References to *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* will be given in the following form: Treatise, Section, Paragraph. Hutcheson (2008, 1.6.12). Cf. Hutcheson (2008, 1.6.3).

<sup>10</sup> Hutcheson (2008, 1.2.13).

<sup>11</sup> Hutcheson (2008, 1.6.8).

<sup>12</sup> Hutcheson (2008, 1.6.9).

gives rise to aesthetic disagreement. And now follows Hutcheson's version of the arousal theory of emotions:

The human voice is obviously varied by all the stronger passions; now when our ear discerns any resemblance between the air of a tune, whether sung or played upon an instrument, either in its time, or modulation ... to the sound of a human voice in any passion, we shall be touched by it in a very sensible manner and have melancholy, joy, gravity, thoughtfulness excited in us by a sort of sympathy or contagion. The same connection is observable between the very air of a tune, and the words expressing any passion which we have heard it fitted to, so that they shall both recur to us together, though but one of them affects our senses.<sup>13</sup>

For Hutcheson, the emotions of melancholy, joy, gravity, etc. that we associate with music are not based on our universal beauty sense. They are *not* independent of antecedent custom, habit, or education. Quite to the contrary, they presuppose these contingent associations. It is thus no wonder that people disagree about "beauty," despite the fact that they have a uniform sense of beauty and harmony: based on individual tempers, circumstances, and experiences people associate a broad variety of pleasing or displeasing ideas with various tunes.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, Hutcheson subsumes the arousal theory of emotions not under absolute beauty (beauty proper, or to use Kant's language: a pure judgment of taste), but rather under "relative or comparative beauty." So, Hutcheson notices the great variety in judgments of taste, and explains these via a person's contingent association of ideas. We think we make absolute judgments of taste, whereas in fact our judgments are relative:

And this may help us in many cases to account for the diversity in fancy, without denying the uniformity of our internal sense of beauty.<sup>15</sup>

Kant almost literally repeats this point at the end of §16 of his *Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment*:

By means of this distinction one can settle many disputes about beauty between judges of taste, by showing them that one is concerned with free beauty, the other with adherent beauty.<sup>16</sup>

Now, a case in point for relative beauty are the emotions aroused by music. Hutcheson sees expression of feelings in music as based on passed associations. Even though Hutcheson devotes much of his discussion of musical beauty to objective criteria (unity, form and proportion are discussed under "harmony," i.e., *absolute* beauty), he declares judgments of taste based on association as *relative*. I cite again: "there is another *charm* in music to various persons, which is distinct from the harmony, which is occasioned by its raising

---

<sup>13</sup> Hutcheson (2008, 1.6.12). Cf. Kant's phrase "mechanical association."

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> KU §16, 5:231.

agreeable passions." Compare this to Kant again:

It is the proportion in music that makes it beautiful. ... However, there is also a manifold of sensation and charm in music. Every tone is similar to certain expressions of the passions. Perhaps the pleasure in music arises from the similarity between the tone and the sensations that one likes to remember.<sup>17</sup>

The parallels between Hutcheson's and Kant's discussion of the arousal theory are striking.

In summary, we may thus say that Kant does not support the arousal theory of emotions because it does not explain the universality of pure judgments of taste. It merely explains the subjective preference of listeners, as affects are based on contingent associations. Kant's choice of language:

- "charm" as opposed to "beauty",
- "mechanical association" as opposed to "free delight",
- "enjoyment" as opposed to "culture"

clearly indicate Kant's rejection of the arousal theory as a proper foundation for the normativity of aesthetic judgments regarding music. In addition, I have pointed out that Kant's discussion of the arousal theory of music in §53 seems to mirror the views of the inner-sense theorist Hutcheson, who likewise rejects the arousal theory as a proper basis for aesthetic judgments.

Having dealt with the arousal theory, Kant continues his train of thought in §53 by following the standard framework of 18<sup>th</sup> century theories of music, as he discusses the mathematical proportions of music as the sole foundation of the universality of the judgment of taste next. It is just one paragraph (!), in which Kant deals with both theories in one sweep. Here is Hutcheson's version of it:

1. Relative or comparative beauty: based on contingent association. Not universally valid. Example: melodies and their association with moods and passions.
2. Absolute or original beauty: based on internal beauty sense. Universally valid. Example: harmony as expressible in mathematical terms.

Similarly, Kant declares the affects aroused by music to be charming, moving, and entertaining, but he does not consider them to be a proper basis for accounting for the universality of judgments of taste in music in virtue of the contingency of their arousal. The proximity of Kant's position to Hutcheson's distinction between relative and absolute beauty seems to me to be further evidence that Kant does not endorse the arousal theory.

But how about the harmonious form of music as expressible in mathematical terms? Why does this theory fall short of explaining the significance of absolute music?

---

<sup>17</sup> VL 24:357-8, my translation.

## 2. The paradox of subjective universality

### **Universality: Formalism, aesthetic rationalism**

2.1 Since the universality of a judgment of taste cannot be based on the “charm” (*Reiz*) of music, it now seems that *reflection* on the mathematical form of air vibration that constitutes a tone elevates the charming sensation to a judgment of beauty. Kant says:

On this mathematical form... alone depends the satisfaction that the mere reflection connects with this play of [sensations] as a condition of its beauty valid for everyone; and it is in accordance with it alone that taste may claim for itself a right to pronounce beforehand about the judgment of everyone.<sup>18</sup>

The second thesis for which I would like to argue is that this theory cannot explain the emotional content of music. Not much argument is needed to establish this second thesis, because Kant explicitly tells us so. Immediately after the passage just quoted, Kant continues as follows:

However, mathematics certainly has not the least share in the charm and the movement of the mind that music produces; rather, it is only the indispensable condition ... of that proportion of the impressions ... by means of which it becomes possible to grasp them together.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, there is no connection between the mathematico-relational structures in music and the subjective-affective pleasure we take in listening to music.

2.2 Theories dealing with the mathematico-relational structure of music can be found, for example, in Leibniz, Wolff, Baumgarten, Euler, Hutcheson (under original beauty), as well as the textbook authors of Kant’s physics lectures, Karstens and Erxleben.<sup>20</sup> For Leibniz, for example, aesthetic pleasure in music derives from the perception of its harmonious structure, i.e., its unity-in-variety.<sup>21</sup> However, Kant is not an aesthetic rationalist, as he rejects the classic trinity of the unity of truth, goodness, and beauty, and argues for the autonomy of taste. Yet, he has its own transcendental version of the significance of the mathematical structure of music, the general upshot of which is the following: beautiful forms are those forms of objects that are purposive for an effortless apprehension through our cognitive faculties. In this way, the possibility of the universal value of aesthetic judgments is explained through the form of human cognition:

---

<sup>18</sup> KU §53, 5:329. “An dieser mathematischen Form ... hängt allein das Wohlgefallen, welches die blosse Reflexion über eine solche Menge einander begleitender oder folgender Empfindungen mit diesem Spiele derselben als für jedermann gültige Bedingung seiner Schönheit verknüpft...sie ist es allein, nach welcher der Geschmack sich ein Recht über das Urteil von jedermann zum voraus auszusprechen anmassen darf.”

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. “Aber an dem Reize und der Gemütsbewegung, welche die Musik hervorbringt, hat die Mathematik sicherlich nicht den mindesten Anteil; sondern sie ist nur die unumgängliche Bedingung derjenigen Proportion der Eindrücke ... wodurch es möglich wird, sie zusammenzufassen.”

<sup>20</sup> Kant mentions the mathematico-relational structure of music in various places, e.g., VT 8:392; VL 29:149; VAnth 25:198, 276; for Euler see KU §14, 5:225; VL 24:353.

<sup>21</sup> For an excellent account of Leibniz’ aesthetic rationalism see Beiser (2010, pp. 36ff).

A large object such as a building pleases when it is symmetric, because this facilitates the intuition of the building. The accords in music please because of the simple relations of the tones. Octave is 1:2, fifth 1:3. Euler. ... Thus, there are certain laws of sensibility with respect to its form. ... However, the charm must be completely separated from this.<sup>22</sup>

Whatever facilitates [*erleichtert*] ... sensory intuition, pleases us according to objective laws that hold for everybody.<sup>23</sup>

Beauty consists in the agreement of the form –appearance– with the laws of sensibility. Order. Unity.<sup>24</sup>

In these passages, the standard of beauty consists in an effortless apprehension of a sensible manifold. The feeling of aesthetic pleasure is rooted in “laws of sensibility” which we experience in proportional and symmetrical forms. What lies at the foundation of our beauty sensation is not the affect anymore that music arouses in the listener due to its analogy with modulation of the human voice, i.e., something outside of music itself (arousal theory). Rather, it is the form of sound itself that lies at the basis of the feeling of pleasure for which we assert universal validity in a judgment of taste: certain mathematico-relational structures in music (octave, fifth, etc.) facilitate sensible representation, they are in *harmonia* with the human forms of intuition, and since the forms of intuition hold for all human beings, we can expect that the accompanying feeling of pleasure in music will also hold for all human beings and is thus universally communicable.

The problem with this position is the following: Yes, the feeling of pleasure thus conceived is universally communicable, but what does it have to do with the affects and *Gemütsbewegungen* that music produces? Answer: Nothing. I cite again: “Mathematics certainly has not the least share in the charm and the movement of the mind that music produces; rather, it is only the indispensable condition ... of that proportion of the impressions ... by means of which it becomes possible to grasp them together.”<sup>25</sup> So, where does this leave us?

The two positions outlined so far (arousal theory, formalism) do not resolve the paradox of subjective universality with respect to music.

(1) *Arousal theory lacks universality.* Kant views the arousal theory throughout in an empirical context. Thus, Kant discusses the bodily effects of music on digestion and health

---

<sup>22</sup> VL 24:353, my translation. “*Ein grosser Gegenstand als ein Gebäude gefällt wenn Symmetrie darinn angebracht ist; sie erleichtert den Anblick des Gebäudes. Die Accorde in der Musik gefallen wegen des leichten Verhältnisses das zwischen ihren Tönen ist. Die Octave wie 1 zu 2, die Octave zur Quinte wie 1 zu 3. vid. Eulerum p.16. ... Es giebt also gewisse gemeine Gesetze der Sinnlichkeit in Ansehung der Form. ... Allein es muß der Reiz ganz abgesondert werden.*”

<sup>23</sup> VAnth 25:378, my translation. Cf. VAnth 25:390; Refl 15:274, 276.

<sup>24</sup> Refl 16:117, my translation. Cf. VAnth 25:198.

<sup>25</sup> KU §53, 5:329. Cf. Guyer (2014, pp. 436f). Ravasio (2021) points out that Herder takes a similarly skeptical position with regard to the role of mathematical explanations in musical aesthetics, due to their failure to explain our first-person emotional responses.



together with *jest*.<sup>26</sup> In this empirical context, music always belongs to what is agreeable (*angenehm*) or charming (*reizend*), but not to what is beautiful (*schön*). The agreeableness of music insofar as it is based on sensation lacks universality. The distinction between charm and beauty is rooted in Kant's distinction between form and matter, which in turn is central to his transcendental philosophy.<sup>27</sup> For example, KU §14 and §39 argue at length that the *matter* produces the *charm*, but only *form* produces *beauty*.<sup>28</sup> For Kant, charm, agreeableness, or emotive connotations of a tone cannot be tied to the *forms* of intuition, and thus emotive responses become part of the *matter* of sensation and fall outside the territory of beauty. Charm and beauty are opposed to each other. The former belongs to the taste of the senses (*Sinnengeschmack*) which only holds for individuals (*Privaturteil*). The latter belongs to the taste of reflection (*Reflexionsgeschmack*) and demands universal agreement.<sup>29</sup> Nowhere does Kant say that the charming affect of music (*Gemütsbewegung*) could be derived from the form. Just consider the title of §13: "The pure judgment of taste is independent from charm and emotion."<sup>30</sup> The arousal theory of emotions and the mathematico-relational formalism are exclusive alternatives for Kant; they are not complementary despite the efforts of Kant's interpreters to connect both theories.

For Kant, we must not confuse "material aesthetic judgments" (which are "judgments of sense" and deal with "charm or emotion") with "proper judgments of taste" (which are judgments of "reflection" and deal with "beauty").<sup>31</sup> The mere tone of a violin, Kant says, is beautiful only as regards its mathematico-relational form, but not as regards the subjective "quality of the sensations" the tones produce in the listener: "because the quality of the sensations themselves cannot be assumed to be in accord in all subjects, and it cannot be assumed that the agreeableness of one color in preference to another or of the tone of one musical instrument in preference to another will be judged in the same way by everyone."<sup>32</sup> So, for Kant, there is no connection between the arousal of emotions through music and its mathematico-relational form. If the arousal of emotions is seen as lying at the basis of our pleasure in music, then music belongs to the class of the agreeable arts, Kant says. It lacks universality.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>26</sup> KU §54, 5:332.

<sup>27</sup> See for example KU §39, 5:294; Refl 15:268.

<sup>28</sup> KU §14, 5:223ff.; §39, 293.

<sup>29</sup> KU §8, 5:214.

<sup>30</sup> KU §13, 5:223. "A judgment of taste on which charm and emotion have no influence ... which thus has for its determining ground merely the purposiveness of the form, is a pure judgment of taste." (Ibid.)

<sup>31</sup> KU §14, 5:224-5. Cf. VAnth 25:178, 184.

<sup>32</sup> KU §14, 5:224. Cf. KU §7, 5:212; Anth 7:155.

<sup>33</sup> KU §51, 5:325.

The same holds for "the changing shapes of a fire in a hearth or of a rippling brook, neither of which are beauties, but both of them carry with them a charm for the imagination, because they sustain its free play." (KU *General remark on the first section of the Analytic*, 5:243-4) Music, fire in a hearth, rippling brook, and "beautiful views" (sic!) are always mentioned together by Kant as examples of improper objects for aesthetic judgments. They move us for the wrong reasons, as it were. For Kant, these produce transitory feelings that are classified as "charming" but not "beautiful." Cf. Refl 15:76, 137-8, 861; VAnth 25:184, 753; Anth 7:173f.; VL 24:360.

(2) *Formalism lacks subjectivity.* In §51, Kant leaves it undecided whether music should be “defined” as an agreeable or beautiful art.<sup>34</sup> Kant says that if the mathematico-relational structure of music is seen as lying at the basis of our pleasure in music, then music would belong to the class of the beautiful arts. But note: “aesthetic pleasure proper,” which is the product of judgment that reflects on the formal unity of a sensible manifold, is not identical with the emotive content of music, i.e., its charm and *Gemütsbewegung*. When Kant says, following Euler, that he does not doubt that a single tone is beautiful because “through reflection” we perceive the mathematical order of the impressions,<sup>35</sup> he is referring to the form of a tone, which has nothing to do with the emotive content of music: melancholy, joy, anger, cheerfulness, resignation, i.e., the whole range of emotive human life that we encounter in music. The intellectual pleasure in a tone insofar as it is reduced to the physical structure of its harmonious vibrations is independent of the affective emotional content of music. It lacks precisely that sort of subjectivity that according to Kant and common-sense matters most in music, namely, our various emotive responses, which are perceived as a *constitutive* part of our experience of musical beauty. As Kant points out: Above all, music contains sensation and charm [*Empfindung und Reiz*].<sup>36</sup>

Putting the point into a historical perspective: When Kant speaks of “music” in the context of Euler, he is speaking about music theory as a branch of the canonical seven liberal arts. “Music” as a *liberal* art goes back to antiquity and is a branch of theoretical knowledge originating with the Pythagorean discovery of numerical proportions underlying musical intervals.<sup>37</sup> The liberal arts represent what in the humanistic tradition a good student should learn to count as educated. However, music considered as a *liberal* art is quite different from the experience and performance of music, i.e., music as one of the five *fine* arts.<sup>38</sup>

(3) Neither arousal theory nor formalism provides an answer to the problem of subjective universality with respect to music. One theory gives us subjectivity, the other universality. On both standard 18<sup>th</sup> century theories, the broad variety of affective sensations that we associate with music is only *contingently* connected with music. I suggest that Kant’s remarks on the two standard theories should be distinguished from his properly philosophical argument in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Critique: free play and aesthetic ideas.

<sup>34</sup> KU §51, 5:325. Compare KU §51, 5:325 in opposition to KU §14, 5:224.

<sup>35</sup> KU §14, 5:224.

<sup>36</sup> VL 24:358. “Nothing enlivens the senses more than music.” [*Nun ist nichts die Sinne belebender als die Musik.*] (VT 8:392, my translation) Cf. VAnth 25:1136. Note that earlier in the century Batteaux had just canonized for the first time the five fine arts in his famous and influential treatise, *The fine arts reduced to a single principle* (1746): music, poetry, painting, sculpture, and dance. Kant’s dismissive position on music as mere enjoyment is repeated with respect to dance. Cf. Anth 7:277, 316; VAnth 25:999f.; KU §14, 5:225.

<sup>37</sup> See for example VP 29:148f.

<sup>38</sup> On this point, see also Ravasio (2021).

### 3. Kant's solution: Free Play of the Faculties / Aesthetic Ideas

Kant's aesthetic of free play of the faculties and aesthetic ideas is meant to resolve the paradox of subjective universality. The third thesis of this paper is that this theory of free play cannot explain the beauty of music. Why is this so?

Kant's properly philosophical argument for addressing the paradox of subjective universality is the theory that aesthetic experience is a product of the pleasurable free play of our mental powers.

By contrast, the pleasure in the beautiful is neither a pleasure of enjoyment, nor of a lawful activity ... but of mere reflection. ... This pleasure accompanies the common apprehension of an object by the imagination, as a faculty of intuition, in relation to the understanding, as a faculty of concepts, by means of a procedure of the power of judgment. ... This pleasure must necessarily rest on the same conditions in everyone, since they are subjective conditions of the possibility of a cognition in general ... that one may presuppose in everyone. For this very reason, one who judges with taste (as long as he does not err in this consciousness, and does not take the matter for the form, the charm for beauty) may also require ... his satisfaction in the object of everyone else, [i.e.,] may assume his feeling to be universally communicable.<sup>39</sup>

Kant argues that it is only in virtue of such a free play of the faculties that we can demand universal assent regarding our aesthetic feeling of pleasure, because the aesthetic feeling such conceived is natural to all human beings, as opposed to other emotions that are merely contingently connected to our experience. Let us grant Kant this "transcendental" foundation of aesthetic pleasure, and ask one more question: what initiates the free play? Answer: What initiates the free play of the faculties of cognition, in virtue of which aesthetic pleasure in beauty is *defined*, are aesthetic ideas:

Beauty (*whether it be beauty of nature or of art*) can in general be called the exhibition of aesthetic ideas.<sup>40</sup>

Here is one of Kant's examples illustrating what it means to say that the free play of the faculties with respect to fine art *essentially* involves the exhibition of aesthetic ideas:

A certain poet says in the description of a beautiful morning: "The sun streamed forth, as tranquility streams from virtue." The consciousness of virtue, when one puts oneself, even if only in thought in the place of a virtuous person, spreads in the mind a multitude of sublime and calming feelings, and a boundless prospect into a happy future, which no expression that is adequate to a determinate concept fully captures. In a word, the aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination, *associated with a given concept*, which is combined with such a manifold of partial representations in the free use of the imagination

---

<sup>39</sup> KU §39, 5:292-3. Cf. KU §35, 5:287; §40, 296.

<sup>40</sup> KU §51, 5:320, my emphasis. Cf. KU §9, 5:219.

that no expression designating a determinate concept can be found for it, which therefore allows the addition to a concept of much that is unnameable, the feeling of which animates the cognitive faculties.<sup>41</sup>

Here Kant says that the feeling of aesthetic pleasure promoted by fine art requires that imagination play with a *concept*. Kant's example is very clear: the enlivening experience of aesthetic pleasure—which is constitutive of beauty—has its roots in the contemplation of aesthetic ideas. What is an aesthetic idea? Using Kant's technical language, the essence of an aesthetic idea is that it makes sensible a *rational* idea that surpasses experience or makes intuitive an *idealized* object of experience.<sup>42</sup> Avoiding Kant's technical language, we could say that an aesthetic idea makes intuitive those topics to which a person embracing 18<sup>th</sup> century humanism would attribute objective value, i.e., topics regarding human existence that every human can be assumed to have an interest in.<sup>43</sup> Kant's examples include virtue, the supersensible, love and death, which are presented by the artist to an audience in such a way that they 'occasion much thinking' and 'arouse a multitude of sensations and supplementary representations for which no expression is found,' i.e., occasion a free play of imagination and understanding.<sup>44</sup>

The problem is that music alone has no conceptual content whatsoever, and thus, for Kant, it leaves nothing to reflect on: music speaks through mere sensations *without concepts* ("durch lauter Empfindungen ohne Begriffe"), Kant says. Whereas poetry moves from determinate ideas to sensation, and thus always leaves a determinate idea behind, music is transitory,<sup>45</sup> it does not "leave behind something for reflection."<sup>46</sup> Thus music is more enjoyment (*Genuss*) than culture. It lacks *Geist*, i.e., those serious and profound ideas regarding human existence that Kant considers to be the essence of aesthetic ideas.<sup>47</sup> True, music "moves the mind in more manifold and, though only temporarily, in deeper ways."<sup>48</sup> But the foundation of these affects (*Gemüthsbewegungen*) is not the free play of the faculties enlivened by aesthetic ideas, –for, there are none in music alone. Rather, the affective content of music is the product of mere mechanical association (as opposed to free association). Because of its lack of *Geist*, music, like all enjoyment (*Genuss*), requires

<sup>41</sup> KU §49, 5:316, my emphasis; cf. 5:313-5.

<sup>42</sup> KU §49, 5:314.

<sup>43</sup> Accordingly, Kant says in a note: "There are no *a priori* reasons to justify taste, but there is only universal agreement in an era that judges in accordance with reason." [*Man hat keine Gründe a priori, einen Geschmack zu rechtfertigen, sondern nur die allgemeine Einstimmung in einem Zeitalter der Vernünftigen Beurtheilung.*] (Refl 15:270, my translation)

<sup>44</sup> KU §49, 5:313-316.

<sup>45</sup> KU §53, 5:328, 330.

<sup>46</sup> KU §53, 5:328. Cf. "Poets also speak to the understanding, but musicians speak only to the senses." (Anth 7:247) "Music cannot evoke ideas...it is merely a play of sensations." (VAnth 25:999, my translation)

<sup>47</sup> "The principle of the mind that animates by means of *ideas* is called spirit [*Geist*]." (Anth 7:246) Cf. Anth 7:225; VAnth 25:1060.

<sup>48</sup> KU §53, 5:328.

frequent change and cannot bear frequent repetition without producing antipathy, Kant concludes.<sup>49</sup>

This means that music does not fit into Kant's theory of beauty with respect to the fine arts, because it does not sustain a free play of the faculties.<sup>50</sup> Free play of the faculties presupposes the exhibition of aesthetic ideas,<sup>51</sup> and this requires that imagination play with a *concept*. Such a concept is not provided by music, because, unlike a poem or painting, it is non-representational. A "fine art" that does not exhibit aesthetic ideas, cannot give rise to a chain of representations "of the imagination that occasions much thinking,"<sup>52</sup> cannot engage the free play of the faculties, and thus cannot be experienced as aesthetically beautiful. Hence, considered as a fine art, the only spot left for music within Kant's taxonomy is that of an agreeable, not beautiful, art. Kant's theory of free play of the faculties and aesthetic ideas might work for poetry and other representational forms of art but not for music.<sup>53</sup>

#### 4. Discussion

**4.1 A note on interpreting Kant.** Some Kant scholars have tried to unite Kant's notes on the arousal theory, formalism, and aesthetic ideas into one coherent theory. Mohr, for example, writes:

Music as a beautiful art is a mathematical form of affects expressing an aesthetic idea.<sup>54</sup>

In this paper I have argued that (1) for Kant, there is no connection between affect (arousal theory of emotions) and the mathematical form of air vibration (aesthetic rationalism), and (2) both arousal theory of emotion and formalism are independent of Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas. Whether it is desirable or not to unite all three theories is a legitimate philosophical question that Kant did not ask, and need not ask, because his aesthetics of free play transforms the problem of aesthetics: both arousal theory and aesthetic rationalism work within a framework that considers art as imitation of nature (*mimesis*). Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas and free play breaks with this framework. Imagination becomes central in art, as an audience reflects on aesthetic ideas. From a historiographical point of view, it is important to point out that Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas stands on its own, because it is here that Kant makes an original contribution to otherwise standard 18<sup>th</sup> century positions: aesthetic pleasure is the product of the open-ended reflection of an audience. This insight (with its transcendental foundation) is original and not contained in

---

<sup>49</sup> Note that, for Kant, music may become beautiful when it ceases to be absolute music, i.e., when it becomes the vehicle of poetry: "For music is a *beautiful* (not merely pleasant [*angenehme*]) *art* only because it serves poetry as a vehicle." (Anth 7:247)

<sup>50</sup> KU §53, 5:329-30.

<sup>51</sup> KU §49, 5:313-4.

<sup>52</sup> KU §49, 5:314.

<sup>53</sup> Kulenkampff (1987, p. 151) comes to the same conclusion.

<sup>54</sup> Mohr (2010, p. 16). See Matherne (2014) for a similar position.

either arousal theory or aesthetic rationalism, and it opens the door to make the entire spectrum of inner emotive life the topic of absolute music (although Kant does not go this path).

**4.2** *If open-ended reflection is the basis of aesthetic pleasure, why exclude music alone from beauty proper?* Kant thought that music leaves nothing to think about, it is a non-propositional, non-representative form of art. It lacks spirit. Well, but a flower or the song of a bird likewise lacks semantic content,<sup>55</sup> and yet beauty of nature is *the* starting point for Kant's aesthetic theory. In §16, Kant explicitly compares the beauty of music with the beauty of flowers, birds, marine crustaceans, and designs á la grecque [on] foliage for borders or on wallpaper," all of which represent nothing, and yet please by themselves, and are thus labeled "free beauties." So, why exclude music from beauty proper?

The answer to this question has to do with the overall motivation to write the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*: what makes the fact of beauty in nature so central for Kant is that it shows that nature itself is purposively organized for human cognition and moral agency. Natural beauty in its self-sufficiency [*selbständige Naturschönheit*]<sup>56</sup> points to the indeterminate concept of an intelligible substratum underlying the world and ourselves;<sup>57</sup> it reveals a "technique of nature" in "analogy with art" that surpasses nature "in its purposeless mechanism."<sup>58</sup> For Kant, it is always the same cluster of ideas expressed by the beauties of nature, namely, that nature is designed for us: "natural beauty (being self-sufficient) carries with it a purposiveness in its form, through which the object seems as it were to be predetermined for our power of judgment, and *thus* constitutes an object of satisfaction in itself."<sup>59</sup> Even though music, abstract designs, and beauties of nature equally lack semantic content, only natural beauty gives occasion for reflective judgment to ponder the idea that nature itself is purposively designed for our cognitive faculties. It is this *a priori* principle of *purposiveness* that justifies the inclusion of "aesthetics" into the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, as Kant outlines in the two Introductions to this work. The principle of purposiveness of reflective judgment is a piece of Kantian metaphysics mainly motivated by the systematic need to unify the realms of nature and freedom, on the one hand, and the thought of the systematic unity of diverse empirical laws, which Kant's epistemology outlined in the *Critique of Pure Reason* could not guarantee, on the other hand.<sup>60</sup> In other words, the "free beauty" of music is only at the periphery of Kant's interest as a transcendental philosopher, whereas the free beauty of nature lies at its very center. In fairness to Kant, we should not forget that Kant does *not* look at music through the lens of someone genuinely interested in music. For that to be possible, he lacked broad

<sup>55</sup> KU *General remark on the first section of the Analytic*, 5:243.

<sup>56</sup> KU §23, 5:246.

<sup>57</sup> See Kant's section on the antinomy of taste: KU §57, 5:341.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> KU §23, 5:245, my emphasis. Cf. KU *Remark* after §38, 5:291.

<sup>60</sup> See Thorndike (2018, pp. 31-111).

access to classical music,<sup>61</sup> such that he predominantly talks of music as *Tafelmusik*, i.e., music accompanying dinner, but not as the kind of music of the concert hall.<sup>62</sup>

Kant's interest as a transcendental philosopher and his limited knowledge of absolute music as fine art makes it understandable why he does not further pursue the parallel between free natural beauty and music alone. So, let us pursue this parallel further: *Unlike* natural beauty, music is an intentional product of human beings. Therefore, it lacks the idea of independent design, and thus cannot exhibit the set of aesthetic ideas that the transcendental philosopher is most interested in. This fate music shares with all other fine arts. However, *like* natural beauty, fine art may bring about the free play of our cognitive faculties, if it is expressive of aesthetic ideas. In both cases, a historically situated audience engages in an open-ended reflection on aesthetic ideas. This might include –as it does for the transcendental philosopher Immanuel Kant– open-ended reflection on the universal forms of space and time as universal forms of human intuition underlying the mathematical structure of music, or beauty as the symbol of morality,<sup>63</sup> or the purposiveness of nature itself for our power of judgment.<sup>64</sup> My point is that both artistic and natural beauty require form and content to set the imagination and understanding into a genuinely free play. To say that aesthetic ideas are the mark of the beautiful in both nature and art, as Kant does,<sup>65</sup> means to say that both natural beauty and fine art always need to be interpreted by an audience. The exhibition of an aesthetic idea in a manifold of related representations is nothing that would be already either in a work of art or nature. Rather, it is the result of the active listener's imaginative encounter with an object that she judges beautiful. From this point of view, it does not matter whether we contemplate beauty of nature or music alone, because the experience of beauty always involves personal and cultural background contingencies. So why insist so vehemently on the exclusion of emotive content from music? Paul Guyer rightly points out:

Although the ideas of reason that are the core of the “aesthetic ideas” that according to Kant give works of fine art their spirit are precisely the kinds of ideas that might be thought to stir our deepest emotions, Kant went to great lengths to exclude all “charm and emotion” from aesthetic experience.<sup>66</sup>

His view that fine art has “spirit” only when it deals with the highest ideas of reason and otherwise quickly becomes dull and distasteful shows that he was far from advocating the autonomy of *fine art*.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> See Vorländer (2004, p. 389).

<sup>62</sup> See Kivy (1993, p. 259).

<sup>63</sup> KU §42, 5:298ff.

<sup>64</sup> KU §38 and following Remark, 5:289ff.

<sup>65</sup> KU §49, 5:314; §51, 5:320.

<sup>66</sup> Guyer (2014, p. 307).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

To which I would add: The reason for this position lies in the fact that Kant's conception of "aesthetic idea" and its restriction to "*Geist*" stands in the tradition of 18<sup>th</sup> century humanism in general, and transcendental idealism in particular. For example, Kant sees immediacy, disinterest, freedom, and universality as analogous features of aesthetics and morality.<sup>68</sup> For Kant, these are not contingent assumptions. Kant would reject the suggestion that the analogy between beauty and morality is dependent on cultural background contingencies of 18<sup>th</sup> century humanism. For Kant, transcendental idealism is not a contingent standpoint to take after all. –However, it is a contingent standpoint for us to take today. We do not necessarily share Kant's position on immediacy and universality regarding morality, and accordingly we also do not look for it in aesthetics.

If we focus on Kant's idea of aesthetic ideas and go beyond Kant by freeing his theory from its historical embeddedness, then we could develop the following train of thought: Music alone is obviously less suggestive of concepts than a poem. But what if I just preface a piece with one word, say, melancholia? Or what if I tell you that this piece of music was composed in a concentration camp? Or what if I don't tell you anything at all, and simply let you reflect on the immediate emotional impact that music makes on you? Beauty is the expression of aesthetic ideas. The active engagement of an audience with a propositional/representative work of art commences with the semantic content provided by the artist. In non-propositional forms of art, such as absolute music, what Kant calls "fantasia," as well as the free beauties of nature, the starting point of an audience's engagement will be something else, depending on the individual person. It might just be a mood or emotional impact.

Kant also draws this connection when he says that the arousal of emotions in music evokes "aesthetic ideas" and an "unutterable fullness of thought" triggered by the affect that is normally expressed in language by means of such a tone.<sup>69</sup> Passages like these where Kant suggests that music evokes aesthetic ideas or that the broad range of emotions is compatible with beauty proper<sup>70</sup> are good starting points to include broad empirical emotional content into Kant's aesthetic theory. Unfortunately, Kant never follows through on this path. In the above passages, Kant ends up emphasizing the essential distinction between what pleases in judging (proper aesthetic judgment) and what gratifies the senses (broad range of emotions), and concludes that music is merely gratifying, belongs to sense pleasure, is mere entertainment, or that the broad variety of emotions is compatible with but does not contribute anything to aesthetic pleasure proper. Kant thus misses the opportunity to make emotional content essential to the aesthetic experience of music. Again, I think it is obvious why Kant must take this position: neither charm nor emotion can be the determining ground of a judgment of taste because the dichotomies of his transcendental idealism (form-matter, universal-particular, a priori-a posteriori, etc.) and his idea of the autonomy of the faculty of judgment prohibit him to do so.

---

<sup>68</sup> KU §59, 5:353f. Cf. KU §60, 5:356.

<sup>69</sup> KU §53, 5:328. Cf. KU Remark after §53, 5:331f.

<sup>70</sup> E.g., KU §14, 5:225f.



For this reason, Kant’s injection of aesthetic ideas into the arousal theory is restricted to the ideas of 18<sup>th</sup> century humanism, i.e., ideas to which all human beings can allegedly assent: e.g., the mathematical form of the tone exhibiting the universality of human cognition, or the “affect” of the sublime as expressive of universal morality.<sup>71</sup> The manifold of contingent affects is excluded because it indicates a sort of subjectivity that Kant deems incompatible with the demand for universal assent made in a judgment regarding *beauty* (as opposed to a judgment regarding the *agreeable*).<sup>72</sup> However, if we focus on Kant’s theory of free play and open-ended reflection –and bracket the historically contingent conception of “*Geist*”– it really does not follow that we must exclude the broad variety of emotions as content of aesthetic ideas, and thus music, from fine art proper.

Beauty invites us to sustain imaginative exploration of its meaning, Eldridge writes.<sup>73</sup> For an audience standing in the humanistic tradition of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this might mean one thing, for the 21<sup>st</sup> century this might mean something entirely different. We always encounter free beauties of nature and fine art as persons, i.e., contingent historical products of nature and socialization. This includes Kant. Just look closely at how he reflects on the poetic description of a beautiful morning that he cites as an example of an aesthetic idea: “The sun streamed forth, as tranquility streams from virtue,” upon which Kant comments: “The *consciousness of virtue*, when one puts oneself, even if only in thought in the place of a virtuous person, spreads in the mind a multitude of *sublime and calming feelings*, and a boundless prospect into a *happy future*...”<sup>74</sup> The calming feelings and the prospect of a happy future, which Kant here mentions, are affective experiences that are rooted in Kant’s conception of *a priori* morality and thus have –for Kant– a universal rational basis. But it is not only the transcendental philosopher speaking here. It is also the historically situated person Immanuel Kant, whose contingent psychological make-up longs for the *comforting* thought that the universe is designed with humanity in mind, which he here inserts into the poetic description of a beautiful morning. A universe that is blindly mechanistic gives us a hint that it is friendly to human purposiveness. It takes a certain character to long for this comfort. In other words, aesthetic ideas are bound to the aesthetic choices that individuals have made. ‘One learns a point of view, a way of looking at the world,’ Wittgenstein says.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> We can experience the feeling of the sublime only if we approach the world with certain ideas, ultimately moral ideas, Guyer rightly points out. (Guyer 2014, p. 444)

<sup>72</sup> KU §7, 5:212.

<sup>73</sup> Eldridge (2014, p. 59).

<sup>74</sup> KU §49, 5:316, my emphases.

<sup>75</sup> See Wittgenstein (1984, pp. 69-70). Cf. Monk (1990, pp. 530-533). The reason for mentioning Wittgenstein here is also to invite the reader to look at Wittgenstein’s many reflections on music.

## 5. Key Takeaways

The four key takeaways of this paper are:

**5.1** Kant's theory of the free play of the imagination is independent of arousal theory and aesthetic rationalism. Unlike Kant's commentators, Kant does not try to unify arousal theory (aesthetic of emotion), aesthetic rationalism (aesthetic of truth, formalism), and free play (aesthetic of open-ended reflection on aesthetic ideas). Kant's aesthetics of free play is independent of the 18<sup>th</sup> century standard theories on music.

In the context of Kant's rejection of the arousal theory, I have pointed to the hitherto unnoticed similarity between Hutcheson's and Kant's discussion of the arousal of emotions in music as a non-universalizable aspect of aesthetic experience. Further, Kant's remarks on the formal nature of beauty as tied to the forms of intuition stem from Kant's reflections on the principle of unity-in-variety, i.e., harmony, which Kant encountered in both the inner-sense theorist Hutcheson and various aesthetic rationalists. It is in these passages that Kant denies that colors, emotional quality of tones, "beautiful" views and rippling brooks can be properly called beautiful, and claims that only formal aspects, i.e., shape, composition, and what facilitates a sensible manifold to be unified in apprehension, are a proper basis for aesthetic experience (as opposed to our subjective associations and emotions connected with music or a rippling brook, etc.).<sup>76</sup> I have argued that it is not our task as Kant interpreters to make these passages on the formal nature of beauty consistent with Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas, because both groups of thought stem from quite different contexts (mathematical physics and theory of cognition, on the one hand, universal objective values, on the other hand). The common denominator of these theories is the cultural perspective of what Kant labels a *Zeitalter der Vernünftigen Beurtheilung* [an era that judges in accordance with reason],<sup>77</sup> but not a philosophically compelling argument.

**5.2** Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas does not apply to absolute music. Despite the analogy that Kant draws between music alone and natural beauty, it is only the latter that interests him as a transcendental philosopher. Hume's paradox of subjective universality, which so haunted Kant's contemporaries, did not interest Kant as someone interested in the fine arts. As a transcendental philosopher—and unlike Hume—the problem of resolving particular aesthetic controversies was not at the center of Kant's interest, and thus he only mentions in passing how "disputes about beauty" may be settled.<sup>78</sup> For Kant, there is no doctrine (science) in aesthetics, just criticism.<sup>79</sup> For him it was enough to have shown the transcendental possibility of aesthetic judgments, which became the key to a hitherto undiscovered principle of the purposiveness of the power of judgment and the "key stone" in his philosophical system. This was at the center of Kant's interest, not the resolution of

---

<sup>76</sup> E.g., KU §14, 5:225; Refl 15:267. Cf. Refl 15:269.

<sup>77</sup> Refl 15:270.

<sup>78</sup> KU §16, 5:231. Also see the following §17.

<sup>79</sup> KU §43, 5:304-5; §47, 309; §60, 354-5. Cf. Refl 15:269; VAnth 25:176, 385.

particular disputes or the defense of alleged masterpieces, i.e., works of art that stood the test of time, from which Hume starts.<sup>80</sup> Accordingly, Kant's notion of disinterestedness is quite different from Hume's. For Hume, "disinterestedness" refers to sentiments and judgments natural to and universal in humankind, independent of historical and personal context. For Kant, "disinterestedness" is a way of attending to objects that can neither be captured by theoretical nor practical interest. Kant's notion of "disinterestedness" is compatible with the open-ended reflection of an audience on aesthetic ideas, which Kant considers to be the basis of aesthetic pleasure proper, and which, as I have argued, always involves the personal background of an audience. If this is so, then music should be regarded as beautiful. However, this is a position that Kant fails to take. For Kant, the transcendental philosopher, the emotional content of music is not part of aesthetic experience proper.

**5.3** Kant's conception of aesthetic idea and its restriction to *Geist* stands in the tradition of 18<sup>th</sup> century humanism, which itself is a contingent standpoint to take. If we free Kant's theory from its humanistic background, it really does not follow that we must exclude the broad variety of emotions as content of aesthetic ideas, and thus music, from fine art proper.

**5.4** One thing to expect from a theory of music is that it explains what makes absolute music so significant to us. Kant rightly observes that *the* essence of absolute music is our affective response to it, which does not refer to things outside of us or copies already found content. In absolute music, as a fine art, we encounter ourselves emotively as it were. The aesthetic experience of absolute music is not about reference to extra-musical features, but about an emotional self-experience of the listener. Even a mere chord or tone can be experienced as beautiful: it does not refer to anything beyond itself, makes us feel a certain way, and –like the famous Tristan chord— promotes a free play of reflection due to its opacity and ambiguity. Neither arousal theory nor aesthetic rationalism is a good theory to account for our aesthetic experience of music alone because both think of music as imitation of reality: the arousal theory presupposes a reference to the modulation of speech, and aesthetic rationalism conceives of the human mind as a *vis representativa*, where aesthetic feelings are representations of perfections in the world. Kant freed the path for us from the two standard 18<sup>th</sup> century theories, and he indicated a new one, which, historically speaking, became the gateway to modernity. This is why it is so important to point out

(1) to Kant scholars that:

- Kant did not include the standard 18<sup>th</sup> century theories into his own account,
- Despite various publications on Kant's "theory of music", Kant does not have a theory of music –or a theory of any other particular artform—because he is interested in the conditions of the possibility of aesthetic experience as a

---

<sup>80</sup> Hume (2008, p. 106).

transcendental philosopher. He is neither interested in the fine arts *per se*, the concept of which was just arising in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, nor in the question of the value of pure instrumental music.

- In line with the 18<sup>th</sup> century cultural role of absolute music as mere entertainment and a mechanical craft,<sup>81</sup> Kant did not approach absolute music as we do in the concert hall today, but rather associates music with *Tafelmusik*, tea circles, gambling, dance, and smoking tobacco.<sup>82</sup>
- The types of music Kant refers to are neither the emotionally moving arias and duets expressive of poetic content (for that type of music is full with aesthetic ideas and thus a candidate for beauty) nor the Romantic fantasias that we associate today with absolute music, e.g., Beethoven's 1802 Quasi una fantasia "Moonlight" sonata (Op. 27), Schubert's 1822 Fantasie in C major "Wanderer Fantasie" (Op. 15), Chopin's 1841 Fantasie in F minor (Op. 49), or Brahms' 1893 pieces Op. 118, but rather earlier types of fantasias such as Bach's already then famous Chromatic fantasia and fugue in D minor (BWV 903) or perhaps –if Kant had the chance to listen to it— Mozart's 1785 Piano Fantasia in C minor (K 475). If we add to this cultural background Kant's own personal appreciation of music (or lack thereof), the intellectual background of arousal theories and aesthetic rationalism, and the terminological distinctions that Kant draws in his transcendental philosophy, Kant's often noted ambiguous statements and derogatory remarks on music become understandable.
- This should not hinder us to see the path that Kant's philosophy opens to come to grips with the puzzling and deeply moving aesthetic experience of absolute music.

(2) to artists and those interested in aesthetics of music more generally that

both arousal theory and aesthetic rationalism stand in the tradition of art as imitation of reality, which presupposes a way of looking at reality that was prominent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and is deeply rooted in the terminology, psychology, and epistemology of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Not many people outside of humanities departments would endorse this perspective today, for example, the conception of the human mind standing opposed to an independently existing world, which it mirrors (*vis representativa*). Yet, insofar as the value of music is seen to either reside in the imitation of emotions or in the perception of truth, there is an implied assumption of a correspondence between musical elements and the extra-musical world. It is because of this false implied assumption that Plato's attempts to strictly link given musical modes to moral values (*ethos* theory) or the 18<sup>th</sup> century project of a dictionary of affects corresponding to musical phrases (*Affektenlehre*) had to

<sup>81</sup> Kant never discusses music in the context of his theory of genius. Unlike beautiful art, music is a discipline, i.e., rule-governed. See for example, Refl 15:272 ["Music ... is a discipline"]; VAnth 25:999 ["Music is a game in accordance with rules"], my translations.

<sup>82</sup> See for example, VAnth 25:212; KU §43, 5:305f.; Anth 7:277.

fail. Both contemporary artists and philosophers think confusedly about what they do if they see themselves to stand in the tradition of either arousal theory or aesthetic rationalism.<sup>83</sup>

### **Bibliography**

Allison, H. (2001), *Kant's Theory of Taste*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Beiser, F. (2010), *Diotima's Children: German aesthetic rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Eldridge, R. (2014), *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Gracyk, T. (2020), "Hume's Aesthetics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), ed. E. Zalta, URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/hume-aesthetics/>

Guyer, P. (2014), *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Kant, I. (2000), *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. P. Guyer, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Henrich, D. (1957/58), "Hutcheson und Kant", *Kant-Studien* 49 (1-4), pp. 49-69.

Hume, D. (2008), "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Aesthetics: A comprehensive Anthology*, ed. S. Kahn and A. Meskin, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, pp. 103-112.

Hutcheson, F. (2008), *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, revised edition, ed. W. Leidhold, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis.

Kivy, P. (1993), "Kant and the Affektenlehre," in *The fine art of repetition: Essays in the philosophy of music*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 250-264.

Kulenkampff, J. (1990), "The Objectivity of Taste: Hume and Kant," *Noûs* 24, pp. 93-100.

Kulenkampff, J. (1987), "Musik bei Kant und Hegel," *Hegel-Studien* 22, pp. 143-163.

Le Huray, P. and Day, J. (1981), *Music and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Centuries*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

---

<sup>83</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Seminario Kant y la filosofía clásica alemana at UNAM, Mexico City. I like to thank the organizer, Efrain Lazos Ochoa, for inviting me, and all participants for the lively discussion and helpful comments. I would also like to thank Robert Clewis, with whom I have discussed Kant's aesthetics on many occasions, and who read a later draft of this paper.

- Matherne, S. (2014), "Kant's Expressive Theory of Music", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72 (2), pp. 129-145.
- Mohr, G. (2010), "Kant on Music as Beautiful Art", Mary Gregor Lecture, Chicago, February 19, 2010, URL = *KantOnMusic20100502Web.doc*
- Monk, R. (1990), *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The duty of genius*, Penguin Books, New York.
- Ravasio, M., "History of Western Philosophy of Music: Antiquity to 1800", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), ed. E. Zalta, URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/hist-westphilmusic-to-1800/>
- Thorndike, O. (2018), *Kant's Transition Project and Late Philosophy: Connecting the Opus postumum and Metaphysics of Morals*, Bloomsbury, London.
- Vorländer, K. (2004), *Immanuel Kant: Der Mann und das Werk*, Marix Verlag, Wiesbaden.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1984), *Culture and Value*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Young, J. (2020), "Kant's Musical Antiformalism", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 78 (2), pp. 171-181.

## Abbreviations

All references to Kant's works are in accordance with the *Akademie-Edition* Vol. 1– 29 of *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften (formerly: Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften), Berlin: Walter de Gruyter (1902–). References indicate an abbreviation of Kant's individual work, followed by volume and page number of the *Akademie-Edition*. Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992—). The following abbreviations are used:

- AA *Immanuel Kants Schriften*. Ed. Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften (formerly: Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902–.
- Anth *Anthropologie in Pragmatischer Hinsicht (Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View)*. In AA, Vol. 7.
- KU *Kritik der Urteilskraft (Critique of the Power of Judgment)*. In AA, Vol. 5.
- Refl *Reflexion (Reflection)*. In AA, Vols. 14–19.
- VAnth *Vorlesungen über Anthropologie (Lectures on Anthropology)*. In AA, Vol. 25.

- VL *Vorlesungen über Logik (Lectures on Logic)*. In *AA*, Vol. 24.
- VP *Vorlesungen über Physik (Lectures on Physics)*. In *AA*, Vol. 29.
- VT *Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie. (On a recently prominent tone of superiority in philosophy)*. In *AA*, Vol. 8.

