

Why should you Listen?

Why should you listen to symphonies, sonatas, string quartets, and the rest of what constitute the absolute music repertoire? On first reflection that sounds like a pretty silly question (as do so many other questions that we think of as the peculiar domain of philosophy). Such music has given pleasure for centuries to generations of listeners of all kinds. It is very likely it will give pleasure to you if you are willing to take the trouble to listen in an appropriate way. *That's* why you should listen. Do you need a better reason?

But that would be to misconstrue the real significance of the question, *Why should you listen?* Of course the question already assumes that you know absolute music gives pleasure or satisfaction or whatever else you think best describes your experience. The question really is, rather, *Why should you want this kind of pleasure or satisfaction instead of some other kind?* And *that* question has some depth to it, because of what we think absolute music is and because of what some of us, anyway, think it *isn't*.

What we all think absolute music is, needless to say, is fine art, along with painting, sculpture, the poem, the play, the novel, and, in our own times, the moving picture. What many of us think it *isn't*—which all of those other things so predominantly *are*—is representational or imbued with linguistic content. These two, what absolute music is, and what it isn't, have been, since the eighteenth century, in continual conflict with one another. We all feel this conflict. And it is this conflict that lies at the heart of the perplexity I have tried to express in the question, *Why should you listen?*

The thinker who first understood and expressed clearly the perplexity about absolute music of which I have been speaking is Schopenhauer. He also had the glimmering, although confusedly, of what I think is at least part of the right answer. So it is to Schopenhauer's philosophy of music that we must now return.

But before we do that, I want to make it clear that there isn't *one* answer to the question, *Why should you listen?* There are many answers, and some of them have already been given in earlier chapters of this book. For,

wherever I have tried to explain what the elements of enhanced formalism are, wherever I have tried to reveal what I think are the things in absolute music that we enjoy, and how we enjoy them, I have been giving answers to the question, *Why should you listen?* However, there is, I want to suggest, a more general answer to our question, *Why should you listen?*, to which the other answers, so to speak, contribute. And *that* is the answer I want to pursue here, in my final chapter, with Schopenhauer's help.

Schopenhauer thought that all of us organize our world, the world, under the categories that comprise what he called the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. The Principle of Sufficient Reason, which was put forward by the great German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646–1716), simply states that *nothing happens without a reason*, there is a sufficient reason for everything there is and everything that happens. That doesn't sound very controversial, and I imagine all of my readers would agree to it. It merely says that nothing exists or happens without there being a reason or cause or explanation for it, whether or not we know what the reason or cause or explanation is.

Schopenhauer called Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason—let's just call it the Principle, for short—because he thought the reasons for things and events were framed in four different ways: in terms of cause and effect, premise and conclusion, motive and action, space and time. Thus, the Chicago fire was caused by Mrs O'Leary's cow kicking over a lantern, the conclusion that Socrates is mortal follows from the premises that all men are mortal and that Socrates is a man, Orestes killed Clytemnestra from the motive of revenge, and, finally, all that we perceive and encounter occurs within the confines (if you will) of space and time, the conditions of our experience. These categories, which comprise the Principle, rule, indeed dominate, our practical and theoretical lives: our lives as doers and thinkers.

With the Principle in hand, I go on to Schopenhauer's theory of the fine arts. We are, as Schopenhauer saw it, rather like slaves to the Principle. It gives us no rest, but drives us relentlessly on to reason from effect to cause, action to motive, inference to conclusion, in a never-ending quest for a finality we can never achieve, always under the domination of space and time, the conditions under which we are compelled to perceive our world. Schopenhauer compares the human condition to the Wheel of Ixion, in the Greek myth. Ixion, in the myth, made amorous advances to Hera, the wife of Zeus. As his punishment for this outrage, Zeus bound Ixion to a wheel that is forever whirled through the air. Like Ixion, we are bound to a wheel, the wheel of the Principle, around which we revolve in a

never-ending dance of unmitigated striving.

Unlike Ixion in the myth, however, we have a means of at least temporary escape: a temporary exit from the wheel of life, the wheel of the Principle. It is the fine arts. For it is the gift of the artist to be able to liberate himself from the thrall of the Principle, at least for intermittent periods of time. In other words, the artist is able to see the world, or, in a sense, *see through* it, free of the Principle. He is able, in something like a mystical illumination, to experience things outside cause and effect, premise and conclusion, motive and action, space and time. When he does this, he perceives, through the veil of appearances, the eternal ideas that lie behind. These ideas he can represent in works of art that we can perceive and that, while we do, liberate us from Ixion's wheel, allowing us to see what the artist saw. Art is *our* liberation from the Wheel of Ixion, the wheel of life, the Principle.

But, among the arts, music, on Schopenhauer's view, is very special, as we saw in an earlier chapter. The other arts reveal the ideas behind the appearances. But *music* reveals what is behind the ideas: the basis of all reality, the striving metaphysical will. (Just why Schopenhauer thought will is somehow the most basic reality of the world is an obscure question that there is no need for us to grapple with here.)

Now I do not expect readers of this book to put much credence in these views of Schopenhauer's, which must seem to them, as they do to me, extremely bizarre in many ways. But there are two ideas here that it seems to me do have value for us if we alter them appropriately to our purposes. They are the ideas of liberation, and of music's special, unique status among the fine arts. Let us look at music's uniqueness first.

Schopenhauer realized that absolute music is very different from the other fine arts. Unlike many of his predecessors, however, he did not think that it is *so* different from them that that difference disqualifies music as a fine art. He argued that our experience of music is very much like our experience of the other arts, and that, since our experience of the other arts depends so heavily on their representational character, it must follow that music is representational too. What makes it unique is not that it fails to represent but the uniqueness of *what* it represents. All the other arts represent the ideas. Music alone represents the will.

Now Schopenhauer was certainly right that absolute music is unique among the fine arts (although that does require some qualifications to come). He was quite wrong, however, about where that uniqueness lies. It lies not in the uniqueness of what music represents but in the fact, as I have argued throughout this book, that absolute music does not represent

at all: it is simply not a representational art.

This brings us to Schopenhauer's second idea: that the fine arts are *liberating*. Again, I think there is some truth here, but a different truth from the one that Schopenhauer sees. For what makes music unique among the fine arts is not only the negative fact that it does not represent (or in any other way possess 'content'). There is also the positive fact that, *unlike* the other fine arts, music alone is the liberating one. The two facts are closely related.

If we are to salvage from Schopenhauer's reflections on the fine arts anything of value for ourselves, we must, I think it is obvious, dismiss straightaway his way of structuring the world into appearance, idea, and will. I cannot believe that this world-structure can form any part of our world view, which, I take it, is that of modern science, at least in so far as the lay person can comprehend it (although I am not ruling out the possibility that, for many people, the scientific world view exists side by side with a religious world view as well). And, if we reinterpret Schopenhauer as saying that the fine arts liberate us from thinking about the world we experience every day of our lives, the world in which we live and die, or, in his way of describing it, the world of cause and effect, motive and action, inference and conclusion, space and time, then I think he is seriously mistaken.

Leaving aside for the moment the art of absolute music, it seems clear that all of the other fine arts, painting, sculpture, drama, the movies, and literary fiction in general, have, for most of their history, had the 'real world' as their subject matter. I will call these arts, when they do have real-world content, the arts of content or, for short, the 'contentful arts.'

To be sure, various works of the contentful arts differ a great deal as regards their involvement with the 'real world.' Works of fantasy distort it considerably, so-called escapist art makes it better for us than it really is, and another way of describing that kind of art is as 'wish-fulfillment' art. But even such genres of the contentful arts that greatly distort 'reality' are in touch with it. More important, much of the art we consider truly great or profound is just that art—particularly literary art and dramatic art—that raises for us the profoundly difficult, disturbing moral, political, social, and philosophical problems of the real world: just the world of cause and effect, premise and conclusion, motive and action, space and time, from which Schopenhauer thought it rescues us. In short, Schopenhauer to the contrary notwithstanding, the fine arts, absolute music excepted, have been, for most of their history, the contentful arts; and as such they have been knee deep in reality.

But there remains the art of absolute music to consider. And it is here, it seems obvious to me, that Schopenhauer's dream of an art that liberates from the Wheel of Ixion is fully realized. Music, alone of the fine arts, makes us free of the world of our everyday lives. Thus Schopenhauer turns out to have been right. Music is unique. Its uniqueness, however, does not lie in its unique object of representation; rather, in the fact that it does not represent, does not possess content at all. Hence it is unique in the fact that it alone of the fine arts is the 'liberating' art. Furthermore, Schopenhauer turns out to have been right, too, that fine art frees us from the world of the Principle—from the world of our practical, philosophical, political, existential angst. He was surely wrong, though, in his ascribing this to fine art across the board. For the contentful arts, at least in many, if not most, of their most admired and valued instances, do just the opposite: they plunge us into our world with a vengeance, and compel us to think deeply about it. Only music, music alone, is the true art of liberation. And it is important enough that Schopenhauer had an inkling that there must be some point at which fine art and liberation from the Principle intersect: that point is absolute music. Let us look at the nature of 'musical liberation' (if I may so call it) a bit more closely.

It seems appropriate to describe contentful works of art, at least those of the more important or elaborate kind, as presenting us with 'worlds' to inhabit imaginatively or, perhaps, to observe: 'art worlds,' so to speak. Different works present, of course, different worlds. But each world is a version of our own. They may be greatly altered worlds, as in the case of fantasy or science fiction. They may be close relations of our world, as in the case of 'realistic' film, novel, and drama.

It is, of course, part of the charm, the attraction of contentful works of art that they afford us exit from our world and entrance, at least as observers, into theirs; and sometimes that is all we want or require. But even so, many, if not most, of the contentful works of art we place the highest value on present us with versions of our world that reflect back on it in ways that, far from being 'escapist,' compel us to think of our own world and its—which is to say, *our*—problems. Perhaps an example might help.

In his wonderful film trilogy, *Marius*, *Fanny*, and *César*, Marcel Pagnol presents us with what can best be described as a 'world': a cinematic 'art world,' if you will. Anyway, that is the way I, and most of the people I know who have seen these movies, think of them. In this world, full of richly developed and generally lovable characters, the young people, Fanny and Marius, fall passionately in love. But Marius has the *Wanderlust*. He

wants to sail away on a ship, experience the sea, and go to exotic places. He definitely does not want to remain in Marseilles and live his father's César's, settled, middle-class life as a café-owner whose greatest pleasure is to sit around with his friends, arguing and drinking pastiche.

Marius finally gets a berth on a sailing vessel. Should Fanny tell him that she is carrying his child? If she does, he will certainly 'do the right thing' by her, marry, settle down, and eventually go into his father's business. She decides not to reveal her secret because she feels Marius will forever resent the loss of his chance for adventure. He sails away, leaving poor Fanny in her (to him unknown) predicament, from which she is rescued by marriage to the elderly Panisse, a kind widower who provides a home for Fanny, becomes father to her son, and saves her the disgrace of having her child out of wedlock.

Marius, however, has second thoughts, returns to Marseilles, only to find his beloved Fanny married to Panisse. The young people fall into each other's arms in a passionate embrace only to be confronted by César, who lectures them on their duty to renounce their love rather than hurt the good Panisse, who has been both a devoted husband to Fanny and a loving father to her child, even though he is not his biological son. The lovers acquiesce in César's moral assessment of their situation, and Marius departs once again, this time to a town some few miles from Marseilles, where he opens a car repair shop. From here he watches his son grow into early adolescence without ever revealing to him his true identity, even after, by accident, they meet and become friends.

When the boy is about 15 years old, Panisse dies. And finally, after these years of renunciation, Fanny and Marius marry and, we hope, 'live happily ever after.'

The world of Pagnol's trilogy is, needless to say, not my world, nor yours (unless, of course, you are the son of a café-owner, or the daughter of a fishmonger, in Marseilles, France). It is, nevertheless, certainly a world that we are meant not only to observe, but to think about. Did Fanny do the right thing in not telling Marius that she was pregnant? (Consider the chain of unhappy events her decision initiated.) Did César give Fanny and Marius wise counsel in convincing them to renounce their love so as to avoid hurting Panisse and violating César's code of middle-class morality? (Think of the hurt done to Marius's son, who was to grow into adolescence without having or benefiting from the companionship of his biological father, not to mention the unhappiness caused to Fanny and Marius.) Pagnol leaves no doubt in the viewer's mind about what his (Pagnol's) answers to these questions are. But it seems clear as well that

part of the experience we are meant to have in viewing these films is the experience of questioning *for ourselves* whether Fanny, Marius, César, and the rest acted wisely or well in the circumstances. And, because these characters are, after all, not so unlike us, their circumstances possible circumstances for us, when we think about their problems, we are thinking about *our* problems too. Far from giving us respite from our world and the Principle, such works of art as Marcel Pagnol's trilogy, which form so large a part of the art of the West, our art, plunge us into our own lives and our own problems in the most intense way.

Absolute music too presents us with worlds of art into which we enter or, if you prefer, that we observe. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, like Pagnol's trilogy, is an art world of its own: a sound world. But, unlike *Marius, Fanny, and César*, it is not a version of our world: it is a world unto itself, as are all the art worlds of music alone. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is truly a world full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. That is not a defect in it. To be 'senseless'—to lack semantic or representational content—is not, as we have seen earlier, something 'missing' from an artifact that was never meant to possess it in the first place.

To be sure, we do use words of our ordinary, workaday world to describe absolute music. We say that Beethoven's Fifth Symphony has the qualities of conflict, and resolution, struggle, and, in the end, triumph. But they are the struggle, drama, conflict, and triumph of no one. They are the phenomenal, heard properties of the music itself. And it is worthy of note that absolute music, unlike any other art of the West that I know of, can be described in a purely technical language that has no application at all to anything external to music itself: a symptom, I think, of its self-contained character.

Thus absolute music is truly the liberating art that Schopenhauer sought, wrongly, in all of the arts. And this liberating function is, so to speak, absolute music's overarching, comprehensive charm. Other charms it has as well, and we have become acquainted with them in previous chapters. But the joy of liberation it is always ready to give us, along with the rest, if we are receptive.

Here one may begin to wonder about just what kind of 'charm' this liberating charm of absolute music might really amount to. It sounds more like, as it were, a negative rather than a positive one: that is to say, the removal of something unpleasant rather than the imparting of a real, captivating satisfaction—the kind of hedonic 'rush' that music-lovers get when they listen to the great masterpieces of the absolute music repertoire.

I think this negative view of music's liberating power can be dispelled if we give a little attention to just what the cessation of pain or discomfort, at least in certain circumstances, really amounts to. In Plato's famous dialogue, the *Phaedo*, which purports to give an account of Socrates' last day, before his execution by the Athenian state, Socrates is represented as maintaining that the experience of ceasing to be in pain is itself a positive pleasure. And I think that if you recall your own experience of intense pain giving way to release from it you will see what Socrates was getting at. Freedom from pain itself, particularly when experienced for protracted periods of time, is not particularly noted. To put it directly, you just get used to it. What Socrates was talking about is the *process* of going *from* a state of pain to a state of its absence. It is that experience, the process of liberation from pain, that, Socrates was telling us, is a positive pleasure. And my own experience is that he was right: it is one of the most intense pleasures possible, particularly, I think, when you are reflecting on it while it is happening. Whether it is your experience as well you must decide for yourselves (although I hope your pains will be few and far between).

I am arguing, then, that listening to absolute music is, among other things, the experience of going from our world, with all of its trials, tribulations, and ambiguities, to *another* world, a world of pure sonic structure, that, because it need not be interpreted as a representation or description of our world, but can be appreciated on its own terms alone, gives us the sense of liberation that I have found appropriate to analogize with the pleasurable experience we get in the process of going from a state of intense pain to its cessation. I have emphasized that this feeling of liberation, like the liberation from pain, is a positive rather than a negative feeling: that it is a palpable pleasure or satisfaction rather than simply a release from something bad. And I am emboldened to think that this is perhaps what Schopenhauer had in mind when he wrote of the arts as giving us release from the Wheel of Ixion.

I should add, by the by, that one needn't share Schopenhauer's generally pessimistic view of human existence to appreciate the liberation from the affairs of 'real life as we know it' that absolute music, so I am arguing, provides. You don't have to be downcast or miserable to feel the liberating uplift upon entering the world of music alone: in other words, you don't have to wait until you need 'therapy' to go to a concert. I think there is always some burden to be lifted by the musical experience. But nor am I denying that this liberating effect is *particularly* potent when one is downcast or miserable: weighed down by the petty or powerful aggravations of the human condition. Again, I ask the reader to determine

for him- or herself whether my experience in this regard is shared.

Many of my readers will, I am sure, have found the foregoing reflections on the liberating power of absolute music too speculative and highfalutin for their taste. For those who do, I suggest that the other charms of absolute music described in previous chapters as constituting what I called 'enhanced formalism' will suffice as an account of *why you should listen*. But, for those who are willing to follow me a bit further in this speculative venture, I will continue in this vein for just a little while longer.

Unlike Schopenhauer, I have maintained that music is unique in possessing the liberating power of which I have just now been speaking. But I also added the warning that the uniqueness claim would need to be somewhat qualified. Now is the time to do so. For, strictly speaking, neither is music totally unique among the fine arts in this power of liberation, nor is this power confined to the fine arts alone. There are other human works and activities that also, as part of *their* charm, possess the power to transport us to pure structural worlds.

Among the fine arts in the Western tradition, what is sometimes called 'non-objective,' sometimes 'abstract,' visual art is, at least on first reflection, art of pure aesthetic structure. And such non-artistic activities as chess, or, even more obviously, the contemplation of pure mathematics provide, it has seemed to many participants in these endeavors, just that kind of experience of pure aesthetic structure that I have been ascribing here to absolute music. Furthermore, if the experience of pure sonic structure, in absolute music, provides liberation, there is no reason to believe that the contemplation of pure visual structure, pure mathematical structure, or an elegant game of chess does not do so as well.

Pure mathematics—that is to say, mathematics not being used as part of the scientific representation of nature—is a particularly interesting case in this regard, just because it is so typically described by mathematicians in aesthetic terms. One proof is frequently preferred to another because it is more elegant or more beautiful or, in general, more aesthetically satisfying. Philosophers have argued over the significance of aesthetic considerations in pure mathematics. But few have denied their presence.

What, then, is left of the 'uniqueness' claim for absolute music, given these considerations? Perhaps this: that among the fine arts in the Western tradition, absolute music has completely overshadowed the rest as *the* pure abstract art *überhaupt*. Apparently, the sense of hearing and not the sense of sight is by far the most amenable to being pleased and intrigued by pure formal structure, in the absence of representational or semantic content. Why this should be so is a matter of speculation and debate. And for

present purposes we will have to leave it at that.

With these considerations of what I have called music's 'liberating power' I have reached a reasonable place, I think, to conclude my introduction to a philosophy of music. It is *my* end but not *the* end. There are many topics I could go on from here to discuss, and they are no less worthy of discussion than the ones I have already discussed. However, a book must end somewhere, and for this book here, with the question of Why should you listen?, seems as good a place as any.

But before I close I want to give my reader an important bit of prudential advice. *Don't believe anything I have written.* This is an introduction to *my* philosophy of music. There is probably no view I have put forward here that enjoys universal assent. I have tried to give a fair account of the opposition in the appropriate places, but I am certain that the opposition will not think so. So beware! You had better give the opposition a separate hearing.

The point of an introduction to any branch of philosophy ought to be not to convey information but to get the reader to think about the relevant questions as an independent agent. It was to make this point that I employed, in my epigraph, the quotation from Plato's *Phaedo* in which Socrates adjures his disciples to think for themselves, after he is gone. It is the only quotation in this book. I could think of no better way of beginning it than with Socrates' admonition. And I can think of no better way of ending it. 'If you think that what I say is true, agree with me; if not, oppose it with every argument and take care that in my eagerness I do not deceive myself and you and, like a bee, leave my sting in you when I go.'