

## Experiential Content in Music

**Abstract** – What do we perceive while listening to music? Music is often brought as a paradigm example of the need to distinguish descriptive from experiential content. The former is often regarded as conceptual, objective and communicative, while the latter is denied of these and regarded as subjective and ineffable. In this paper, besides doubting the coherence of the distinction on general philosophical grounds, a question is raised as to what the experiential content of music can be. It is argued that in (classical) music, unlike many other arts and domains, most of the constitutive features by which a work is identified, appreciated and valued are hidden from and are outside the conscious horizons of most hearers, including "reliable" ones. Thus it is unclear what the significance of experiential content is, and why regard it as "content".

Many philosophers distinguish between descriptive content (DC) and experiential content (EC). The distinction applies primarily to mental episodes such as episodes of perception or sensation, like having just seen a red flower, or aching in the back for the last ten minutes. Very roughly put, the DC of these is more or less what can be described and communicated to others. The EC is alleged to be subjective and in a way ineffable, but something we all know is there. The distinction is naturally expanded to apply to thoughts and representations. Thus, a (linguistic) proposition like "Snow is white" has descriptive content, which is its conventional meaning. But, the distinguishers insist, it also has, at least on certain occasions, experiential content, which is conditioned on an actual experiencing of its constituents – snow and whiteness.<sup>1</sup> The descriptive content is often construed as basically "conceptual", in the sense of what belongs to (rational) justification and reasoning,<sup>2</sup> and is in principle available to whoever understands the language concerned (English in our case). This however is not enough for grasping the EC – for this actual conscious experience (of seeing white, feeling pain, etc.) is necessary.

The distinction as portrayed above belongs to the wide and much discussed issue of whether our mental states have non conceptual mental contents, and what their nature is. EC is by definition non conceptual content and if the distinction is coherent and useful it enhances the general case for non conceptual contents and may be relevant to the claim that elements of our conscious experience are not conceptual. The distinction is claimed to be of particular importance for many epistemic concerns and positions. For example, empiricism claims that all knowledge (or at least all knowledge of a particularly important kind) derives from "experience", which, on many construals, is the content of episodes of perceiving or sensing. On this view it is natural to regard EC as basic.

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<sup>1</sup> This is different from other sorts of ineffability, like Wittgenstein's "showing" in the *Tractatus*.

<sup>2</sup> This has become quite customary in the relevant literature following McDowell's (1994) and many subsequent articles.

Though there need be no denial of DC and of conceptual knowledge and understanding, they are, on this view, dependent on and derived from experience and EC. I shall not discuss this wide issues here and rather concentrate on some aspects of the alleged EC, particularly in music.

Music and its aesthetic appreciation are often brought as prime examples for the need to make the distinction and to appeal to EC. The distinction is claimed to be of particular importance for aesthetic and evaluative concerns. A grasp and appreciation of a work of art (a painting, a sculpture, a dance, a symphony etc.) or of a natural scene or occurrence, depend, according to many, on having or grasping the EC of it. For such tasks grasping the DC is not enough, and in many cases perhaps even not necessary.

To completely know what a work of art is like you must experience it. No description, however complete and critically accurate, will provide you with complete knowledge of what the work of art is like in the case of a painting, a symphony or a ballet [...] The sensory and affective experience of the work, however subjective and personal, is part of the knowledge of what the work of art is like (Lehrer 2017).

Lehrer relies here on his notion of what he calls exemplarization, developed in his (2012):

Experience of the work of art results in representation that uses the experience of the work of art as an exemplar to stand for a class of experiences of which it is a member" (p. 9). The exemplar is an individual experience used as a standard, however, and not a universal separate from experience" (10). This claim concerning exemplar representation by exemplarization rests on an ability that I conjecture is innate (14).

Now, it is difficult to deny the distinction and its usefulness for some purposes, but on many positions it is construed as a sharp discrepancy, even a dichotomy, so that DC is regarded to be entirely different from EC so that each one of them does not involve the other. This extreme view is I believe objectionable. There are two points I wish to make here: The first, which I shall just mention, has to do with fundamental issues in a theory of meaning. The second – with more particular issues concerning music.

I shall be very brief on the first for it has been widely discussed, particularly since McDowell's influential (1994). The basic point is that both sides of the alleged dichotomy can be claimed to be presented in a faulty and misleading way. Many (including myself) believe that when notions of meaning and descriptive representation are properly explored it turns out that they involve and cannot be detached from experiential elements; it is then doubtful whether there is any EC left that is not part of the DC. On the other side when perceptual notions are properly explored they turn out to be imbued with conceptual (i.e. descriptive) factors. EC, to the extent it is operand in our cognitive and mental capacities, as manifest e.g. in perception, cannot be thus divorced from conceptual factors, and hence from DC. This is basically an old doctrine of Kant's and has been recently extensively argued for, notably by McDowell.

Likewise, DC and grasping the meaning of a linguistic expression cannot be thus detached from experiential factors. This has been argued on at least three levels. The first is the other side of the general Kantian doctrine alluded to above. The second is a widely

admitted recognition that there are cases in which these factors are parts of the DC, like in using e.g. demonstratives to, and specimens of these factors themselves as constituents of the description, like in saying "this color" (with an appropriate pointing), or "the color I see in front of me".<sup>3</sup> The third is a much less discussed view of. e.g. the late Wittgenstein, that the regular use and understanding of descriptions and pronouncement of perceptual experiences involve experiential elements. I believe that this is one of the important messages of Wittgenstein, particularly in his late writings, namely that there are experiential elements, like what he called "the feeling of meaning" and the "dawning of an aspect", that condition the ability to understand and grasp meaning in general. Something essential for grasping meaning and for understanding is lacking with someone who is "aspect-blind" or "feeling-deaf" in this sense.<sup>4</sup>

This much shows that the distinction and the dichotomy associated with it are unclear and perhaps bogus. Moreover, in many cases the very idea of EC raises grave difficulties on which I would like to expand a bit more. Take the case of music. Music has been often brought as a paradigm case of the importance of EC and its sharp distinctness from DC. No description, it seems, can capture the very essential element of music – how it sounds and how it is experienced in actual hearing. This is often regarded as an essential element, *sine qua non*, of music. Many regard it as true of many other domains, like colors, tastes, etc. but it seems to be particularly sharp and persuasive about music. No description can give you the exact taste of a dish; you have to taste it. Likewise, and even more so, no description can give you an exact idea of a symphony; you have to hear it. This seems so obvious and self-evident that it hardly needs an argument. Well, but is it?

First, a relatively minor point: Many composers compose without actually hearing the notes (think of old Beethoven...). Moreover, for many able musicians (not of the order of a Beethoven), particularly those equipped with absolute pitch, reading music notes of a piece can be a rich musical experience, sometimes even richer than actual hearing of it.<sup>5</sup> And the music notes are a sort of description, descriptive representation of the piece. It can in principle be substituted for by a verbal description, though this would in general be extremely cumbersome (but so it is also e.g. in mathematics...). Should we say that such cases are not musical **experiences**? that what these musicians read or write does not have EC for them? This seems absurd. It is not only that composing is often considered to be musical experience par excellence, but also in many such cases even of reading music scores the readers are not only informed of what is going on in the work, but experience it: they are also moved, excited, in euphoria not less, and often even more than in actual hearing.

One can object here that these activities are not absolutely detached from actual hearing but rather depend on it: In reading or writing music these able musicians **know or**

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<sup>3</sup> I believe that Frege's notion of the sense (*Sinn*) of a term as a mode its reference is given to us, when properly understood, also concerns these experiential factors, as they are involved in this mode, but shall not expand on it here.

<sup>4</sup> I have expanded on this in my "Wittgenstein on the Experience of Meaning and the Meaning of Music", *Philosophical Investigations*, vol. 29/3, 2006, 217-249.

<sup>5</sup> For the notion and its role in music understanding see Bar-Elli (2016).

**imagine** how the music would sound, and this knowledge is ultimately dependent on actual sound and actual hearing.

This may be true but it is not a real objection to the above point. Imagining and knowing are not actual hearing, and strictly, they are not perceptual episodes. To the extent we regard them as having EC, it just shows that the discrepancy between DC and EC is not as sharp as we might think. Intuition (*Anschauung*) and imagining are crucial, as Kant taught us, in thinking and understanding in general, including e.g. many mathematical thoughts, which are considered prime examples of having DC.

Secondly, and this is perhaps the main point, what exactly is the EC of hearing a piece of music – say, a Bach fugue? Music is perhaps unique among the arts in that many (perhaps most) of the essential musical features of structure, harmony, counterpoint, thematic relations, etc. are hidden from most hearers (most music lovers, concert goers and even professional musicians) while listening – they are not conscious of them and these features are not phenomenally given to them, are not even in their perceptual horizon.<sup>6</sup> It often takes hard work of studying and analyzing to recognize them and be aware of them. This hard work is usually done on the score – the notational representation of the work. In many cases it is even practically impossible (unless for exceptional talents) to achieve the awareness concerned on "just hearing". It thus appears that on hearing a Bach fugue, EC, what is phenomenally given, what a reliable listener is aware of, is a far cry from the constitutive musical features of the work.

This is true even of features one can regard as non conceptual. Luntley has argued for the existence of non conceptual mental content in hearing music. For him, "non conceptual representations are ways in which we respond to the world that we are not able to rationally organise" (Luntley 2003, 417). "Rationally organise" is Luntley's generalization on the commoner and more restricted notions of inferring and justifying. He argues that a "novice" recognizing of a certain occurrence of e.g. V<sup>7</sup> chord would be such a non conceptual representation of the content of his musical experience. I doubt whether Luntley's distinction between "recognizing", and functioning in a rational organization is helpful or can be sustained. But I shall not discuss it here, for my point here is not in denying non conceptual contents, but in questioning the coherence or relevance of EC: Most musical features that are essential to understanding, appreciating and rationally organizing a musical work of even a moderate value and complexity are not recognized by most hearers, who are even totally unaware of them while listening. Even among those (a small minority) who recognize a V<sup>7</sup> chord on hearing very few would recognize e.g. its delayed solution (if the delay is long enough), not to mention its intentional absence, and the use of the chord in modulations. And these are simple and restricted examples. Many other more sophisticated examples from all domains of music analysis can be easily brought here.

In talking of the EC of hearing the fugue, what then is the relationship between what is objectively there in the work and what is heard in the experiential, perhaps even

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<sup>6</sup> These features are not necessarily what the composer is thinking of and what is important to him. Likewise the constitutive properties of a painting are not necessarily what is important to the painter. This is not to deny the importance of the artist's testimony on these.

subjective sense?<sup>7</sup> If EC is the former, it is virtually absent from the subjective experience of most hearers, of the contents they are conscious of. But these are the constitutive elements of the work, by which it is aesthetically appreciated and which should direct a sensitive and caring hearer to what he should hear and should experience. So, if his EC of the work lacks them, what can be its aesthetic significance?

Some people may protest that the above discrepancy assumes a superficial "all or none" picture with regard to the relevant musical features, but that in fact the picture is much more complex and gradual: Some features are recognized even by the novice – a melody going up or down, a cantabile line contrasting sharp jumps, some points of tonality, drastic changes of rhythm, some aspects of articulation, etc. Others are vaguely noticed, though perhaps not fully recognized, like some harmonic modulations, repetitions of motifs, short inversions, strange registrations, changes of metre, etc. Full recognition of all features (whatever it means) is never or hardly ever attained.

All this may be true but it doesn't affect my above point, i.e. that most hearers don't recognize and are not even aware of many (perhaps most) of the essential features that constitute the work and are most important for its aesthetic appreciation. They are not in their EC. This I surmise makes the notion of EC either irrelevant or bogus.

Of course, there can be debates on what are the constitutive features of a particular work, and analysis is not infallible, but the above is true on any such view and for (almost) any analysis. Hearing the various voices of the fugue, the entrances of the subject in the exposition, cadences and harmonic modulations and their function, the interplay of the subject and the counter-subject in the development, all sorts of variation, inversions, augmentations and diminutions, retrogrades, various aspects of structure, rhythm etc. all these are constitutive musical features of the work however one analyzes it. But, to repeat, they are in general no elements of the phenomenal subjective EC of which the hearer is conscious.<sup>8</sup> These elements, however, are supposed to be the substance of the notion of EC. In particular when people talk of the discrepancy between DC and EC it is this phenomenal notion of what people are conscious of that is concerned. If it does not consist in the essential features of the piece, what could be the significance of EC for grasping and appreciating its aesthetic value?

It should be noted that this problem transcends or cuts across the view that the fugue itself can serve as representing the EC of itself (what K. Lehrer called "exemplary representation", see his 2017)<sup>9</sup>. For, the problem is that what is represented is unclear:

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<sup>7</sup> I assume here a moderate notion, according to which what is subjective can, on appropriate circumstances, be recognized identified and referred to, shunting aside a more radical notion in which this modal "can" is denied, which was forcefully attacked by Wittgenstein.

<sup>8</sup> I take this as obvious and well known to any musician. Just for a funny illustration, a friend of mine, a devoted lover of classical music, once came up to me and said with sparking eyes that after dozens of times he had listened to Brahms' fourth symphony, he had just discovered that the last movement is a set of variations...Variations, like Bach's Goldberg, or Beethoven's Diabelli or the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement of op. 111 provide obvious illustrations, but the point is valid generally for many features of any work of some value.

<sup>9</sup> This in fact is a sort of generalization of McDowell's idea that demonstrative referring to e.g. a color or a sound can serve in a conceptual description or representation of it.

does it consist of the essential musical features revealed in analysis and hidden from most hearers, or is it the phenomenal (subjective or inter-subjective) "contents" of which they are aware? On the latter it appears therefore that EC is detached from the constitutive features of the work it is an experience of, from those that are most pertinent to its aesthetic appreciation.

Of course, in all art works and in fact in most perceptual episodes, one can reveal to us or draw our attention to important features we perhaps were not conscious of. This can, and often does happen in painting, sculpture, dance, poetry etc. But then, after our attention has been drawn to them, we become conscious of them and they become elements of our phenomenal EC. In music the discrepancy between the phenomenal EC – what we are conscious of while listening – and the musical features that constitute the work and is the basis of its aesthetic appreciation is by far bigger. In fact, in most works of even moderate value and complexity it is so big that the very notion of EC becomes, as we have seen, incoherent or unclear. By this I am not denying of course that actual hearing is important, perhaps essential to music. I am challenging the idea that what we hear in hearing music is fruitfully captured by the DC/EC distinction.

## References

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