

A Modern Interpretation of the Beautiful: The Aesthetics of Instrumental Music

Zackery Messenger

Ancient theories in artwork, ranging from Plato to Confucius, have conceived art through an objective lens where in order for the piece to be considered beautiful, the art must indicate strong ethics. However, as the concept of universal ethics dissolved throughout time, it seems so would theories of aesthetics. The focus of this essay is to establish grounds for how and why the beautiful can only be experienced through the subjective lens where our aesthetic sensibilities take primacy within the experience of the beautiful. In combatting these ancient theories of artwork, I will use instrumental music as platform for deconstructing ethicism. Then, under the application of instrumental music, I will use Indian rasa theory, Kant's judgment of the beautiful, and Heideggerian terms, in order to reveal how the experience of the beautiful is fully contingent on the perceiver and his or her relationship with the artwork being presented within the current moment.

Keywords: Ethicism, Kant's beautiful, earth and world, rasa theory

Art has always been conceived of as a great asset to the human experience. According to Plato, art has the ability to lead us towards the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. In Plato's *Symposium*, for example, poets have a privileged position on the staircase of love because their artwork conveys principles of Platonic thought where "true" beauty lies: "Starting from individual beauties...from one to two, and from two to every lovely body, from bodily beauty to the beauty of institutions, from institutions to learning... until at last one can know what beauty is" (Plato, 211c). According to Plato, only art that guides one towards the Good is considered beautiful artwork. Plato's conception of the Beautiful is found upon an objective view that artwork must necessarily lead one towards Truth in order for it to be beautiful.

Similarly, in Confucian's theory of art, only art that promote strong morals can be considered beautiful. For Confucius, the ultimate goal of his social philosophy is to harmonize with the whole. Artwork promoting such principles of moral cultivation, therefore, would then be considered beautiful within Confucian thought. Both Plato and Confucius, therefore, abide by the doctrine of ethicism in which they view beauty through an objective lens where only morally strong artwork can be considered beautiful. The problem with these theories of artwork is that an aesthetic judgment of the beautiful, a largely subjective field of inquiry, cannot be understood through an objective lens. The goal of this essay is to establish a starting point for how the experience of the beautiful, specifically within the application of instrumental music, can only be

experienced through our aesthetic sensibilities rather than through any cognitive ability as Plato and Confucius suggest. In making my argument that theories of the beautiful should remain dominantly within the domain of the subjective experience, I will use instrumental music to explain rasa theory, Kant's theory of the beautiful, and Heidegger's notions of earth and world, where beauty is produced through a dialogue between the artwork being presented and the perceiver actively participating with the phenomenology of the work of art.

To start, the rasa experience in metaphor is the digestion of a food in which "what was outside is transformed into what is inside" (Schechner, 29). In a rasa performance, there is a sense of community in which performers and the partakers alike can relish the experience they are having together as one: "Rasic performance values immediacy over distance, savoring over judgment" (Schechner, 31). In a rasa performance, the goal is to harmonize with one another through relishing the present moment. This savoring and immediacy that rasic partakers experience can be explained through two terms, bhava and rasa. Bhava is the more objective side of the rasa experience. It is the "sweetness in a ripe plum", and the general mood or emotion brought forth in the performance. The bhava allows listeners to imagine a time when they felt an emotion similar to the one being conveyed in the performance, whether its "desire, humor, pity, anger, vigor, fear, disgust, wonder, [or] bliss" (Schechner, 31). Differently, the rasa is the internalized experience one gets from the bhava in the performance: "The emotions, the sthayi, bhava, are objective; feelings (what the individual performer or partaker experiences) are subjective." (Schechner, 32) The beauty of the rasa experience lies in harmonizing with the whole through each of the participant's personal yet universal experiences. That is, the rasa experience is made meaningful and beautiful individually to the participants, yet also universally in that each of them are experiencing a common human emotion, which in effect, brings the community together as one. The experience of the beautiful, therefore, in a rasa performance is fully dependent on both the bhava of the song as well as the partakers where there is a personal and meaningful relationship between the two.

Furthermore, rasa theory can be understood within the modern age where instrumental music shows similar properties of the rasa experience. In instrumental music, there are emotions set forth through the instruments being used, whether it's guitar, piano, drums, bass, etc. The performers, resembling a small community, bring forth emotions, such as joy, pity or fear, through their music. A modern understanding of bhava is the use of key signatures, complex chords, and chord progressions. The bhava being presented within an instrumental piece in turn allows for the audiences to internalize the performance. This internalization process is the rasa. The rasa of instrumental music, therefore, is about relishing the present moment of the performance where we find meaning through the objective dimensions of art, rather than judging the art through rational concepts as Plato does. In essence, instrumental music (and rasa) involves allowing our aesthetic sensibilities take primacy when experiencing the beautiful over any cognitive understanding of art and beauty.

Similarly, according to Kant, an aesthetic judgment of the beautiful is devoid of all concepts or rational, cognitive thought because reason actually leads us astray from the aesthetic qualities that could have produced an experience of the beautiful. The experience of the beautiful is "merely contemplative" (Kant, 51). For example, if someone were to go to a concert with

practical implications in mind, say to impress someone on a date, or to take pictures of the show for his or her photo gallery, the individual would not be having an aesthetic experience of the beautiful due to the purposes the perceiver had in mind when they went to the show. The beautiful can only be experienced when we can let go of our liking for the good, which involves losing ourselves to the aesthetics of music: “Forgetting oneself goes well with contemplation and appreciation” (Kant, 20). In experiencing the beautiful, we forget about ourselves in that we are not trying to use the aesthetic experience to a personal advantage or purpose. Rather, in experiencing Kantian beauty, we become lost in the phenomenology of the piece being presented to us, where we do not have any practical implication in mind.

Furthermore, Kant says that in order to have an experience of the beautiful there is a never-ending free play between our imagination and our understanding of a piece of music. This is why instrumental improvisational music is such a unique and profound phenomenon. The music allows one to enter into a contemplative state where our understanding of the piece of music is constantly evolving. This holds true because the meaning of a piece of instrumental music is contingent on the individual’s present moment. When we hear an instrumental piece, there are key signatures and certain chord progressions used to evoke an emotion, which determines the mood of the song. This emotional quality of the piece is determined by the manner the chords are being used; however, it is up to the individual’s spontaneous imagination to find an understanding of what the piece communicates to them individually in that moment.

With that said, because the meaning of an instrumental piece is fully contingent on the individual’s present moment, which is informed by past experiences, the meaning of the piece is constantly changing due to the individual’s evolving experiences in life. For example, a dark melancholy black metal piece of instrumental music could remind me of a time when I was going through a bad break up and the energy the song emitted made me feel powerful or in control. However, years from then, I could listen to the same piece again and find complete new meanings for that piece of music, despite it being the same song. The meaning and understanding I assign to a piece of instrumental music is constantly changing due to my ever-changing mindset. It can be gathered that it is the relationship between the performance and the perceiver is what establishes meaning and beauty on an individual basis.

Instrumental music therefore, is a good platform for discussing Kant’s conception of the beautiful because there is never a fixed meaning in a song because once we have a cognitive and fixed understanding of an object, it can no longer be beautiful. This is especially true of instrumental music because there are no words that fix the meaning of the piece. When we hear a love song with sappy lyrics all the way through, the meaning of that piece is established by the artist’s will; however, with instrumental music there is a constant free play between our imagination and understanding of the song’s meaning and beauty. Listeners can experience the piece of music within their own subjective worlds rather than trying to find out the meaning of a song through the words of a piece. In this sense, the meaning alongside the beauty of instrumental music is context-based within the subjective domain of the listener. Our understanding of the piece, therefore, will never be fixed because the aesthetics of instrumental music allows for contemplation of our own experiences where meanings can vary individual to

individual, creating a much more subjective interpretation of what the beautiful can be considered to be.

Heidegger's similarly complies with Kant's notion that the beautiful is something subjectively conceived through the objective qualities of the piece of art. In Heidegger's *Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger says that the physical sounds of instrumental music is called the earth. It is the objective side of music in that the artist arranges the physical (in music's case, the manner of vibrations put forth) in a way that allows all the earthly qualities of a piece come together to make a coherent sound or emotion. The worldly quality of art, however, is what human perception brings into meaning through the listener's subjective view.

For example, when we hear an instrumental piece, say a symphony, we can simultaneously tell how the music is presented to our sense through the physical sensations it makes with the ear and by how it makes us feel in effect. The aesthetic qualities of the symphony first captivate us in a world that it created. The song may be slow and heartfelt or fast and loud, creating an emotional effect on audiences where individual meaning will arise. The world that the piece of music is generating discloses meaning to us immediately for it emotionally compels us while listening. However, as this world is conveyed, the piece of music always rests and falls back onto its earthly quality, which is *bhava*, the key signature, the tempo, the use of rhythm, and/or the use of volume. The song may have these objective and physical values, but it is human perception that makes these clangs and tones meaningful. In this sense, the world and the earth affect us simultaneously in instrumental music: "World and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated" (Heidegger, 92). Through this example, we can see that the object in itself is meaningless. It is, however, through human perception that the world or meaning can spring forth from the physical properties of music. Therefore, Heidegger's notions of earth and world presupposes that beauty and meaning can only come into existence through a dialogue between the perceiver and the object; both the earth and the world are necessary for a personalized beauty to arise in artwork.

So as one can see, there is an objective side to the beauty of instrumental music. It lies in the *bhava*, or the key signature, or the general emotion set forth by the artist. However, there is another side to music in which the experience of the performance can evoke the experience of the beautiful. There is a relationship between the perceiver and the music being presented to us where we as listeners find various meanings within the bounds of the song's structure: "Meaning is interactional in that it is generated in relation to the perceiving subject; a single event can have multiple affordances for each perceiving subject; and music can be directly perceived as meaningful, independently of formal understanding" (Clayton, 9). Even without understanding of music theory or even without being a musician (which would help in understanding the *bhava* and the objective side of music), music is still inherently digestible and meaningful to humans. This meaning is produced through musical discourse can lead one to an experience of the beautiful.

Essentially, it seems that Plato and Confucius might have been hindering themselves from experiencing the beautiful in that they let their cognitive abilities overpower their aesthetic sensibilities. In seeing the beautiful through an objective lens where there is moral criteria, there

is no beauty to be experienced, but only principles to be shown through the art. It has been my aim of this essay to show that our aesthetic sensibilities have primacy within the experience of the beautiful because they lead us to individual understandings of beauty. I have shown this through the application of instrumental music where rasa theory, Kant's conception of the beautiful, and Heidegger's notions of earth and world can be better understood. Through these example, it is my hope to show that beauty arises through a dialogue between the perceiver and the presentation of the artwork in opposition to beauty arising from understanding a rational concept. Within the experience of art, beauty and meaning are personal manifestations where there is little cognitive understanding needed to see the beauty of a piece. We do not need a rational concept to discover beauty; rather, the experience of the beautiful is simply beautiful because it is.

References

- Clayton, Martin. "Introduction: Towards a Theory of Musical Meaning (in India and Elsewhere)." *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 10.1 (2001): 1-17. JSTOR. Web.
- Heidegger, Martin. *The Origin of the Work of Art*. Waterloo, Michigan: University of Waterloo, 2001. Print.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2005. Print.
- Schechner, Richard. "Rasaesthetics." *TDR: The Drama Review* 45.3 (2001): 27-50. Project MUSE. Web.
- Plato. *The Symposium*. Trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989. Print.