

## MUSIC AND THE AURAL ARTS

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The visual arts include painting, sculpture, photography, video, and film. But many people would argue that music is the universal or only art of sound. In the modernist era, Western art music has incorporated unpitched sounds or 'noise', and I pursue the question of whether this process allows space for a non-musical soundart. Are there non-musical arts of sound—is there an art phonography, for instance, to parallel art photography? At the same time, I attempt a characterization of music, contrasting acoustic, aesthetic, and acousmatic accounts. My view is that there is some truth in all of these. I defend the claim that music is an art with a small 'a'—a practice involving skill or craft whose ends are essentially aesthetic, that especially rewards aesthetic attention—whose material is sounds exhibiting tonal organization. But acoustic and acousmatic accounts help to distinguish between music and non-musical soundart, since music must have a preponderance of tones for its material.

### I. THE POSSIBILITY OF NON-MUSICAL AURAL OR SOUNDART

AN AURAL art is one that is primarily addressed to the ear, and which uses sound as its primary material. To say that music is the universal or only aural art will seem almost tautological, insofar as the claim is intelligible at all. In contrast to the visual arts, which include painting, drawing, sculpture, video-art, and perhaps film, reference is rarely made to 'the aural arts' or 'the arts of sound'. Poetry and radio drama are in a sense, aural arts, but they are impure, in that sounds are mostly treated as non-naturally meaningful.<sup>1</sup> So music does not stand to the aural arts as painting stands to the visual arts, but has a much more dominant role. Most of the visual arts are characterized with reference to a particular material medium—painting with reference to paint, whether oils, tempera, watercolour, or household gloss, and similarly drawing, video-art, and film. Sculpture, perhaps, is different—its traditional media of stone and bronze have been expanded in the last century to include many other materials. But music, so the traditional view goes, makes reference to no medium other than sound. It is the universal or only art of sound. In the last couple of decades, however, under the influence of Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète*,

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<sup>1</sup> 'That sound means danger', said of the howling of wolves or roaring of lions, is an example of natural meaning; 'That gong means dinner' illustrates non-natural meaning, in this case conventional; the concept comes from Grice.

the work of John Cage, and the audio ecology researches of R. Murray Schaefer, there has appeared a loosely defined movement known as soundart or audio art.<sup>2</sup> ('Aural' parallels 'visual', but I continue with the more established term 'soundart'.) Many professed soundartists have contested what they regard as the hegemony of music, wishing to liberate soundart from its shackles, just as many art photographers wished to liberate photography from painting. Thus they deny that music is the only art of sound.

The context for the development of soundart was the twentieth-century revolution in the material basis of music, in which *the ideology of instrumental puritanism* has been supplanted by the concern with sound as sound.<sup>3</sup> This ideology dictated that only instrumental sounds, or sung vocal sounds of fairly determinate pitch, could be included within music. But with composers' growing interest in sound as sound, musical material has broadened to include non-tonal and noise elements. Although musical performance has always included non-musical noise that is inessential and even a distraction—for instance the toneless scraping of the violin bow, or toneless breathing sounds on wind instruments—and noise elements have been a particular concern of some musicians and composers, during the twentieth century, the boundary between music and noise acoustically defined was qualified. In the modernist era, beginning with the introduction of siren glissandos and other industrial noises by Varèse and Antheil, sounds that are unpitched or not discretely pitched were allowed into Western art music—though such unstable sounds had long been present in some kinds of traditional music. But recording was the crucial technological advance which liberated a concern with sound as sound, in the soundart sense—never before could one analyse sounds and alter their envelope. Inspired by electro-acoustic composition whether or not they directly participated in it, composers such as Stockhausen, Xenakis, and Ligeti liberated timbre and texture as structural elements of musical composition through their use of sound-masses and other avant-garde techniques. Rock musicians have deployed feedback at least since the 1960s. Today most theorists, if not ordinary listeners, recognize that any sounds can be incorporated into music and that no intrinsic qualities are required. Smalley for instance comments that '[d]evelopments such as atonality, total serialism, the expansion of percussion instruments, and the advent of electroacoustic media, all contribute to the recognition of the inherent musicality in all sounds'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Musique concrète* is discussed in A. Hamilton, 'The Sound of Music', in M. Nudds and C. O'Callagan (eds.), *Sounds and Perception: New Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2007).

<sup>3</sup> The term comes from T. Wishart, *On Sonic Art* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, rev. edn 1996).

<sup>4</sup> D. Smalley 'Spectro-morphology and Structuring Processes', in S. Emmerson (ed.), *Language of Electro-acoustic Music*, (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 61.

The twentieth-century concern with the properties of sound itself, as opposed to a traditional, more restricted concern with sound as tone, has manifested itself in the attempt by music to embrace all sounds, but also—to reiterate—by the development of soundart that sees itself as non-musical. David Toop, curator of the Sonic Boom exhibition at London's Hayward Gallery in 2000, writes that soundart, 'detaching itself from the organizing principles and performance conventions of music ... [has] explored issues of spatial and environmental articulation or the physics of sound using media that included sound sculptures, performance and site-specific installations'.<sup>5</sup> Among other artists he cites the work of Bill Fontana amplifying the tones produced by traffic crossing the Brooklyn Bridge, mixing them and sending the result by satellite round the world; David Dunn's concern with bioacoustics; and Alan Lamb's recordings of the 'Aeolian humming' of telegraph wires in Australia. Not all of its proponents present soundart in stridently non-musical terms; often they characterize it as having a concern with sonic space, or through a connection with the visual arts.<sup>6</sup> But the contrast with music is at least implicit. Thus Toop refers to the 'determinedly non-musical sound processes of Minoru Sato and Atsushi Tominaga [which] documented the peripheral bug noise and fugitive crackle of loudspeakers saturated by steam or disconnecting electrodes planted in vibrating window frames'. Sato comments that 'When we reflect on the condition that most sound works have been requisitioned by music, we are forced to think that the perception/consciousness of sound as a phenomenon has not been valued', while Mamoru Fujieda argues that 'The common notion that any art form using sound as its material is in itself music has begun to lose its validity'.<sup>7</sup> Certainly there are many intermediate cases where even proponents of non-musical soundart will agree that there are musical elements, for instance the audiovisual creations of Ryoji Ikeda.

Even those sceptical of the artistic value of such practices must allow that they challenge what Toop describes as the 'popular logic' that meaningful, organized sound must be either music or speech. This popular logic—what I term the universalist position that music is the only art of sound—traditionally goes with the assumption that music exploits as material a particular range of

<sup>5</sup> 'In the 1990s', Toop continues', 'audio art overlapped with manifestations of ambient music, defined in the 1970s by Brian Eno and revived in the late 1980s in the wake of techno and acid house' (entry on 'Environmental Music' in S. Sadie and J. Tyrrell [eds], *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2004]).

<sup>6</sup> Toop refers to soundart's 'interest in using sound to articulate physical space', and describes it as 'sound combined with visual art practices' which creates a 'closer engagement with the environment and auditor' than is found within the concert hall. Elsewhere, he writes that with soundart, unlike music, we are immersed in sound, 'interacting rather than facing forward and waiting to be entertained' (D. Toop, 'The Art of Noise', *Tate Etc.*, no. 3 [Spring 2005], pp. 62–69 at p. 61).

<sup>7</sup> Hayward Gallery, *Sonic Boom: The Art of Sound* (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2000), p. 119.

sounds, namely tones. During the twentieth century, however, universalism and the conception of music as the art of tones have become separated, as music has embraced more noise elements. However, I will argue that, paradoxically, the tonal basis of music has been clarified by the rejection of instrumental puritanism. Thus I reassert that music is the art of tones, while rejecting universalism and recognizing an emergent non-musical soundart which takes non-tonal sounds as its material. To allow that any sounds can be incorporated into music is not, I argue, to say that any sounds can constitute music—thus room is left for my conclusion that music makes predominant use of tonal sounds, and that there is also a non-musical soundart. Together with music, I will argue, soundart exhausts the possibilities of high art among the pure aural arts. Within this argumentative context, I suggest materials for answering the more fundamental philosophical question ‘What is music?’

There is one further issue that should be noted here. It may appear that it is not only contemporary soundartists who question whether music is the universal art of sound. Roger Scruton in *The Aesthetics of Music* writes that

Music is a special kind of sound, and not any art of sound is music. For instance, there is an art, and an aesthetic intention, in designing a fountain, and the sound of the fountain is all-important in the aesthetic effect. But the art of fountains is not music. For one thing, the sound of the fountain must be heard in physical space, and should be part of the charm of a place.<sup>8</sup>

As we will see, Scruton holds that music exploits acousmatic experience—involving the listener’s spontaneous detachment of sound from its circumstances of production—while fountains do not. But the important consideration for present purposes is that fountain art cannot belong to the high arts. The art in constructing fountains is art with a small ‘a’—a practice involving skill or craft whose ends are essentially aesthetic—and Scruton would probably maintain that among soundarts, only music can aspire to high art status.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to Scruton’s sophisticated universalist position, I believe that there is a potential high art of non-musical soundart. However, I will argue that music turns out to be on a continuum with non-musical soundarts, differing from them in the preponderance of tonal material. The question of the nature and purpose of art—and of music as an art, and as a high art—may be aesthetically more profound, but here I address only the most basic philosophical issues concerning the characterisation of music.

<sup>8</sup> R. Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 16. Scruton’s general position is discussed in A. Hamilton, ‘The Aesthetics of Western Art Music: Discussion of Roger Scruton’s *The Aesthetics of Music*’, *Philosophical Books*, vol. 40, no. 3 (1999), pp. 145–155.

<sup>9</sup> Discussed in A. Hamilton *Aesthetics and Music* (London: Continuum, forthcoming 2007).

## II. THE CONCEPT OF MUSIC

My concern here is with the question ‘What is music?’, understood as on the level of ‘What is language?’ and ‘What is depiction?’—though it is, I believe, inextricably linked with the question ‘How do we conceive of music?’ in a way not paralleled by the questions about language and depiction. I will argue that music possesses at least salient features, and that these may be elucidated by looking at three different directions of characterization: acoustic, aesthetic, and acousmatic. (As will become clear, I am looking for salient features and not necessary and sufficient conditions.) The claim that music has salient features has been contested, if not by philosophers, then certainly by other thinkers. Robin Maconie writes that ‘for sound to be perceived as music is an act of individual determination ... what is music to one listener may be noise to another’.<sup>10</sup> For John Cage, notoriously, there was no significant distinction between music and ambient sound.<sup>11</sup> But I reserve discussion of these more subversive lines of thought for another occasion.

Slightly less subversive considerations arise from cultural relativism—from the fact that, like the concept of art itself, conceptualizations of music have changed historically, and varied across cultures. The Western system of fine arts appeared in its modern form as late as the eighteenth century, and does not have universal application either historically or cross-culturally; therefore one cannot appeal straightforwardly to the post-Enlightenment concept of art in characterizing music.<sup>12</sup> Recent ethnomusicological and anthropological studies have shown that many languages have terms which only partly cover what post-Enlightenment Europeans mean by the term ‘music’. Inuit and most North American Indian languages do not have a general term for music; the Blackfoot language has ‘saapup’ as its principal word for music, but this means something like ‘singing, dancing and ceremony’.<sup>13</sup> In

<sup>10</sup> J. Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1990), p. 60; R. Maconie, *The Concept of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 11–12.

<sup>11</sup> 4’ 33” exemplifies—in Goodman’s sense of ‘exemplify’—ambient sound, and does not represent or document it; the piece is a framing device.

<sup>12</sup> The modern system of the fine arts is discussed by O. Kristeller, ‘The Modern System of the Arts’, in his *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1990), pp. 163–227.

<sup>13</sup> These examples come from B. Nettl, ‘An Ethnomusicologist Contemplates Universals in Musical Sound and Musical Culture’, in N. Wallin *et al.* (eds), *The Origins of Music* (Cambridge, MA: MIT/Bradford, 2001), pp. 462–472; see also B. Nettl, *Blackfoot Musical Thought: Comparative Perspectives* (Ohio: The Kent State U.P., 1989), and C. Robertson-De Carbo, ‘*Tayil* as Category and Communication among the Argentine Mapuche: A Methodological Suggestion’, *1976 Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council*, vol. 8, pp. 35–42.

Africa there is no term for music in Tiv, Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Birom, Hausa, Idoma, Eggon, Luo, or Jarawa. Even the German language distinguishes *Musik* and *Tonkunst*, even if the latter term is now antiquated.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, R. Murray Schafer, the Canadian composer and writer on soundscape, brings the anthropological argument back home to Western music. He claims that before the musical sounds in our cities—church bells, the postman’s horn—were replaced by mechanical noises, and music moved into the concert hall, music and ‘noise’ were not distinct categories.<sup>15</sup> Ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl, citing examples such as the preceding, allows that all cultures have something that sounds to Western ears like music and ‘have a kind of sound communication that they distinguish from ordinary speech’, but wonders whether ‘the various things that are distinct from speech [are] really at all the same kind of thing?’

In fact, it seems absurd to suggest that non-Western cultures lack music—for as Stephen Davies succinctly puts it, the term ‘music’ carries less conceptual baggage than ‘art’.<sup>16</sup> Relativistic concerns raised in the previous paragraph are undermined first by noting that the existence of a continuum, and an area of vagueness, between speech and music, is not essentially problematic. Cultural concepts often exhibit such indeterminacy in their application. Speech is distinguished from music by its lack of fixed pitches, but football chants, religious chant, and text-sound pieces such as Kurt Schwitters’s *Ur-Sonate* constitute interesting and genuinely intermediate cases. Second and more important, cultural differences do not make it impossible to isolate defining or at least salient features of music. To say that would be to affirm the anthropologists’ heresy—if Anthropology, except in its Lévi-Straussian moment, traditionally emphasizes difference, Philosophy should recognize unity. A natural first response to this heresy is that while not all societies conceptualize music in the same way as post-Enlightenment Western listeners, they do produce the same kind of aural phenomenon. This seems to be the response of Nettl when, in answer to his own earlier doubts, he argues very sensibly that although many African societies do not have a conception of music matching that found in Western culture, ‘the ease with which many African societies have adapted to the English or French conceptions of and terms for “music” suggests that the domain exists, integrally, even where no term is

<sup>14</sup> *Musik* applies to all kinds of music, while *Tonkunst* refers to Western art music, and was used in that sense by Hanslick; today it sounds pretentious or élitist.

<sup>15</sup> ‘The string quartet and urban pandemonium are historically contemporaneous’ (R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* [Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977], p. 103). See T. Van Leeuwen, *Speech, Music, Sound* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> S. Davies, *Musical Works and Performances* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 258.

available'.<sup>17</sup> He comments on the widespread use of tones with consistent pitch, and of tonal systems using from five to seven tones; he adds that all societies have a type or kind of stylized vocal expression distinguished from ordinary speech—most readily called singing, but which might also be referred to as chanting, screaming, howling, or keening.<sup>18</sup>

To reiterate, the natural first response to the anthropological heresy assumes that it is the nature of these sounds, rather than producers' or listeners' experience or conceptualization of them, that constitutes music. A performance of Mozart could be experienced non-musically—as muzak perhaps—but it would be perverse to deny that it contained musical sounds, that is, organized tones, regardless of how a particular listener experienced or chose to experience them. So, one may conclude, what matters is not whether the sounds are experienced or conceptualized as this or as that, but what 'this' is when it is music—that sounds constitute music through their intrinsic nature and organization. I will call this the *phenomenal thesis*, which says that we should not confuse the conceptualization of music with the phenomenon of music.

I believe that although the anthropologists' heresy must be avoided—the concept 'music' is certainly instantiated in all cultures—the phenomenal thesis is not the right way to do so. The thesis tends towards an *acoustic characterization* of music—a physical interpretation of the truism that music is organized sound.<sup>19</sup> According to this characterization, musical sounds or tones consist of regular, stable, periodic vibrations; noise consists of irregular, unstable, non-periodic vibrations. Within the science of acoustics, noise is defined as undifferentiated sound without definite pitch, or as material whose exact frequencies are not determined, but statistical.<sup>20</sup> However, this technical definition has no viable parallel in an acoustic characterization of 'music' as sound of periodic vibration, since acoustic organization is not a sufficient condition for music; consider the cases of speech, or the hum of a finely tuned air-conditioning system at a definite pitch, each of which could satisfy the acoustic characterization. Neither does the acoustic characterization offer a necessary condition for music. This is not just because after modernism, music

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<sup>17</sup> Nettl, 'An Ethnomusicologist Contemplates Universals', p. 466; entry on 'Music' in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.

<sup>18</sup> Nettl, entry on 'Music' in the *New Grove Dictionary*, cites several accounts in musical encyclopaedias which assume a definition in terms of tones.

<sup>19</sup> An alternative interpretation of the phenomenal thesis perhaps regards musical phenomena as private objects in the sense of Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument.

<sup>20</sup> M. Grant, *Serial Music, Serial Aesthetics: Compositional Theory in Post-War Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996), p. 96.

has come to incorporate noise elements, since as I will argue, a preponderance of tonal organization is still essential. Nor is the reason quite that in many kinds of non-Western music, non-tonal sounds may predominate; these cases will be included if the acoustic characterization of music is extended to include rhythm, defined in terms of silences between tones.

Mention of rhythm brings us to the fundamental reason why tones cannot be defined in wholly physical terms. Like 'noise', 'tone' has both a purely acoustic and an intentional definition. Musical tones certainly have physical parameters; they are determinate pitched sounds of a certain stability and duration, which normally possess a degree of impurity as befits their human production, distinguishing them from pure sine tones.<sup>21</sup> However, for the purposes of characterizing music, the physical definition is too atomistic; 'tone' here is a relational concept which refers not just to the nature of component sounds, but to the way in which they are structured through rhythm, melody, and harmony—a structure that is evolving and meaningful, the kind that Webern despaired of listeners locating in his own music when he described one performance as 'a high note, a low note, a note in the middle—like the music of a madman'.<sup>22</sup> Another way of putting this point is that tones are not raw musical material, since they are already the product of human intentional action before they form music. There are tones in nature, such as birdsong and the song of the whale, but these are tones physically defined; with limited exceptions, tones not produced by human intentional action do not count as music. The wind-powered Aeolian harp produces tones without direct human agency, though the sound-producer itself is created intentionally, and it is doubtful whether the result is music. Indeed, the form/matter distinction breaks down here, as elsewhere, if pressed hard enough. As Lippman comments, 'all instances of [musical] material, tone itself not excepted, are forms as well, the outcome of some manifestation of human creativeness and intention'. As examples of such material he cites the tone of a violin, a major scale, a cadential progression of chords,

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<sup>21</sup> Hence Palombini's reference to the musical note or tone as 'a notable assortment of pitch, duration, and intensity, [which] has borne sway over European tradition and laid claim to universality' (<http://www.rem.ufr.br/REMV4/vol4/arti-palombini.htm>, accessed 2004). 'Tone' in this sense is not a musician's term; for most musicians, 'tone' refers to timbre. But Schoenberg objected to 'atonal' as a description of his music, on the grounds that all music uses tones.

<sup>22</sup> Comment to Peter Stadlen after an inadequate performance of his Symphony op. 21 by Otto Klemperer in 1936, quoted in H. Moldenhauer, *Anton von Webern: A Chronicle of his Life and Work* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 471.

waltz-rhythm, a melody taken for variations.<sup>23</sup> If musical tones are normally the product of intentional action, and are apt for artistic organization, then the dichotomy between the intrinsic nature of sounds, and producers' and listeners' experience or conceptualization of them, breaks down. In describing the nature of the sounds, one will inevitably be referring to producers' and listeners' conceptualization of them—this is the reason why the phenomenal thesis is unacceptable.

At this point, therefore, it is necessary to bring in producer- and listener-centred accounts of music, which refer to the purposes for which musical sound is created, and the kind of experience which it invites. To reiterate, the phenomenal thesis says that while a Mozart sonata could be experienced non-musically—perhaps as muzak—one could not deny that these were musical sounds, regardless of how a particular listener experienced them. What the phenomenal thesis fails to acknowledge is that while a particular listener, on a particular occasion, may perhaps experience Mozart non-musically, it is essential to the concept of music that there are many examples of sound regarded as music where listeners in general do not. The alternatives to the phenomenal thesis appeal to the obvious idea that 'organized sound' refers not just to purely acoustic properties, but to intentional organisation by a human agent, whether composer, performer, or listener. Hence the truism that music is organized sound is more plausibly interpreted by an *aesthetic characterization* of music: music is an art with a small 'a'—a practice involving skill or craft whose ends are essentially aesthetic, and that especially rewards aesthetic attention—whose material is sounds exhibiting tonal organization. According to the aesthetic account, music in all societies is the object of an aesthetic attitude in that it falls under the heading of 'useless work'; that is, it involves the refining of skills which are not strictly necessary for any social purpose the practice may have.<sup>24</sup> Musical sounds are those that are felt to be particularly rewarding as objects of aesthetic attention.

<sup>23</sup> For some reason Lippman denies that violin tone is form as well. He continues: '[It] is restrictive to regard sound [that we produce] simply as material that is formed. Instead we are confronted with ... music as a social activity rather than an object that presents itself to consciousness ... more importantly, music contains something of this quality of activity in its very nature ... even apart from actual performance' (E. Lippman, *A Humanistic Philosophy of Music* [New York: New York U.P., 1977], p. 45). The last sentence is close to Scruton's claim that music, in dynamic and other qualities of movement, is the object of necessary metaphorical perception, to which we return at the end of this section. Contrast T. Greene, *The Arts and The Art of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1940), p. 46: 'The primary raw material of pure music is auditory sound with variations of pitch, timbre, intensity, and duration, plus silence, regarded as the mere absence of such sound ... [it is] entirely preartistic in character and constitutes the subject-matter of the physical science of acoustics.'

<sup>24</sup> I would be sympathetic to Denis Dutton's account of artistic skill in his 'Aesthetic Universals', in B. Gaut and D. McIver Lopes (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2002); D. Pye develops the concept of 'useless work' in his *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design* (Huntingdon: Herbert Press, 1978), pp. 12–13, 34.

There exists in the literature a defence of something like the aesthetic characterization, though its author, Jerrold Levinson, rejects the label. He argues that music is sound organized by a person for the purpose of enriching or intensifying experience through active engagement—listening, dancing, performing—with the sounds regarded primarily, or in significant measure, as sounds. He contrasts regarding sounds as sounds with attending to them as ‘symbols of discursive thought’; any verbal component, Levinson argues, must be combined with more purely sonorous material.<sup>25</sup> The two components of Levinson’s characterisation, namely the purpose of enriching or intensifying experience, and the regarding of sounds primarily as sounds, correspond to the two components of the aesthetic characterization just outlined: the aesthetic end, and the tonal material through whose organization that end is achieved. I will now explore these components, which turn out to be closely connected, by developing Levinson’s characterization.

To deal first with the purpose. Levinson’s account concurs with my earlier claim that human intentional production is primary, and that birdsong and environmental sounds might at best be treated *as if* they were music. But is the purpose of intensifying or enriching experience—which unlike Levinson I believe is minimally an aesthetic purpose—too strong a condition? It may, for instance, imply that muzak is not music, which seems counterintuitive given the frequent label ‘background music’. The issue has some depth. The term ‘muzak’ was coined in 1922 by George Owen Squier, who launched a company to pipe music, advertising, and public service announcements into homes and businesses; the word is a fusion of ‘music’ and ‘Kodak’. Thus was born the modern concept of sound-design, integral to the concept of the modern selling space; research companies now exist which devote themselves entirely to it. Perhaps muzak in lifts originated—like mirrors—in a desire to make using them less boring; in the original high-rises lifts were slow. Maybe it can enhance the aesthetic experience of shopping, by making shops and malls pleasant places to be, causing people to linger and buy more. Even if one accepts this rather trivial sense of enrichment, however, the primary purpose of muzak is surely to anaesthetize—literally, to deprive of feeling—by putting customers in a relaxed mood in which they are more likely to consume. And other kinds of muzak aim to influence consumer choice more directly.<sup>26</sup> The

<sup>25</sup> J. Levinson, ‘The Concept of Music’, in *Music, Art and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1991), p. 272.

<sup>26</sup> Psychologists at Leicester University tested the effect of in-store music on customers’ wine selections. On alternating days, French accordion music or German brass band music were played; prices were similar, and national flags were attached to each display. When French music played, 40 bottles of French wine and 8 bottles of German were sold; when German music played, 22 bottles of German wine and 12 bottles of French wine were sold (A. North *et al.*, ‘The Influence of In-store Music on Wine Selections’, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 84 [1999], pp. 271–276).

BBC's 'Music While You Work' was intended to increase productivity during World War II; sound design is applied to inmates at Guantanamo Bay, or to disperse youths outside shops.<sup>27</sup> Muzak compilations use—that is, mention—music, and therefore aurally have many of the properties of music, but are engineered using processes such as compression, to make them bland and unintrusive.

One does not have to accept Vance Packard's critique of consumerism to recognize crucial differences between the aims of muzak and the more positive relaxing effects of New Age, Ambient and Techno, music therapy, or traditional lullabies.<sup>28</sup> Related categories are background music such as easy-listening, light music, lounge music, and eighteenth-century *Tafelmusik*; like muzak, commodified pop music for FM radio play is treated to make it unintrusive to the listener.<sup>29</sup> But while background music and commodified pop subordinate the aesthetic, muzak rejects it completely in favour of commercial or political imperatives. It has no aesthetic aim; it is not meant to be listened to, but rather to elicit a subliminal, Pavlovian reaction. Odours or drugs would serve as well. Muzak is an evil because it erodes people's aesthetic capacities—their ability to hear anything. It degrades their response to music. Muzak, whether in lifts or restaurants or piped to telephone customers on hold, belongs under the heading of sound-design, and while sound-design can have an aesthetic purpose, it does not do so when it takes the form of muzak. While sound-design may overlap with music, its aesthetic aims are fused with more functional ones. It embraces such diverse phenomena as Native American or African talking drums, and Morse code, and the concept is developed in section 3.

I am not sure whether one should argue that muzak is not music. To show this, one would at least have to show that the author of Vivaldi-as-piped-down-the-phone-line is not just the eighteenth-century composer, but also the Muzak Corporation. However, I am seeking salient features and not necessary and sufficient conditions for something to count as music. So the aesthetic characterization of music that I am defending requires only that the existence of these quasi- or non-aesthetic genres is parasitic on that of music

<sup>27</sup> 'Music While You Work' began in June 1940, and presented a non-stop medley of popular tunes. A BBC memo for the programme reads: 'Banned completely: numbers with predominant rhythm, insufficient melody or other unsuitable characteristics; numbers that are too lethargic and unsuited to any speeding up of tempo; all modern slow waltzes owing to their soporific tendencies.' 'Deep in the Heart of Texas' was also banned, as its clapping motif caused workers to beat hammers and other tools on the workbench, doing much damage (<http://www.whirligig-tv.co.uk/radio/mwyw.htm>, accessed 2005).

<sup>28</sup> V. Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (Harmondsworth, Middx.: Penguin, 1960).

<sup>29</sup> Kant had harsh words for *Tafelmusik*: 'an odd thing, which is supposed to sustain the mood of joyfulness merely as an agreeable noise, and to encourage the free conversation of one neighbour with another without anyone paying attention to its composition' (*Critique of Judgment*, section 44, Ak. 305).

which does aim to enrich and intensify experience—that is, that not all music could be background music. To sustain this claim, one must confront a further objection to the aesthetic characterization, which says that genuinely aesthetic responses to music did not exist before the advent of autonomous art in the eighteenth century—art without direct social function whether for church or aristocracy. This objection contrasts with considerations arising from anthropological relativism that were presented earlier, which questioned whether music is present in all societies; the present objection concerning pre-eighteenth-century concepts of the aesthetic implies more plausibly that music, assumed to exist in all societies, need not always have aesthetic ends. Levinson—who, as we have seen, distinguishes the enrichment and intensification of experience from what he regards as more purely aesthetic aims—argues that music for the accompaniment of ritual, for the intensification of warlike spirit, or for dancing, does not call for aesthetic appreciation in the sense of requiring specific attention to beauty and other aesthetic properties. On this view, it is only since the Enlightenment that aesthetic responses have become purified; Neolithic peoples who gazed at a beautiful sunset were as much in awe of the Sun God as delighting in natural beauty, and in Ancient Greece the aesthetic and ethical were thoroughly interfused.

These claims rest, I believe, on an unacceptably rarefied interpretation of the aesthetic. Music has always on occasion been treated as background, though the tendency has become almost ubiquitous in the era of mechanical reproduction. But on the broader conception of the aesthetic which I would defend, Levinson's implication that music was not listened to aesthetically until the later eighteenth century is quite implausible. Bach, for instance, saw his keyboard music as a heightened intellectual and spiritual activity; though neglected after his lifetime, it was known by Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin. So is that broader conception correct? I believe that the enriching and intensifying of experience just is the aesthetic aim, and so the anti-aesthetic objection that Levinson makes turns out to be self-defeating. Underlying it is a key error—a purification of the aesthetic attitude that is also a rarefication. Levinson's characterization of the aesthetic response as 'contemplative and distanced apprehension of pure patterns of sound' may seem Kantian in its echoes of disinterested pleasure—though the reference to 'patterns of sound' is too static, and one should refer rather to an evolving syntax.<sup>30</sup> However, it implicitly equates aesthetic experience with the attitude of the so-called aesthete, and is unduly restrictive. The aesthetic is ordinary and ubiquitous; the eye or ear lingers on everyday objects, and 'pleasing to me' rapidly transforms into—simply—'pleasing'. 'Aesthetic purpose', I would argue, is a description at least

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<sup>30</sup> Levinson, 'The Concept of Music', p. 272.

as informative as ‘the purpose of intensifying or enriching experience through active engagement’, while the consequences of direct social function—and of the imperfect separation of the ethical, aesthetic, and cognitive value spheres before the eighteenth century—is overrated by Levinson and others writers.<sup>31</sup> In his discussion of universal features of music, ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl mentions features of musical sound or style—vocal music, metre, or pulse, a variety of pitches, use in ritual, for special events, and in dance—and adds: ‘Another universal is the use of music to provide some kind of fundamental change in an individual’s consciousness or in the ambiance of a gathering’.<sup>32</sup> This, I would argue, is the aesthetic dimension, and it is universal.

Clearly, the defence of the aesthetic as ordinary and ubiquitous requires an article or monograph in itself.<sup>33</sup> I turn now to the second element of the aesthetic account, concerning the material of music. I have characterized the material as tones, while Levinson’s proposal raised the central question of what it is to regard sounds primarily as sounds. Listening to music obviously does involve hearing sounds as sounds, if the implied contrast is with hearing sounds as non-naturally meaningful or perhaps—possibilities which Levinson does not mention—as naturally meaningful, or representational of natural sounds. Music and speech differ in that while both impose a structure on sounds, the structure of speech is semantic while in that of music it is at most syntactic. Moreover, to describe music as an art is to say that unlike speech it particularly—and often richly or deeply—rewards aesthetic attention. Clearly the issue is a complex one. There is speech that is art—that is, drama and poetry, where one attends aesthetically to the actor’s or poet’s voice, to their delivery as well as the content of what they say. But music is essentially an art while speech is not. A sequence of sounds becomes speech if they are meaningful, and it is not essential, and indeed may be a distraction or barrier to understanding, to appreciate them ‘as sounds’. With music, in contrast, it is essential to appreciate the sounds as sounds, in the sense that one does not attend to them for the information that they yield about the world, whether through their natural or non-natural meaning. The important question of the resemblance of music and language, in the sense in which it is normally discussed in aesthetics, is not at issue here.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> As Young in effect argues: J. Young, ‘The “Great Divide” in Music’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2005), pp. 175–184. His claim is that music was the object of exclusively aesthetic attention even before the ‘great divide’ of 1800, when concert-going overtook the place of music in social, civic, or religious ceremonies. He offers interesting empirical evidence to this conclusion.

<sup>32</sup> Nettl, ‘An Ethnomusicologist Contemplates Universals’, p. 468.

<sup>33</sup> The claim is defended in Hamilton, *Aesthetics and Music*, ch. 1.

<sup>34</sup> It is discussed, for instance, by S. Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1994), ch. 1, and T. Adorno, ‘Music and Language: A Fragment’, in *Quasi una Fantasia*, trans. R. Livingstone (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 1–6.

But having excluded purely cognitive modes of listening, might it not be that one can hear sounds as sounds in a way distinct from hearing them musically as tones—or indeed, that hearing sounds as tones is *not* hearing them as sounds? The traditional conception of music as the art of tones is somewhat overlooked by Levinson, but is central to Scruton's treatment. At the same time, and logically independently, some avant-gardists argue that listening to soundart involves hearing sounds as sounds in a distinct non-musical sense.<sup>35</sup> Scruton argues that musical listening does not involve hearing sounds as sounds, though he agrees with Levinson, and with modernists and postmodernists, that no intrinsic properties of sound—melody, rhythm, harmony—are required for something to count as music. However, he argues in opposition to modernist conceptions that melody, rhythm, and harmony, though non-intrinsic, are still necessary, since these are defining properties of tones as opposed to sounds—and music is sound transformed into tones. Scruton's claim is based on what I term an *acousmatic characterization* of music, according to which music is constituted by the listener's experience or response to sounds, as abstracted from their worldly cause. Acousmatically, sounds are experienced as detached from the circumstances of their production; non-acousmatically, they are experienced as having a certain worldly cause. Scruton distinguishes acoustical experience of sounds from musical (acousmatic) experience of tones; for him, sound becomes tone when organized by pitch, rhythm, melody, and harmony, and 'tone' is the intentional object of a necessarily imaginative and metaphorical musical perception. He therefore has a threefold classification—hearing sounds as sounds, as tones, and as words—while Levinson assimilates the first two items under the heading 'hearing sounds as sounds'. For Scruton, the locution 'regarding sounds as sounds' implies that one is not having the central musical experience of acousmatic listening, while for soundartists it suggests that one is listening to soundart and not music—soundartists would not agree that regarding sounds as sounds has to be non-acousmatic or merely informational.

Scruton's emphasis on the exploitation of the acousmatic experience of sound is highly suggestive; however, as I have argued elsewhere, it is strictly incorrect. There is, I believe, a twofoldness to musical experience that is both literal and metaphorical, non-acousmatic and acousmatic. Each aspect is a genuinely musical element of musical experience. Thus listening to music involves experience in terms of causes of sounds, and experience which abstracts from those causes.<sup>36</sup> However, while the non-acousmatic is part of musical experience,

<sup>35</sup> Francisco Lopez explains how he is 'fighting against a dissipation of pure sound content into conceptual and referential elements ... trying to reach a transcendental level of profound listening that enforces the crude possibilities of the sound matter by itself' (F. Lopez, interview at [www.franciscolopez.net](http://www.franciscolopez.net), accessed 2004).

<sup>36</sup> Hamilton, 'The Sound of Music'.

the acousmatic is unique to it, so Scruton's stress on it is justified. Thus as my earlier discussion indicates, he is right to regard music as essentially an art of tones, conceived of in relational terms as structured rhythmically, harmonically, and so on. It follows that in its reference to tones, the aesthetic characterization accommodates the truth in both acoustic and acousmatic treatments: music is an art with a small 'a'—a practice involving skill or craft whose ends are essentially aesthetic, that especially rewards aesthetic attention—whose material is sounds regarded predominantly as tones. Against concerns that there is circularity in the characterization of music that makes reference to tones, I would reply that the circularity is benign, and reflects a conceptual holism or explanatory interdependence of 'music' and 'tone'. There is a relationship of mutual presupposition between the concepts of music and tone—one cannot acquire one concept without also acquiring the other; and one cannot manifest understanding of one concept without also manifesting understanding of the other. Underlying the aesthetic characterization is a deeper holism between art and the aesthetic. But that fundamental question, and the general justification of such holisms, are issues which cannot be pursued here.<sup>37</sup>

### III. SOUNDS, TONES AND SOUNDART

I will conclude by examining the implications of the preceding treatment for the concept of soundart. I wish to advocate the position concerning the relation of music and soundart which may be termed non-universalism. This position contrasts with conservative universalism and avant-garde universalism. Conservative universalists such as Roger Scruton argue that music is the universal (high) art of sound, and that it is essentially tonal—in the broad sense of tonal, of course, in which atonal music is tonal. Thus they reject the possibility of any aural high art not based essentially on tones. Conservative and avant-garde universalists agree in rejecting the concept of non-musical soundart, but differ in that for avant-gardists, 'non-musical soundart' is a mislabelling of an artistically valuable enterprise, while for conservatives the enterprise itself is misconceived. Conservative universalism is no longer tenable, I would argue; the real debate is between liberal or avant-garde universalism, and non-universalism. Stockhausen advocates the former; taking electronic composers' discovery of the continuum between sound and noise—acoustically defined as unstable periodicity—as vital, he concludes that 'Nowadays any noise is musical material'.<sup>38</sup> In similar vein, Marina Rosenfeld comments that 'instead of the notion of [Morton] Feldman's

<sup>37</sup> A general account of conceptual holism is offered in A. Hamilton, *Memory and the Body: A Study in Self-Consciousness* (forthcoming).

<sup>38</sup> K. Stockhausen, *Stockhausen On Music: Lectures And Interviews*, compiled by Robin Maconie (London: Marion Boyars, 1989), p. 109.

work contributing to a history of “freeing sound from music” ... I experience the opposite: that in a great deal of groundbreaking twentieth-century music there was an attempt to radically reintegrate sound into music’.<sup>39</sup> Non-universalists, in contrast, claim that there is a genuinely non-musical soundart which aims to ‘free sound from music’. Wiora, for instance, assumes non-universalism when he writes: ‘Music is a play of tones ... If [other sounds] are numerous, the result is only partially musical. If they predominate, it is no longer music’.<sup>40</sup> Non-universalism inherits the truth in conservative universalism, that the central concept of music is tonal—again in the broad sense of tonal.

To develop a point made earlier about ‘non-tonal’ music, the claim that the central concept of music is tonal does not exclude borderline cases. A piece consisting of a pure, single sine-tone might not count as music because music characteristically uses impure tones, impurity being an inevitable consequence of human intentional production using the voice of traditional instruments. It might also be argued that a piece could involve no tones and yet be music—consider a piece for tam-tam with no pitched tone, and maracas; or Australian aboriginal music where glissandos and portamentos predominate.<sup>41</sup> In fact there is a continuum of universalist positions, from conservative to avant-garde, depending on the degree to which non-tonal material is allowed to enter into music. This is not simply a matter of contrasting a predominantly tonal composition into which elements of noise are incorporated, with a composition which predominantly comprises noise as material. For when the structural nature of tone is recognized, in a holistic account involving rhythm, melody, and harmony, as opposed to an atomistic one, it is possible to contrast musical organization of essentially non-tonal material (as found in some of the work of contemporary German composer Helmut Lachenmann), or a Fiat advert in which car noises are organised in a rhythmic structure, with the physical or non-tonal organisation of tonal material (Varèse, Xenakis).

The arguments of avant-garde universalists tend to be empirical—that advocates of non-musical soundart have rarely achieved anything significant.<sup>42</sup> However, I believe that there is a nascent category of genuinely non-musical soundart, and the issue is how it should be separated from other categories, and

<sup>39</sup> C. Cox, moderator, *Artforum* discussion, <http://artforum.com/index.php?pn=symposium&id=6682>, accessed 2004.

<sup>40</sup> M. Wiora, *Les Quatre Ages de la Musique* (Paris; Payot, 1965), pp. 191–192; quotation translated in van Leeuwen *Speech, Music, Sound*, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> I am indebted for these examples to Stephen Davies, including to his *Musical Works and Performances*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001) p. 49. His concern is with the definition of a work as a sound structure or rhythmically articulated array of pitched tones; definition of a work is more open to objections from borderline cases than is the definition of music as such.

<sup>42</sup> This seems to be Max Neuhaus’s position in his introduction to P.S. 1’s ‘Volume: Bed of Sound’ show in 2000, quoted in Cox, *Artforum*.

how its own internal distinctions can be captured. The following distinctions can be made. Firstly, soundart should be distinguished from sound-design, which itself falls into two categories. The first is what I will term *significant sound-design*, such as mobile telephone ringtones, alarm clock tones, car horns, door chimes, computer ‘earcons’, and airport announcement chimes.<sup>43</sup> The items in this category have a practical function, and a non-natural meaning; they give explicit information. The second category of *non-significant sound-design* comprises fountains, car or aeroplane engines, and tones for synthesizers and other electronic instruments. There is also an interesting intermediate category of sound designed to convey subliminal meaning; the way, for instance, that the satisfying clunk of a car door on an expensive model is crafted with the intention of conveying sumptuousness and quality. Turning from sound-design to soundart, two subcategories may also be distinguished. The first is *documentary soundart*; although Cage’s use of ambient sounds was not documentary, his influence on this genre is clear. Examples are found in the recent work of Philip Samartzis, and the artists mentioned at the outset of this article. The second category of soundart, intermediate between music and documentary soundart, is *non-documentary sonic composition*, which creates instead of merely documenting an environment. The successors of musique concrète in the GRM community, notably Bernard Parmegiani, provide examples of this category. Non-documentary sonic composition, like music, invites twofold experience, both acousmatic and non-acousmatic, while documentary soundart struggles to escape the non-acousmatic—even assuming its exponents wish to do so.<sup>44</sup> No example of so-called documentary soundart could be merely documentary, however; any artistic creation, even if it seems to involve only selection of material, has a form. If one sets up a mini-disc player and microphone in an underground station and records the sounds of passengers and trains for 77 minutes, then releases it unedited on a 77-minute CD, basic if mundane compositional decisions are still required—when to start recording, the location and direction of the microphone, the kind of microphone, and so on.

It may seem paradoxical that if music during the 20th century was coming to embrace all sounds, a non-musical soundart was also needed. While art criticism, particularly in the era of modernism, is replete with statements that a given enterprise is not painting, not sculpture, perhaps not even art, there is always the possibility of expanding the traditional artform to include the new activity.<sup>45</sup> It

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<sup>43</sup> The tones played before announcements at Kuala Lumpur airport are particularly delightful, I can report.

<sup>44</sup> The issue is discussed in Hamilton, ‘The Sound of Music’.

<sup>45</sup> Calder’s mobiles might have been regarded only as a new style of sculpture. He presumably thought that this would not do justice to their originality, but their categorization as sculptures might still have had a liberating effect on sculpture.

may be more forward-looking to expand the concept of music than to dissociate sound-art from music. There are the responses that the attempt at separation simply exhibits an unjustified 'genre anxiety'.<sup>46</sup> Or that the issue is simply sociological; whether self-segregation is a good solution or not depends on the practical problems that soundartists face—whether they suffer from patronage discrimination exercised by a conservative music tradition, for instance. However, I believe that I have demonstrated conceptual reasons, based on the concept of tone, why music and soundart should be separated. It follows that unlike art after Duchamp, in music, even post-Cage, not anything—sonically—goes.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> For instance, Wishart, *On Sonic Art*, wonders whether this is the case.

<sup>47</sup> Many thanks for comments from Jerry Brown, Michael Clarke, Jason Gaiger, Martyn Harry, Justin London, Brian Marley, Max Paddison, Nick Southgate, Roger Squires, and audience members at the ASA conference at Asilomar, April 2005.