

Solving the Antinomy Between the Aesthetics and the Politics of Music

I.

The aesthetic experience of a piece of instrumental music and its potential political significance are sometimes seen in a tension; they might even be understood as two incompatible aspects of its appreciation considered as an artwork. Whereas musical autonomists or formalists (e. g. Peter Kivy in his new book *Antithetical Arts* [2009]) deny the possibility of any kind of moral or political significance of absolute music, moralists and functionalists (e. g. Ph. Alperson/N. Carroll in their recent paper „Music, Mind, and Morality: Arousing the Body Politic“; *Journal of Aesthetic Education* [2008]) tend to underrate the importance of the specifically intrinsic value of a piece of music as a work of art. While both positions adhere to an incompatibility thesis between the aesthetic and the political dimension of music, they both do so for very different reasons. By way of introduction, in my paper I first would like to give a critical account of the autonomist and the functionalist position by critically summarizing the recent contributions of Peter Kivy and Ph. Alperson/N. Carroll.

II.

After that, I would like to give a short review of two traditional suggestions for solving the antinomy between the specific aesthetic value of music and its possible political content. I distinguish between two general strategies: 1) First, one could distinguish between two types of music and thus speak of the compatibility of the aesthetic experience of some kind of music (e. g. absolute music) with the political significance of another type of music (e. g. vocal music or program music). The antinomy might thus be solved by limiting the validity of the respective claims of the autonomist and the functionalist: Absolute music offers a specific kind of aesthetic experience but does not have any political significance. And some forms of vocal or program music might have a specific political significance, but they cannot offer its listener a particular type of aesthetic experience. 2) Secondly, one might claim that it is precisely because music has no specific social or political function that it is of especially high political significance. Adorno might have been an advocate of this strategy by which the aesthetic experience of music tends to become identified with its political significance. The particular aesthetic experience music might offer and its particular political significance tend to become one and the same matter.

To my mind, both of these strategies ultimately fail. As far as the first strategy is concerned, I point out that drawing a border between two kinds of different uses of different kinds of music is highly controversial. Surely, also vocal music and program music may be the object of a genuine aesthetic appreciation, and surely it can not be assumed just by definitional fiat that absolute music is devoid of any moral or political significance. As far as the second strategy is concerned, I claim that once one succeeds in disambiguating its main claims the identification of the aesthetics with the politics of music falls either in the autonomist or in the functionalist camp and therefore, in the end, does not succeed in solving the antinomy.

III.

My own original proposal achieves more than the first strategy does by going beyond postulating a mere compatibility of the aesthetics and politics of music. But it achieves less than the second strategy aspires to: the identification of those two aspects. Therefore I want to call it the interlocking thesis which, on the one hand, articulates the interaction between its aesthetic and its political dimensions, and, on the other, allows for their mutual independence and irreducibility. This proposal for solving the antinomy crucially depends on two distinctions: 1) First I distinguish between the internal and the external purpose or function of a piece of music. Its external function results from the use it is put to in some specific circumstances. But its internal function is an object of the understanding and particularly depends on its expressive meaning which remains independent of any particular social or political circumstances of its reception. 2) I secondly distinguish between a traditional, narrow and affect-oriented concept of aesthetic experience which exclusively focuses on the specific aesthetic pleasure of the listener of a piece of music and an extended, content-oriented concept of aesthetic experience according to which the aesthetic experience of an artwork has its aesthetic properties as its content.

With this two distinctions in place I now can formulate my own original proposal to solve the antinomy: Once we grant the possibility of an internal purpose of a piece of music becoming the focus of its aesthetic experience in the new and extended sense of the term, then we do not need to speak of an antinomy between the aesthetics and politics of music any more. We might instead speak of an interlocking between these two aspects which have been attributed to music already since Plato and Aristotle. The internal purpose of a piece of music might itself have some political significance, and for that reason its political significance might become a component of its genuine aesthetic experience. With this proposal, we do not need to identify these two aspects. They still might be recognized as mutually separate and irreducible. And surely, the aesthetic experience of much music does not depend on its political significance. And vice versa: The political significance of a lot of music is not dependent on an adequate understanding by an informed and competent listener.

IV.

To illustrate my main thesis I want to make use of at least one example: the instrumental music of Dmitri Shostakovich. Some recent discussions of how to understand the aesthetic aspects and the potential political significance of his music quite neatly fits the categories of my philosophical discussion of the interaction between the aesthetics and politics of music in general. First we have the autonomist or formalist position: and Peter Kivy (again in his *Antithetical Arts* [2009]) claims that Shostakovich's symphonies are to be understood as absolute music devoid of any external (or, for that matter, internal) moral or political significance. Given the clearly political reception of his music, this seems to me a very unpalatable suggestion. Secondly, we may observe that there are – broadly speaking – two different attempts to attribute some political significance to his instrumental music. Traditionally, he has been seen as a composer conforming to and supporting the communist ideology of the Soviet state. A new revisionist interpretation (e. g. Volkov, Ian MacDonald) wants to make him a dissident.

However, both the traditional view and the revisionist view fail to make a clear distinction between the external and the internal purposes of his work. The question of whether his music is to be understood as conformist (traditional view) or as the work of a dissident (revisionist view) makes sense only on the assumption that its external function exhausts its possible meanings. But music might have an independently internal function with a political significance. Shostakovich's music clearly expresses and articulates a collective emotion, the

fears and sorrows of a people at a particular time (see e. g. Taruskin). Independently of any external political uses to which this has been put and might be put: Its internal purpose gives his music its particular political significance as well as its aesthetic value.