Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 6, 2014

Edited by Fabian Dorsch and Dan-Eugen Ratiu

Published by the European Society for Aesthetics

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Proceedings of the European Society of Aesthetics

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: http://proceedings.eurosa.org

Email: proceedings@eurosa.org

ISSN: 1664 - 5278

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Musical Sublimity and Infinite Sebnsucht— E.T.A. Hoffmann on the Way from Kant to Schopenhauer

Albert van der Schoot^{*} *University of Amsterdam*

ABSTRACT. Kant's criterion for a work of art to be considered beautiful was the question whether we could appreciate it for its mere form. Unfortunately, Kant had no idea about how to enjoy (or even to experience) form in music. But one of his students had, and moreover, he proceeded from enjoying the beautiful in music to recognizing music as the sublime expression of infinite longing. Thus, E.T.A. Hoffmann bridged the gap between Kant's disregard and Schopenhauer's glorification of music as the highest of all art forms.

1. Pleasant or Beautiful

The state of affairs as established by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judge-ment* did not offer a prospect for a glorious role of music aesthetics in the 19th century. On the contrary: it seemed that Kant had pinned down music to a very modest position in the realm of fine arts – if music were to be admitted to that realm in the first place. For Kant finds it hard to allow music a separate platform in the hierarchy of arts. In his tentative division of arts in § 51, music has to share the position of the 'beautiful play of sensations' with the 'art of colours'. According to Kant, 'we cannot say with certainty whether colours or tones (sounds) are merely pleasant sensations or whether they form in themselves a beautiful play of sensations, and as such bring with them in aesthetical judgement a satisfaction in their form' (Kant, 1914, § 51).

His choice of the term 'sensations' makes it clear that these arts have little to offer to the intellect. Therefore, Kant found it difficult to decide

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whether even this common denominator of 'beautiful play of sensations' is not too much honour for these 'arts'. If, indeed, they have to be considered as mere sensations, they can only be qualified as 'agreeable'. The condition for them to be elevated to the status of being beautiful would require them to appeal to our finding enjoyment in their form.

Kant obviously strikes out upon paths that are entirely new – certainly for him. He is stumbling around to find the right terminology, and clearly does not feel at ease here. His search for the justification of his hierarchical division involves a cumbersome detour through the physical and physiological aspects of our reception of tones and colours – an approach that he feels more at home with than the aesthetic judgement of their structural qualities. Only with a lot of hesitation he must admit that maybe, after all, these sensations are not *merely* sensations, but do also include a judgement of *form*. And in that case, we might be forced to consider such games as instances of 'beautiful arts'. Kant's phrasing does not betray any sign of enthusiasm for this idea.

In § 53, he compares music to poetry and finds her superior only on the level of amusement; this, however, is not what we are or should be looking for in our engagement with fine arts: 'For although [music] speaks by means of mere sensations without concepts, and so does not, like poetry, leave anything over for reflection, it yet moves the mind in a greater variety of ways and more intensely, although only transitorily. It is, however, rather enjoyment than culture [mehr Genuss als Kultur]' (Kant, 1914, § 53).

It is, indeed, one of the most striking paradoxes in the history of aesthetics that the philosopher who even today is identified as the one who broke the grounds for that new discipline, called *aesthetics*, was himself so hesitant to tread these grounds. Kant remains caught in a web of forms – not the aesthetic forms whose mental appreciation he is trying to uncover, but the formal reasoning of the *Schulphilosophie* that he was brought up with. With all credit to Kant for blazing the new trail, it would be left to others to bring in the harvest.

2. Music becomes Autonomous

During the last ESA conference in Prague, Mario Videira brought this issue to the fore in his contribution 'Kant et la Pensée Musicale du Ro-

mantisme Allemand'. Videira claims that the key to understanding the value of music in the perception of the post-Kantian authors is to be found in the Kantian concepts of *genius* and *aesthetic idea*. Far from denying the significance of these concepts (many writings from the early 19^{thth} century testify to their importance), I believe this view underestimates the impact of the 'age of aesthetics', of the *Zeitgeist* of the period in which Kant's notions came to life, that is, were 'historicized'. Notions that were developed by Kant in an abstract, timeless manner, and moulded, so to speak, for the next generation of critical authors to turn them into cornerstones of the aesthetic revolution that was to take place in their lifetime. Notions such as *freedom*, *imagination*, *genius*, and *sublimity*.

A pivotal role in this process is played by a student of Kant's who followed his lectures at the University of his birthplace Königsberg in the early 90's, so in the period in which Kant had already written the three pillars of his critical enterprise: Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann (1776-1822). Hoffmann is credited with being 'the first to speak emphatically of music as a "structure", (Kropfinger, quoted in Dahlhaus, 1989, p. 7) - in other words: to take the Kantian dictum seriously, that we appreciate the beautiful because of the purposiveness of its own, autonomous form - a demand that Kant himself was certainly not able to apply to music. Lydia Goehr devoted a study to the rise of the idea that music consists of compositions, 'works of art' to which we as listeners and performers owe a certain Werktreue (Goehr 2007); she mentions Hoffmann as the one who 'gave to this notion [of being true or faithful to a work] a prominence within the language of musical thought it had never before had' (Goehr 2007, p. 1). But before focusing on Hoffmann, I'd like to provide a somewhat richer context by reporting a few other attempts to fertilize the reflection on music with Kantian ideas.

3. The Romantic Revolution

Philosophical ideas have a tendency to develop gradually over time. But around 1800, the history of philosophy was accelerated. *Sturm und Drang* took over, and the new concept of *Romanticism* was quickly adopted as a characteristic of many of the new events and tendencies in all fields.

The French Revolution had materialized the insight that contemplations of freedom did not necessarily have to remain restricted to philosophical analysis, but could be fought for in combat.

Johann Gottfried Herder is probably the best-known philosopher (and theologian) to have personally attended Kant's lectures in Königsberg. He did this thirty years earlier than Hoffmann, and therefore got acquainted with a different, pre-critical Kant; he always remained sceptical about the direction which Kant's later philosophy took.

Herder was a prolific author, and we find quite a few fragments dealing with music spread over a multitude of works. These include a discussion on Mount Olympus, where the Muses try to decide which art form has a greater effect: painting or music (Herder 2006). Herder treats the matter in the style of a Renaissance paragone, with a surprising yet traditional outcome: painting reaches phantasy, and music reaches the heart; yet neither painting nor music, but poetry is the most effective art form, as it is the only one able to reach human understanding. Kant would have approved of this conclusion. But Herder's evaluation of music gains profundity, and in his 1793 essay devoted to 'Cäcilia' (who is in fact the Christian appearance of the Muse of music), he surmises that music calls for an attitude that Kant would never have thought of: 'devotion' (Andacht). In the context of 'Cäcilia' Herder still speaks of church music, but the appeal disseminates in much of the later literature, including his own: not the liturgical occasion, nor the religious context, but music itself demands a devoted attitude from us. We witness here the beginning of the attitude of adoration, characteristic of what the 19th century will come to call 'art religion' (Kunstreligion). Herder himself takes this step convincingly in Kalligone (1800), a text written in outright opposition towards Kant's Critique of Judgement. In his section 'On Music', he mocks Kant's reduction of music to a 'beautiful play of sensations', coming from outside. Yes, the impulse may be external, but what really occurs in listening to music happens inside. We feel moved, disturbed, and forced to comply with the tones from within:

Das empfindende Geschöpf fühlt sich bewegt, d.i. aus seiner Ruhe gebracht und dadurch veranlasst, durch eigne innere Kraft sich dieselbe wiederzugeben. (...) Der Compositeur fand Gänge der Töne, und zwingt sie uns mit sanfter Gewalt auf. Nicht 'von aussen werden die Empfindungen der Musik erzeugt,' sondern in uns, in uns (Herder 1955, pp. 145/6).

On the one hand, Herder intensifies the corporeal participation in our listening to music; in claiming that 'experience shows that we almost listen with the whole of our body', he offers us a very early announcement of Merleau-Ponty's *corps-sujet*. On the other hand, he strengthens the autonomous force of music in that same process, in opposition to the idea that tone must never be separated from word or gesture in order to be meaningful. Music is on the way to realizing its own freedom, as if responding to Kant's appeal in the 'Answer to the question: what is enlightenment?' Music is, so to speak, 'emerging from her self-incurred dependency':

Auch die Musik muss Freiheit haben, allein zu sprechen, wie ja die Zunge für sich spricht, und Gesang und Rede nicht völlig dieselben Werkzeuge gebrauchen. Ohne Worte, blos durch und an sich, hat sich die Musik zur Kunst *ibrer* Art gebildet. (....) Habt ihr also, ihr, die ihr die Musik der Töne als solche verachtet, und ihr nichts abgewinnen könnt, ohne Worte nichts mit ihr, so bleibet ihr fern (Herder 1955, p. 151).

Anyone who despises the music of tones in themselves, and in particular Herder's beloved professor Immanuel Kant, is well advised to stay away from it: music has conquered its own domain.

These two aspects, both the *physical hearing of music* (rather than acoustic stimuli) and the *maturity of musical sovereignty*, are revolutionary. Herder's role in the coming about of a paradigm that evaluates music as a power in itself, detached from any non-musical context, must not be underestimated. Moreover, Herder predicts what will effectively happen in the decades to come: even when putting aside all the mythological effects ascribed to music, the natural effects which the musical tones exert on human feeling will be enough reason to raise music from the lowest position, assigned to it by Kant, to the victory stand – 'auch in Beziehung auf die Kultur der Menschheit' (Herder 1955, p. 155). This is the process that will eventually culminate in Schopenhauer's celebration of music as the highest form of art.

4. From Devotion to Epiphany

Around the same time in which Herder radicalized his thoughts of music being 'culture rather than pleasure', the first writings of two close friends

began to appear: Ludwig Tieck and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder. The latter seems of primary importance as far as their musical aesthetics is concerned, but he died young and the publication of his work came in the hands of Tieck. Already during Wackenroder's lifetime they used to edit publications together, so it is difficult to distinguish exactly who wrote what, for instance in the *Phantasies about Art* that were published in 1799, shortly after Wackenroder's death. What can be established on the basis of their correspondence is that Wackenroder, coming from a Pietist background, was more inclined to the sentimental approach of *Empfindsamkeit*, whereas Tieck felt more attracted to the grandeur of Sturm und Drang (Dahlhaus 1989, p. 59). Wackenroder's Pietist background is important in that it helps us to understand how his inclination toward the sentimental experience of music is also informed by a religious orientation that leads to a similar experience of the presence of an almighty God, something which is beyond us and seizes us from outside. We recognize the religious impulse when Wackenroder, in a fragment from the Phantasies about Art confesses how he withdraws from everyday life into the Land of Music 'as in the Land of Faith':

Wahrlich, es ist ein unschuldiges, rührendes Vergnügen, an Tönen, an reinen Tönen sich zu freuen! Eine kindliche Freude! – Wenn andre sich mit unruhiger Geschäftigkeit betäuben, und von verwirrten Gedanken, wie von einem Heer fremder Nachtvögel und böser Insekten, umschwirrt, endlich ohnmächtig zu Boden fallen; – oh, so tauch' ich mein Haupt in dem heiligen, kühlenden Quell der Töne unter, und die heilende Göttin flößt mir die Unschuld der Kindheit wieder ein, daß ich die Welt mit frischen Augen erblicke, und in allgemeine, freudige Versöhnung zerfließe. – Wenn andre über selbsterfundene Grillen zanken, oder ein verzweiflungsvolles Spiel des Witzes spielen, oder in der Einsamkeit mißgestaltete Ideen brüten, die, wie die geharnischten Männer der Fabel, verzweiflungsvoll sich selber verzehren; – oh, so schließ' ich mein Auge zu vor all dem Kriege der Welt, – und ziehe mich still in das Land der Musik, als in das Land des Glaubens, zurück (...) (Wackenroder 1799, pp. 148-150).

The identification of aesthetic exaltation with religious exaltation becomes more emphatic here than with Herder. Not devotion, but epiphany constitutes the parallel between the two fields: it is a crystal-clear example of *Kunstreligion*.

5. Inexpressible Yearning

Wackenroder's outpourings lead us right into the world of E.T.A. Hoffmann. In today's literature on music aesthetics, Hoffmann plays only a moderate role. He is sometimes used to introduce a subject (both Goehr and Videira offer cases in point), but is generally remembered more through the way in which others have made use of his works, than through these works themselves. We know The tales of Hoffmann better as an opera by Jacques Offenbach than as the tales by Hoffmann himself, and we hardly ever realize that one of the most successful pieces of the ballet repertoire, Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*, is based on one of these tales. Schumann's piano phantasies op. 16, called Kreisleriana, have been successful on stage in their own right, but they owe their name to the articles that Hoffmann wrote under the pseudonym of (Kapellmeister) Johannes Kreisler. But even under his own name he played many roles: he was a lawyer, a public servant, an author, an illustrator, a theatre intendant, a conductor, a composer and a music critic. It is in this latter role that he adopted the pseudonym of Kreisler, and in the articles published under that name we find his most important contributions to music aesthetics.

What Hoffmann does is connecting the 18th century concept of the *sublime* with the new concept that emerged on the brink of the 19th century: *romantic*. The sublime had been attributed its place in transcendental idealist aesthetics by opposing it to the smoother forms that attract our attention as being beautiful. The sublime is not beautiful, yet very attractive, and it owes this attraction to the way it challenges our cognitive and perceptive faculties. Kant had cunningly taken advantage of this challenge by assigning an edifying role to the sublime: confronted with the overpowering forces of nature, we realize how majestic our Reason is. The experience of the sublime in nature evokes ideas in us that go far beyond what nature itself could realize. However, for Kant it remains an experience in confrontation with nature only, not with art. Kant could never have imagined any work of art as a vehicle of the sublime.

Enter Hoffmann. He knows where to find the sensorial experience of the sublime: in music. Instrumental music, that is, undisturbed by any words that might impose a literal 'meaning' on the music. After centuries of subjection to the reason-controlled domination of the text, music has gained independence, and leads the way; 'music reveals to man an unknown realm, a world quite separate from the outer sensual world surrounding him, a world in which he leaves behind all precise feelings in order to embrace an inexpressible longing' (Hoffmann 1989, pp. 96). The difference with Kant could not have been expressed more explicitly. No innocent 'play of sensations'; the world that Hoffmann sketches has lost all connection with the everyday world of sensorial experience. Unaussprech*liche Sehnsucht* – it is impossible to come up to the exact affective value of these words in any attempt to translate them. Yet Hoffmann, like everybody else, remains obliged to Kant. In Goehr's book, Hoffmann's quote is followed by the remark that 'disinterested contemplation, otherwise described as a free play (Spiel) of imagination or fancy, was increasingly described as isolated not only from our everyday concerns, but also from our rational faculties' (Goehr 2007, pp. 169/170). Kant had done his utmost to grant a legitimate place to a disinterested kind of interest, as part and parcel of his all-encompassing conception of Reason; but it was already too late. In Hoffmann's writings, we have definitely entered the age of Romanticism, where feelings grow stronger than reasons; and music, music alone, is the bearer of these extramundane affections. For music 'is the most romantic of all the arts - one might almost say, the only genuinely romantic one – for its sole subject is the infinite' (Hoffmann 1989, p. 96).

6. Beethoven as the Incarnation of the Sublime

A decisive difference between Hoffmann and Wackenroder is that Hoffmann does not only indulge in *romantische Schwärmerei*, but makes its object more concrete by pointing out the genius who has realized all these ideals with musical means: Ludwig van Beethoven. Hoffmann defines Beethoven as a 'truly romantic composer': 'Beethoven's music sets in motion the machinery of awe, of fear, of terror, of pain, and awakens that infinite yearning (*Sehnsucht*) which is the essence of romanticism' (Hoffmann 1989, p. 98).

But with hindsight, Haydn and Mozart are also included in the run up that leads to the triumph of romantic music. Haydn is still pictured as the composer who leads us out of our everyday world into the realm of nature – an idealized nature, that is, painting life as a 'world of love, of bliss, of eternal youth, as though before the fall' (Hoffmann 1989, p. 97). Hoffmann does not explicitly mention Haydn's *Creation* here, but his contemporaries will have understood the reference to Genesis: Haydn had been the first composer to express the moment of God's creation of the world with powerful musical means. An indefinite suggestion of C minor paints the Spirit of God as it was hovering over the surface of the waters – until the moment in which God said: 'Let there be light!', which is when a very definite and fortissimo C major takes over.

Mozart leads us one step further from the face of the earth, according to Hoffmann: into the spirit realm (*Geisterreich*). As opposed to Haydn's comprehensible love for human life, 'Mozart takes more as his province the superhuman, magical quality residing in the inner self' (Hoffmann 1989, p. 98). And after this preamble, it is left to Beethoven to complete the triumph of Romanticism in music, and be hailed as the most sublime of all composers.

In Hoffmann's writings, it is only natural for the terms romantic and sublime to grow together. This happens clearly in the review he published of the Fifth Symphony, a shocking and incomprehensible concoction in the ears of many listeners in those days. It may be the single most influential review of a particular composition that was ever published. Hoffmann writes enthusiastically, but with a professional understanding of musical structures that were only globally hinted at by Herder. He speaks as a fellow-composer, and all the elements that were shocking for the public, are praised by him as being just the right notes at the right time. What Hoffmann emphasizes is the inevitability of all the combinations and contradictions that Beethoven confronts us with: 'the way in which they succeed each other, all is directed towards a single point' (Hoffmann 1989, p. 100). What Beethoven realizes is the climax of unity in variety: 'It may well all sweep past many like an inspired rhapsody, but the heart of every sensitive listener is certain to be deeply stirred by one emotion, that of nameless, haunted yearning, and right to the very last chord, indeed for some moments after it, he will be unable to emerge from the magical spiritrealm where he has been surrounded by pain and pleasure in the form of sounds' (ibid.).

It seems to me that 'the sublime' feels more at home in such reviews

by Hoffmann than in §§ 23-29 of the *Critique of Judgement*. Hoffmann's review of what even today may still be the best known of all symphonies has done a lot for Beethoven to be accepted and even appreciated by a wider audience. Hoffmann spoke not just as a supporter, but as an expert, whose opinion was valued by many professionals from the world of music.

Eventually, the news about Hoffmann's writings reached Beethoven himself. And his reaction showed how important Hoffmann's support was for him. He reacted with the following lines:

I seize this opportunity of approaching a man of your intellectual attainments. You have even written about my humble self, and our Herr _____ showed me in his album some lines of yours about me. I must assume, then, that you take a certain interest in me. Permit me to say that, from a man like yourself, gifted with such distinguished qualities, this is very gratifying to me. I wish you the best of everything and remain, sir, Your devoted and respectful Beethoven (Strunk 1965, p. 41n).

Devotion and respect were not always Beethoven's trademarks, so his gratitude must have been sincere.

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