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Edited by Dan-Eugen Ratiu and Connell Vaughan

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# ***The Ineffability of Musical Content: Is Verbalisation in Principle Impossible?***

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ABSTRACT. In my paper I examine the question if there are any aspects of our musical experience that we cannot successfully verbalise. I compare musical content with linguistic, visual and other perceptual content, and I consider what aspects of these different types of contents might be ineffable. I suggest that only some aspects of musical content are adequately analogous to the former three, while other aspects must be explicated without any reference to other types of contents. After these preliminary considerations I turn to the investigation of the musical case and to a specific argument for the ineffability of musical content. In order to clarify the possible positions I discuss how our views about the ontological status of musical works affect our possible account of the ineffability of our musical experiences. Finally I distinguish two possible positions about the ineffability of musical content. First, one may argue that it is in principle impossible to express all aspects of musical content by linguistic means. Second, it is also possible to argue that such an attempt to verbalise is not impossible per se, but is not practical or necessary in most cases. I defend the latter position, arguing that although verbalisation would be highly impractical and useless in many contexts, nevertheless theoretically all musical content could be expressed in language.

## **1. Ineffability**

It has long been observed that at least some aspects of our knowledge about the content of our perceptual experiences seem to be ineffable, due to the limitations of our linguistic skills in verbalising what we perceive with our senses. Our linguistic skills might be insufficient for the task because the nature of our perceptual experiences may be such that at least some aspects of them defy verbalisation. Candidates for ineffable perceptual content

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include elements of pictorial, musical and other perceptual (e.g. tactile) contents as well. Besides perceptual content some nuances in verbal (linguistic) communication may also be considered ineffable. Let us first discuss why verbalisation may be difficult in cases of these types of contents.

In natural languages nuances of semantic content might be the source of ineffability. Consider, for instance, the difference between the meanings of the words ‘giraffe’ and ‘tiger’ on the one hand, and ‘man’, ‘fellow’ and ‘guy’ on the other hand. In the first case the difference between the meanings of the two words may be simply accounted for by explaining that they refer to two different species. In the latter case, however, we will need to give examples for different contexts in which one or the other word might be more or less appropriate. Still, our list of contexts could not be exhaustive, and much of our knowledge about the different uses of these expressions will be left to the linguistic intuitions of a native (or highly proficient) speaker of the English language. In other words, while explaining the reference of words does not usually cause difficulties, the connotation of verbal expressions often seem to defy verbalisation.

Let us consider a pictorial example next. When looking at the photograph by André Kertész below, we may easily construct sentences that adequately describe some of the content of the photograph. If we simply state ‘There is a man behind the glass.’ Or ‘There are clouds in the sky.’, then we certainly do not risk any misunderstanding about the description of the picture. Neither the linguistic structure of the sentences nor the semantic content of the words used is ambiguous, so it seems that at least some aspects of the photograph are not difficult to verbalise. There are, however, many other aspects and components of the photo that do not give to verbalisation so easily. If we want to describe some nuances of the picture – precisely where the figure is positioned, what texture the glass has, what shapes the clouds take – we will likely feel that our words fail adequately to convey what we wish to communicate. We often have similar experiences when trying to describe with words the perceptible nuances of our visual environment in general and the perceptible nuances of pictures in particular.





André Kertész: *Martinique*, 1972

It might also be useful to consider here a modality that is often disregarded in philosophical arguments about perception. When reporting our tactile experiences we mostly rely on words that express the perceived surface properties of the objects we touch. For instance, we describe the surface of our desk as hard, flat and smooth, while we say that the surface of a tennis ball is soft, rough and springy. For our daily life we simply do not need more fine grained semantic distinctions. The lack of a larger and more precise vocabulary to name a greater number of properties of the various surfaces we touch might easily lead to difficulties when (for some reason) we would like to communicate with words nuances for which we do not have adequate terminology. This may in turn lead to the conclusion that the means of natural languages are not adequate to communicate all of our knowledge about human tactile experiences.

Before proceeding to the specific case of perceiving musical content, let us also briefly consider the wider theoretical context of the alleged ineffability of at least some of the contents of these various types of perceptual modalities. Given the subjective nature of qualia, some aspects of the content of our perceptual experiences have been assumed or explicitly argued to be ineffable in various discussions in the philosophy of mind and perception. For instance, arguments about our difficulties understanding (in terms of imagining what it is like) the qualitative character of the perceptual content of mental states of other species are based on observations about the subjective nature of mental states.<sup>2</sup> In a widely discussed thought experiment Frank Jackson argues that a person who knows everything there is to know conceptually about the science of colour perception, but who nevertheless has lived in a black and white environment, still learns something new when introduced to seeing colours.<sup>3</sup> What she learns is argued to be not only nonphysical, but also something ineffable. However, the source of ineffability is not merely subjectivity but also the nonconceptual nature of the new information – learned from experiencing colours. In other words, some aspects of perceptual content might also be considered ineffable due to their nonconceptual character.

The function of these examples here is not to suggest any general position for or against the ineffability of perceptual experience, but to briefly introduce the wider theoretical context of the musical case. In what follows I will consider a specific argument for the ineffability of musical content, and I will argue that it does not show that there are musical properties that we can perceive but not express in language. It is beyond the scope of this paper to extend and generalise these arguments to other perceptual modalities, but at least some relevant analogies will be mentioned, and musical content will be compared to the content of other perceptual modalities as well.

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<sup>2</sup> See Nagel 1974, for instance.

<sup>3</sup> Jackson 1986.

## 2. Musical Content

Let us first consider some of the possible understandings of musical content in order to clarify precisely what aspects of our musical experience might be called ineffable. The first step is to examine if the potentially ineffable knowledge about musical content is analogous to our knowledge about linguistic, pictorial or tactile content.

Linguistic meaning consists of atomic semantic units (morphemes) that are the building blocks of more complex meanings (compound words, sentences, stories, etc.). The combination of single atomic meaning units into complex meanings is achieved by using linguistic syntax. Musical structures might be considered analogous to linguistic structures in terms of their syntactical structure, but without analogous semantic content.<sup>4</sup> Even though we might occasionally associate specific semantic content or feelings with some selected musical works (or tunes or movements), there is no representational musical vocabulary on par with the vocabulary of natural languages.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, although music has a syntactic structure, the audible (musical) perceptual content – similarly to pictorial and tactile content – has nonconceptual components as well.<sup>6</sup> If some aspects of our knowledge about our musical experience are ineffable, then the source of ineffability is not akin to the source of the possible ineffability of linguistic semantic content.

One important difference between linguistic and musical structures on the one hand and pictorial compositions on the other is that the complex content of pictorial representations is not organized in syntactic structures. That is, complex pictorial meaning is not similar to linguistic meaning in terms of the nature of its compositionality. Difficulties of verbalisation in the case of pictorial content, however, might be considered similar in some respects to difficulties of verbalisation of musical content, because some

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<sup>4</sup> See Raffman 1993, pp. 15-30.

<sup>5</sup> See Kivy 1991 for detailed arguments against the representational theories of musical meaning.

<sup>6</sup> See DeBellis 1995 and Raffmann, *ibid.*, on the nonconceptual character of musical experience.

aspects of the perceptual content are nonconceptual in both cases. We may also add tactile experiences to this list, at least with respect to nonconceptual content as a possible cause of ineffability. Although musical content is nonrepresentational, while pictures (with the exception of abstract pictures) have representational content, nevertheless difficulties with verbalisation in both cases seem to be connected to the lack of linguistic types of atomic semantic building blocks.

The lack of linguistic types of atomic meaning units is also coupled with the phenomenon that in the case of our visual, tactile, and auditory perception conceptual schematization (having schemas for remembering and reporting our perceptual experiences in our long-term memory) is usually considerably less fine-grained than our conscious perceptual discriminatory ability. On the basis of this phenomenon Diana Raffman<sup>7</sup> argues that perceiving nuances below the threshold of the most fine-grained level of conceptual schematization constitutes experiences and knowledge that cannot be verbalised. She first distinguishes two levels of mental representations of our musical experience. The first one is structural; it is the mental recovery of the musical structure. In other words, this is the level of the mental representation of the score. The second level, however, is nonstructural, and it consists of the mental representations of the fine-grained details, the nuances of the performance, such as vibrato, shades of pitch colouration, out-of tune pitches, and the like. On the basis of these observations Raffman concludes that “we actually *hear* many more than twelve different pitches in a typical performance. Let us call these many fine-grained determinate pitches 'nuance pitches', or 'N-pitches' for short.”<sup>8</sup>

After arguing for the existence of nuances as sensory-perceptual representations Raffman proceeds to suggest that although we can hear these nuances and could even name them, nevertheless we cannot remember them for long term communication purposes. The reason for this is that our discriminatory abilities are more fine-grained than our ability to remember

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<sup>7</sup> Raffman *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

the distinct contents of the perceptual experiences we can discriminate.<sup>9</sup> Since they are below the threshold of conceptual schematization we cannot report these sensory-perceptual representations in natural languages. We can show these nuances by ostension only, and we cannot retain the knowledge of these sensory-perceptual nuances in order to verbalise our musical experiences. We only know nuances *qua* individual nuances, not *qua* nuance-types in a schema. To summarise: according to Raffman we need conceptual schematization for verbalisation, but we only have that at the level of the music scores (mental scores), not at the level of nuances that we only hear during musical performances.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. The Ontological Status of Musical Works and the Verbalisation of Our Musical Experiences**

Before examining the nuance argument for the ineffability of at least some components of musical content, let us briefly diverge and consider if our views about the ontological status of musical works would influence our position about the ineffability of musical content. The relevance of this question arises from the fact that the arguments discussed in this paper are not about the larger issue of the possible ineffability of aspects of our auditory experiences, but specifically about our musical experiences. Although the two questions certainly interrelate (listening to music being just one part of our overall auditory experience), as we saw above, Raffman's argument was specifically about music, on the basis of differentiating between the structural and nonstructural levels of mental representations of our musical experience.

On the one hand, one may have a Platonist position about the ontological status of musical works.<sup>11</sup> In its simplest form musical Platonism is the view that musical works are abstract entities, characterized

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<sup>9</sup> Raffman proposes a re-identification condition for reporting our musical experiences. This is based on the idea that re-identification is a necessary condition for concept possession. See Kelly 2001, for instance for a detailed discussion of the re-identification condition on demonstrative concepts.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83-97.

<sup>11</sup> See Kivy 1983a and 1983b, for instance.

entirely by the formal (mathematical) properties and relations of the sounds. Musical works, therefore, may be described entirely conceptually by a key and the syntactic relations of notes (relative and temporal properties). Those intentions of the composer that are not noted in the score are not relevant; the score contains all the aesthetically and artistically relevant musical properties of the work.

According to musical Platonism performances of musical works are sound-events of an abstract sound-structure. The musical work itself is a type, while its performances are tokens of the type.<sup>12</sup> The tokens are not identical (as opposed to celluloid film or digital copies of a moving image); they are *interpretations* of the musical work as a type. This kind of type-token relation may be observed in case of other art forms as well. For instance, theatrical performances of dramas are also interpretive token performances of the drama as a type. A consequence of this position is that aesthetic and artistic properties attributed to the work itself are the very properties that are attributed to the type. Given that the tokens of musical works are interpretative performances (not identical copies) they also have aesthetic and artistic properties *qua performances* for their interpretive merits. According to musical Platonism however, these properties do not pertain to the properties of the work as a type. Indeed, we may say that a particular performance of a masterpiece was rather poor, while mediocre musical compositions may have good or even excellent performances. Before turning to the consequences of the Platonist position for the question of musical ineffability, let us also consider an alternative ontological position.

While the musical Platonist holds that musical works are abstract entities, musical historicists argue that musical works are sound-events and they exist in their performances. According to Levinson<sup>13</sup> some of the most important reasons for this position are the following. First, musical works come to existence by the compositional activity of the composer. Musical Platonism, however, entails that they are eternal entities, existing even

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<sup>12</sup> See Carroll 1996, pp. 66-70 for a detailed discussion on the different type-token relations in various art forms.

<sup>13</sup> See Levinson 1980, for instance.

before they were “composed”. Second, it is possible that two composers produce identical scores in different musico-historical contexts. According to musical Platonism they must be identical works. However, identical sound-structures composed in different musico-historical context may have distinct aesthetically and artistically relevant properties. For instance, one may be exciting and original in its context, while the other is boring and unoriginal, and it is not clear how musical Platonism may account for these different properties. Third, historicists hold that the specific means of performance sound production are integral to the musical works, because music is to be heard, not merely entertained conceptually as an abstract sound-structure.

According to the historicist position, therefore, the actual and full tonal characteristics of the sound sequences are an intrinsic part of the works. Musical works are not only sound-structures but also performance and sound-production means structures, whose aesthetically and artistically relevant properties are determined in a specific musico-historical context. The most authentic performance is the one that is most appropriate to the historical context of the work. This includes, for instance, using historically authentic instruments, since the specific sonic properties of the instruments of the historical era are also aesthetically and artistically relevant properties of the work. The intentions of the composer (even intentions not noted in the score) are relevant in this case because, according to the historicist, the score does not contain all the aesthetically and artistically relevant musical properties of the work.

Let us turn now to the question of what these positions entail in terms of the alleged ineffability of some musical content. On the one hand, the musical Platonist may argue that there is nothing ineffable about the content of the musical work itself, since its formal syntactical properties may be fully described with words. Only the audible properties of the performance of the work may be the source of ineffable experience and knowledge. On the other hand, musical historicists are committed to maintain that if our experiences of performances have ineffable aspects, then (since musical works exist in their performances) our knowledge about musical works themselves has ineffable elements. In other words, although a Platonist and

a historicist may agree that our experiences of the audible sound events (musical performances) may have components that we cannot verbalise, their position about the ineffability of the aesthetically and artistically relevant properties of musical works will be different. While the musical works may not have any ineffable aspects for the Platonist, the historicist will be committed to hold that if some aspects of the audible sound-events are ineffable, then it means that our musical experience itself has aspects that defy verbalisation. Although the status of musical performances is different in these accounts, what we need to see now is whether or not our experiences of performances have any ineffable aspects.

#### **4. The Ineffability of Musical Experiences**

In order to understand precisely what is meant by the claim that some aspects of our knowledge of our musical experiences cannot be verbally communicated, we need to distinguish two possible positions about the ineffability of musical content. First, one may argue that it is impossible to express all aspects of our experiences and knowledge of musical content by linguistic means. Second, it is also possible to argue that such attempts at verbalisation are not impossible per se, rather they are not practically feasible in numerous cases. In other words the question is if, as a matter of fact, a) we do not have adequate linguistic means to express all of our experiences and knowledge of the perceived musical contents or b) sometimes it is merely not practical or necessary to do so. It is not always explicitly stated if arguments about the alleged ineffability of musical content aim at establishing the former, stronger; or the latter, weaker position, but Raffman<sup>14</sup> clearly holds the stronger one. In what follows, I will argue that her arguments do not support this position.

As we saw, according to Raffman, verbalising our musical experiences and knowledge depends on schematization, because only schematization ensures that we can develop a terminology that is sufficient to name our experiences and re-identify them over time. She argues that re-identification

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<sup>14</sup> Raffman *ibid.*



is possible at the level of musical syntactical structure only; at the level of the mental score we come to have as a result of our musical experience. Musical nuances, however, are below the threshold of conceptual schematization, and therefore we cannot report these sensory-perceptual representations in natural languages. We can show them by ostension only, but since we lack sufficient terminology (in a scheme) we cannot retain knowledge of the sensory-perceptual nuances in order to verbalise our musical experiences.

While I agree with Raffman that we do not often conceptualise and report our experiences of musical nuances, I do not think that she has successfully established that it would be *impossible* to extend our terminology to name sensory-perceptual nuances. Although the differences between the processing of linguistic and perceptual contents and structures might make it difficult to form practically useful linguistic descriptions for all musical properties that we are able to perceive, this does not mean that we are in principle unable to do so. I propose that if it is necessary or useful for some purposes, we might as well devise conceptual schemas for other aspects of our musical experiences besides the level of the syntactical structure.

Ear training in music education is aimed at the syntactic level, but (as Raffman also admits) our discriminatory ability is considerably more fine-grained than is used in ear training. Music students spend many years sharpening their skills because what they learn is useful for playing and / or composing music. What they learn is the ability to reliably recognise and re-identify their musical experiences and to report them according to the music theoretical schema(s) to which they are simultaneously introduced. People who have never had ear training and education in music theory do not have this knowledge (these schemas) and this ability (recognising and re-identifying musical structures, such as chords, etc.). The fact that we can learn new schemas and / or more fine-grained schemas than we had previously possessed indicates that we need a convincing argument if we are to doubt that, for specific experiences, we are unable to devise new and / or more fine-grained schemas.

I propose that if we do not have more types of and more fine-grained schemas, then this is merely because it is not useful or practical for our purposes, not because we are incapable of forming such schemas. Besides the structural level, important nuances, for example bowing instructions for string instruments, are also often noted in music scores. These bowing instructions predictably determine the character of the musical sounds produced well beyond the structural description of the syntactical structure of the musical work, and it depends on the composer how much interpretive freedom she wishes to give the musicians. That is, it is the choice of the composer to provide or not provide bowing instructions. This is only one example that pertains to nuances that are determined by bowing, but there are many other examples for such possible notations pertaining to the level of nuances in our musical experiences. In the absence of a relevant schema nuances are indeed merely known *qua* nuances, nevertheless they could be known *qua* nuance-types as well, should it be useful and practical to develop a schema that would incorporate them. It might even be argued that we do in fact have a simple schema for bowing, and trained musicians (playing the same or a similar string instrument) may reproduce much of the bowing of another musician only by listening to her performance.<sup>15</sup>

I propose that we could construct more types of and more fine-grained schemas for systematically accounting for the musical nuance experiences we have. Relying on these possible schemes we could also name, re-identify and report the musical properties we perceive up to the limits of our perceptual discriminating abilities. When we do not use such schemes, it is not because we cannot have them. It is because the effort that would go into constructing them and to perform the ear training that would ensure their practical application is well beyond any useful purposes that these schemas and re-identifying abilities would serve. Furthermore, we may (and in fact we often do) use our technology to detect, describe, and name properties

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<sup>15</sup> As María José Alcaraz León pointed out to me (personal communication) we might also devise ways of communicating our perceptual experiences with gestures and with behaving in certain ways. This could be an improved version of the system of nonverbal communication that we already have, coupled with a higher level of awareness of the utilisation of the system.

well beyond our perceptual discriminating abilities. Providing the properties of the pixels of a high-resolution image is one example of providing descriptions of visual properties beyond our perceptual discriminating ability. Detecting and describing the properties of ultrasound is an example of schematizing sonic properties – even beyond our perceptual discriminating (in this case even perceptual detecting) ability. There is no in principle constraint on schematization and on extending our terminology up to the limits of our perceptual discriminating abilities, and we may also use our technology to detect, describe and name properties well beyond that. For a long time we could only speculatively theorise about the properties of matter beyond the limits of our perceptual abilities, but today we have sophisticated schemas and terminology for molecular and even subatomic structures and properties.

To summarise, my position is that theoretically all of our knowledge of our musical experiences might be expressed in language; there are no in principle ineffable musical experiences. I have argued that the limits of schematization and verbalisation (up to the limits of our discriminating and detecting abilities) are practical: it is our purpose and interest that determine how fine-grained we need the schemas and terminology to be. However, there are no obstacles that would in principle prevent us from forming practically useful schemas and linguistic descriptions for all musical properties that we are able to perceive, whether that perception is with our ears or with technological devices extending the scope of our perceptual discriminating and detecting abilities.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Although in this paper I considered some visual and tactile examples as well, here I make no specific claims about how these arguments may or may not be extended to other perceptual modalities. I will consider these issues in another paper.

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