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Volume 15, 2023

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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*The Impression of Music: Edmund Gurney's ideas about music in  
The Power of Sound*

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ABSTRACT. *The Power of Sound* by British pianist and theoretician Edmund Gurney (1849-1888) has long been treated as an obscure if valid addition to the philosophy of music. In contrast to much of the literature in that field, which is usually built upon a systematic vision putting music and its building blocks at the top of philosophical priorities, Gurney's book is a discussion-driven work, combing already published papers and involving serious addition to the dispute about the scientific vs speculative understanding of the world, music and human perception. Gurney – much better known as a psychologist or a philosopher – has been a trained musician and later in his life a concert pianist, both of which have given him substantial insight into the world of music. His devotion to music, as confirmed by his friends, has always been unshaken. He saw music as the greatest pleasure in life. Gurney became a concert pianist, and although his career ended abruptly, he was remembered as the most capable and amazing musician among his friends. When in 1880 Gurney published his *Power of Sound* he hoped to combine his knowledge and understanding of science (physiological and physical) and apply it to his experience and love of music, advocating the ability of music to lift people's spirit and help them endure life's difficulties. Gurney hoped to explain music's inner workings as well as convey his beliefs in music's potential for social and

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individual development. Unfortunately, the book's reception was slow and rather indifferent. It is only today that the Power of Sound regains its proper place among musical literature. The author of this paper aims to present the two concepts that are introduced by Gurney in the XIV chapter of *The Power of Sound*. Gurney describes music using the terms expression and impression. Both of these terms are treated by Gurney as two types of musical effectiveness, two ways in which music acts and is received. The author of *The Power of Sound* prefers the latter (impression) to the former, however, from today's perspective the term expression which was used throughout the twentieth century, both to describe the object and the subject's state of mind, has been often discussed in aesthetics, while the concept of impression remained connected to the behavioral reaction of the listeners and nothing more. The author of this paper explains presented concepts in reference to Gurney's aesthetics as well as to contemporary understanding of aesthetic qualities and the aesthetic experience. Following Roman Ingarden's and John Dewey's applications of the concept of aesthetic quality for their theories of aesthetic experience, she ventures to shed light on the possible understanding of impression. The author of the paper concludes her paper with suggestion that the category of musical impression, although confusing at times, may provide a way of describing the experience and understanding of music independently of a particular emotional effect or behavioral consequence, stressing the aspect of immersion in the process of following the music and the inner ideal motion in the music itself.

The important thing in musical comprehension, he holds, is the grasping of individual parts as they occur... (Levinson, 1993, p. 181)

## 1.

Edmund Gurney (1849-1888) is usually remembered as a psychologist studying mind transference, hypnosis, or hallucinations. His contribution to psychology and philosophy of mind is substantial. He has written on the issues of great importance hardly studied and poorly discussed before. As in the case of many intellectuals, Gurney's interests were varied. He was concerned with philosophical questions and at the same time committed to answering at least

some of these questions using experimental methods. In the age of the most rapid scientific development, as it must have been seen at the time, Gurney belonged to those, for whom the questions of transcendence or matters of specifically human perceptual potential, seemed most pertinent and highly at risk of being disregarded due to lack of scientific merit. Gurney, who distinguished himself at school with his intellect and talent for languages, received a prestigious scholarship to study at Trinity College, Cambridge, and was resolved to study those questions and many more. He proved to be an excellent student and a gifted researcher. Between 1883 and his death in 1888 Gurney devoted himself to psychical and psychological research, for which he is known the most, researching difficult and elusive phenomena of the human mind's functioning, among those telepathy, hallucinations, or hypnosis. He was the co-founder of the *Society for Psychical Research* (S.P.R.) and in 1883 became the *Society's Honorary Secretary*. Although he held no fixed religious beliefs his attitude towards supernatural and spiritual remained not only neutral and curious but also rather anxious. It seemed that finding evidence of a supernatural order would give more meaning to human existence, as Gurney thought that "The keynote of life without Supernaturalism is resignation: the keynote of life with Supernaturalism is hope."<sup>382</sup>

Gurney was also an educated musician and a gifted pianist, who at one point in his life attempted a solo career. His capabilities and devotion to music, as confirmed by his friends, have always been unwavering. Music was his greatest passion and an unsatisfied love (Myers, 1972, p. 36). Although his pianistic career has been cut short, it might have been the very impulse behind his extensive work on music *The Power of Sound* published in 1880, that rarely received a deserved recognition. Rollo Myers in his text on Gurney expresses his disbelief, saying:

It is something of a paradox that what is possibly one of the most original and important treatises on musical aesthetics ever written (...) should seemingly have won so little recognition... (Myers, 1972, p. 36)

In what follows, I would like to introduce the concept of impression used by Gurney to explain the great beauty and power of music, putting it in the context of Gurney's more general ideas

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<sup>382</sup> Quoted after <https://people.elmbridgehundred.org.uk/biographies/edmund-gurney/>.



and beliefs on music. In an attempt to understand the presented concept of impression, I am going to use the concept of aesthetic quality, as it was defined in the wider context of the theory of the aesthetic experience. In doing so, I will be following John Dewey's and Roman Ingarden's insightful theories of aesthetic experience. My aim here is to introduce the concept of impression concerning contemporary aesthetic experience and art appreciation. I will also turn to Jerrold Levinson and his understanding of Gurney's view on music perception and values. In conclusion, I will use both the concept of impression and the idea of careful and open listening to explain the reception of music and musical works and the pleasure thereof as consisting most of all of the following musical sounds as they appear as unified and complex motion. The idea of the impression of music as explained by Gurney implies that music's ability to make an impression comes from music's inner motion – the process of music development as perceived and followed by an engaged mind.

## 2.

As suggested before *The Power of Sound* has not been given the attention it deserves. It is only today that the book regains its proper place among musical literature and is seen as a valid addition to the philosophy of music. In the second half of the twentieth century, Gurney's work was discussed by philosophers of music, among others Jerrold Levinson, who devoted his book *Music in the Moment* to developing a theory of the perception of music based on Gurney's *The Power of Sound*.<sup>383</sup> Still, ideas put forward in *The Power of Sound* are hardly known to a wider public. As Rollo Myers persuasively suggested, a work of such a wide scope should be better known and studied much more carefully. It is with this realization in mind that I undertake to present Gurney's ideas about music, its affective power, and social and individual meaning.

Let me start by introducing some general views on music put forward by Edmund Gurney at the beginning of his work. The author maintains that the book has been written for anyone interested in music without any prior knowledge or experience in either writing or playing music. Gurney set out to explain music to those, who already cared for it but knew very little

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<sup>383</sup> See Jerrold Levinson, "Edmund Gurney and the Appreciation of Music", *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 42, Art, Interpretation, and Reality (January 1993), pp. 181-205, Jerrold Levinson, *The Music in the Moment*, Ithaca: NY, Cornell University Press, 1997, and Review: "Music in the Moment": A Discussion, *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 16, no 4, 1999, pp. 463-494.

about it. In his attempt to explain the subject popular and cherished already, he assumes that knowing how music is perceived is vital for its understanding and enjoyment (Gurney, 1880, p. v)

My chief object, after certain preliminary explanations, has been to examine, in such a way as a person without special technical knowledge may follow, the general elements of musical structure, and the nature, sources, and varieties, of musical effect; and by the light of that inquiry to mark out clearly the position of Music, in relation to the faculties and feelings of the individual, to the other arts, and to society at large. (Gurney, 1880, p. V)

Gurney wanted to illuminate the most important functions of music and the way music is perceived. His ambitious and discussion-driven work encompassed already published texts as well as newly developed argumentation. Gurney discussed current scientific works including Helmholtz's *Tenempfindungen*, which he believed to be a "groundbreaking" achievement in the area of physics on the understanding of sound, although declaring his disagreement with Helmholtz's findings, and Darwin's views on music. *The power of sound* stands out as the attempt to review important scientific contributions to the understanding of music while at the time providing a personal account of its understanding and importance. Still, it seems to me, the most important among Gurney's beliefs is his approach to music's potential for social and individual betterment. In the beginning of *The Power of the Sound*, Gurney writes:

It is my growing conviction (...) that this art, if its conditions were better understood, might do far more for numbers in all classes, who at present feel at sea in it, and get comparatively little out of it; (...) that it has a unique message for the uncultivated and ignorant... (Gurney, 1880, p. vii)

However general and vague this might sound, Gurney seemed to believe that music might help people who listen to it. He believed that it could provide a positive attitude and change lives by installing hope and enabling inner development. Just how that might be achieved was never explained in detail. Gurney believed in the emotional power of music, in its ability to affect the listeners profoundly in an emotional way:

...melody is a thing which is every day giving varying degrees of pleasure of a most positive kind to thousands and thousands of people of every conceivable variety of class, character, habits, and

mental and physical constitution; a pleasure, moreover, which is capable of seeming to many of these by far the most intense and perfect that they can attain through art (Gurney, 1880, p. 110)  
 ...the prime characteristic of Music, the alpha and omega of its essential effect: namely, its perpetual production in us of an emotional excitement of a very intense kind, which yet cannot be defined under any known head of emotion. (Gurney, 1880, p. 120)

The effects of music upon the listening self is, in Gurney's view, both immediate and impactful. No mediation, image, or association of any kind is needed for it to be profoundly affective (Gurney 1880, p. 121)<sup>384</sup>. And the affective results of listening to music are based not on sound itself, but on a special combination of sound, therefore melody or melodic order (ibidem).

Gurney admits that music is affective in an emotional way, but he is willing to go even further to find a more objective reason for this pleasant reaction upon listening to music. Comparing music and musical forms to the forms in architecture, Gurney concludes that while in appreciating the architectural shapes and forms, the viewer responds to the general forms and that is contingent upon human development, in music, the listener reacts to the particular forms as included in the movement as they are being listened to (Gurney, 1880, p. 122). He explains his beliefs pointing to small children even before the age of 4, who are capable of receiving and copying music in its movement, its melodies, and rhythms within, well before they may be capable of recognizing or appreciating the abstract forms or shapes properly, suggesting that the initial response to music is not mediated through knowledge or understanding of abstract forms (Gurney, 1880, p. 120).

### 3.

In the *Power of Sound* Gurney sets out to illuminate the functioning of music in reference to the scientific knowledge available at the time. Gurney's *Power of Sound* is full of references and arguments concerning current theories and claims, which sometimes have lost all or most of their appeal. The ambitious task of illuminating the inner workings of music in reference to the up-to-date scientific theories has a historical rather than philosophical value for us today. However, Gurney was concerned with aesthetical issues even more than with the questions of

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<sup>384</sup> On page 122 in a footnote Gurney goes as far as to stress that the auditory form is enjoyed from infancy. He says: *the enjoyment of auditory form in embryo must be referred back to an incalculable distance, and had as great a priority in the evolution of the race as it so perpetually has in the case of individual human infants* (see Gurney 1880:122 ).

natural sciences. He was concerned with explaining what is responsible for the beauty of music, its effects on listeners; its importance to individuals and society at large. According to Jamie K. Kassler, there are two primarily aesthetic questions, to which Gurney seeks answers throughout his book.

- (1) How judgments about beauty are possible, given the variety of individual and national tastes?
- (2) How music with little or no definable expressive quality can still possess a distinctive impressive or pleasure giving quality? (Kassler, 2011, p. 32)

There are, of course, many more questions equally important to the author, like the question of the scientific grounding for musical functions and their effects, the question about expression and the possibility of distinguishing expressive musical features, or the question about feelings expressed by music and their importance in relation to musical beauty. However, the second question outlined by Kassler is what concerns me the most here. Not just the possibility of affecting listeners by music which isn't [overtly] expressive, but the very nature of impression of music, that Gurney considers primary and essential.

It is important to notice that Gurney uses the concept of impression in his book in more than one way. It seems to me that he uses impression in a more general way when he admits that music is impressive in its nature, and then in a more specific or narrow sense that is still very general when he explains that music may be impressive but not expressive and that the expression of music is always in some way dependent on music impressiveness. I will come back to that.

In this general sense, music is impressive when it affects listeners directly. It impresses by itself. Negatively, Gurney says, it is not when something outside of musical work and often quite different from it may be linked to it. Impression is when the music affects the listeners by itself while the music lasts. Gurney talks about the impressiveness of music as something that has to do with music's ability to provide the listener with an experience of unity, in which they identify with the musical process.

Gurney explains:

In melody, (...) there is perpetually involved something more even than a suggestion of movement, namely, a direct impulse to move... (Gurney, 1880, p. 103)

And further:

It is the oneness of form and motion which constitutes the great peculiarity of melody and of the faculty by which we appreciate it (Gurney, 1880, pp. 164-165)

These passages make it clear that the impression of music Gurney discusses isn't only emotional. Further on in the chapter on ideal motion (chapter VIII *Melodic forms and the ideal motion*) Gurney explains that to identify the essential elements that give pleasure to the listening subjects, one ought to follow the process of perception of music rather than focus on the musical forms. He postulates turning "to the actual process by which Music is followed", and translating "the phraseology of form" into the "phraseology of movement". Gurney also states that in a process of listening to music, the movement and form are blended (Gurney, 1880, p. 164). Only then one may realize that "the oneness of form and motion" (Gurney 1880, pp. 164-165) is responsible for the "great peculiarity of melody" (Ibidem).

When a melody is familiar to us we realize it by a gradual process of advance along it, while yet the whole process is in some real manner present to us at each of the successive instants at which only a minute part from it is actually engaging our ears. (Gurney, 1880, p. 165)

And further still:

I can think of no better term to express this unique musical process than Ideal Motion (...) ideal in the primary Greek sense of *idea*, ideal as yielding a form, a unity to which all the parts are necessary in their respective places (Ibidem)

In the process of perceiving a melody, Gurney explains, one doesn't just take it as an external presentation, instead one feels being in it as if "something evolved within ourselves by a special activity of our own." (Gurney 1880, p.165) However complex and strange this may sound, Gurney describes, I believe, some things very important in the way listeners listen to music. The process of music – the processual movement that leads the listening ear on – must always

be engaging. Otherwise, the listeners lose their interest in it. Naturally, some phrases may be more engaging than others, and some melodies are easier to follow, but essentially if music is being listened to, the mind follows the movement in it and in following the mind is one with the movement. It may not always happen in the same way, but what makes the experience of music is just such an understanding of musical qualities as leading and pulling the mind making the motion feel uniquely subjective.

#### 4.

In Chapter XIVth of *The Power of Sound*, Gurney talks about impressive versus expressive music, and he uses the contrast between the two terms to explain better what he means. Expression points to the world outside of musical work linking melody, rhythm, or musical structure with images, ideas, or feelings, while impression affects the listening subject in a unique way pointing to music itself. Both of these terms are treated by Gurney as gateways to understanding music's ability to affect the listener. Music as expressive and music as impressive are two types of musical effectiveness, two ways in which music acts and is received. However, stating the difference between these two kinds, or aspects, of music, Gurney also maintains that music, which is expressive of other phenomena, must also be impressive. It must impress the listener with its beauty. He claims that *no music is really expressive*, if it doesn't also *impress*, as having the *essential character of musical beauty* (Gurney 1880, p. 314). This statement alone is quite confusing. The impressiveness seems now linked to beauty, which is never defined or explained by Gurney. The listener is led to understand that Gurney takes both impression and expression to be the most important qualities of music, however, from the previous statements it follows that while music doesn't need to be expressive, if and when in fact it is, it is also impressive (Gurney 1880, pp. 314-315). According to Gurney, impressiveness is in this sense more primary. I would gladly agree with Gurney, believing that while expression or expressiveness of music might only be reached and needed for some listeners, anyone who listens to music is led by music's ability to impress.

...the particular sense of excitement belongs to a state of consciousness known only in the realisation of music, and [is] not essentially referable to any mode or exhibition of feeling belonging to times when music is not being realized (Gurney, 1880, p. 338)

Gurney describes impression: “as something wholly unimaginable apart from the special manifestation” in music (Ibidem, 60). In contrast to this description, the expressive quality in music, as mentioned before, creates in us “a consciousness of images, or of ideas, or of feelings, which are known to us in regions outside Music” (Ibidem, 312). “The impressiveness which we call beauty resides in the unique musical experience”, says Gurney. It follows that the expression:

is subordinate (1) in the sense that it is far from being a constant element; (2) in the sense that not in it, but in the independently impressive aspect of Music, must be sought the explanation of the essential effect of the art; and that the very intensity of which musical expression is capable, so far from being explanatory, is one of the prime mysteries to be explained (Gurney, 1880, p. 338).

Let me stress, then, that according to Gurney, music perception and appreciation do not depend on identifying the expressive element brought by the music (the images, ideas, or feelings associated with it), nor on recognition of the large [architectonic] structures of musical forms; it is the aural process itself, in which the listener follows each small musical bit one by one, that reveals the beauty of music. Jerrold Levinson explains this as follows:

Gurney’s view is clearly inimical to one that many music theorists seem often to subscribe to implicitly — namely, that elucidation and awareness of large-scale structural relations is of great and primary relevance to the understanding of musical works, and that the whole is indeed as important as the parts, if not more so.

(...) What is crucial, according to Gurney, is involvement in the musical progression from point to point, the local movement from note to note and phrase to phrase. The essential form of music is located there, he would claim, and not in architectonic vistas beyond aural experience. (Levinson, 1993, p. 182)

And further

The experience of music is fundamentally a matter of an individual impressions of short extend (Levinson, 1993, p. 183)

I must admit that even the above explanation of the impressive quality of music is still rather

vague. However, what is clear is this. (1) impressive qualities of music and therefore the impression in music is its primary function, and (2) whatever this impression is, it may be seen as the very source of specifically musical beauty. Let me ask then, despite Gurney's numerous attempts to illuminate the musical process, what is the most important quality in music. From Gurney's analysis, one must infer that it is movement and a specific musical quality of moving. It is the process of tones changing one into the other and following in one direction. This movement does not only seem theological but it seems inspired, necessary, and still free. If the aesthetic qualities, as it often seems, are so difficult to define, perhaps, in this case, the quality of impressiveness in music may be seen as having to do with the movement and gradual change. It is on those very features of moving and changing that the aesthetically valuable qualities – as Ingarden would have termed it – are based (Ingarden, 2005, p. 226). However, the aesthetic quality found in artistic works is often identified with the way something appears or may be described as, in this case, the quality itself seems to be as much in the movement as in the mind perceiving it.

John Dewey, in *Art as experience*, describes the organic experience as filled with aesthetic quality. The quality itself, however, is not explained or described in any way throughout the book. The reader can guess what this aesthetic quality may be, as the process of experience is more successfully outlined by Dewey. Perhaps a similar situation may be said to occur in Gurney's *The Power of Sound*. As we learn from the author about the way music is followed and grasped, by agreeing with him and realizing that this description is much more attuned to what we have experienced as listeners, we may see that the musical quality that we seek is right in front of us. The impressiveness of music seems to be the music's ability to draw attention and drive it in one direction. There is one more way to describe the musical quality of impressiveness by following John Dewey's later text from 1965 *Aesthetics Experience as a Primary Phase and as an Artistic Development* (Dewey 1965). There Dewey builds upon his earlier explanations of organic experience as being a matter of fulfilment and completion, to suggest an understanding of the creative process in art through the development of an initial phase. "A continuation, – explains Dewey – using intelligent selection and arrangements of the natural tendencies of natural events" (Ibidem). The process, thus explained is more than the appearance, more than what it isn't. It may only be identified through being in it, through the development itself. Similarly, with impressiveness of music, isn't something, one may observe,



but rather it needs to be experienced and felt. The difference between the second description in Dewey's text, which places the stress on the development allows one to understand how the process of music, in music, may be the quality which the listeners identify with beauty. The very development that Gurney is talking about is the development called the Ideal Motion. The development of listening subject who is one with the music. The aesthetic quality we are looking for in music appreciation as much as in art appreciation seems to be present in the very process of perception. The impressiveness of music lies within the engaged following note after note of the musical process.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, let me say that the impressive quality in music seems to be, Gurney is quite persuasive in this respect, the very quality, that brings out the beauty of music. This quality – both complex and immediately experienced as the subject of listening – is the most important quality in music. To say precisely what it is, would be impossible as, (a) it appears in the very process of listening, and (b) it is one with the flowing of tones and rhythms, combining movement and form. It is why listening and attending to sound is soothing and demanding at the same time. It is in the pushing and pulling of the listening ear. This outstanding quality of the music may be recognized as part of the process of perception, while the process in the music is being internalized so well that it feels as if it developed from within the listening subject itself. (Gurney, 1880, p. 165)

Gurney understands the impressiveness of music as the source of beauty and consequently the most important element of perceiving and appreciating music. The comparison to Dewey's explanation of aesthetic quality as the primary element of an organic experience, should be helpful in better understanding, how in reference to music and the aesthetic experience of music, it is the quality of impression or being impressed that makes the experience of music whole and allows the listening subject to feel immersed in the process of listening. On the other hand, Roman Ingarden in his explanation of aesthetic experience, follows the qualitative element in the experience as the element of meeting and communal dialogue. He conceives of perceiving and interpreting the work as based on the features and elements found. These then provide a communal meeting ground and sustain the dialogue. Yet, in both of these accounts of aesthetic experience, the aesthetic qualities, named or not, are

essential for the process of experiencing as well as its consequences. Similarly, in Gurney's understanding of music's ability to impress the mind, the following of the inner motion in music and the subsequent immersion in it, brings out the music's beauty and drives the listening subject's experience. As the fulfilment for Dewey and the dialogue and meeting for Ingarden visions of aesthetics experience, in Gurney's theory of the understanding of music the ability to discover the beauty and importance of music, and through it, possibly even shifting one's perspective on life, it is the following and immersing in musical inner movement. For some this may come naturally, while for others it requires endless studying and patient pursuing. Yet, for all, in its conclusion, is it definitely impressive.

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