

2021

What Does Music "Mean?"

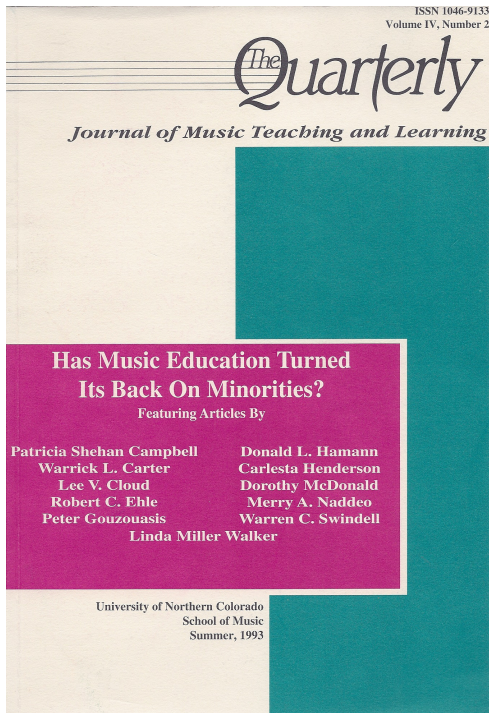
Robert C. Ehle
University of Northern Colorado

Follow this and additional works at: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme>

Recommended Citation

Ehle, Robert C. (2021) "What Does Music "Mean?"," *Visions of Research in Music Education*: Vol. 16 ,
Article 22.

Available at: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme/vol16/iss4/22>



Title: What Does Music “Mean?”

Author(s): Robert C. Ehle

Source: Ehle, R. C. (1993, Summer). What does music “mean?”. *The Quarterly*, 4(2), pp. 77-81. (Reprinted with permission in *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 16(4), Autumn, 2010). Retrieved from <http://www-usr.rider.edu/~vrme/>

It is with pleasure that we inaugurate the reprint of the entire seven volumes of The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning. The journal began in 1990 as The Quarterly. In 1992, with volume 3, the name changed to The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning and continued until 1997. The journal contained articles on issues that were timely when they appeared and are now important for their historical relevance. For many authors, it was their first major publication. Visions of Research in Music Education will publish facsimiles of each issue as it originally appeared. Each article will be a separate pdf file. Jason D. Vodicka has accepted my invitation to serve as guest editor for the reprint project and will compose a new editorial to introduce each volume. Chad Keilman is the production manager. I express deepest thanks to Richard Colwell for granting VRME permission to re-publish The Quarterly in online format. He has graciously prepared an introduction to the reprint series.

What Does Music “Mean?”

Review By Robert C. Ehle

University of Northern Colorado

LAWRENCE FERRARA, *PHILOSOPHY AND THE ANALYSIS OF MUSIC: BRIDGES TO MUSICAL SOUND, FORM, AND REFERENCE*. NEW YORK: GREENWOOD PRESS, 1991.

In reviewing the literature on the analysis of music, one comes upon certain perennial questions: “What is the nature of music? Is it the working out of natural forces such as the harmonic series or small whole-number ratios, or is it artificial (as implied by the word “art”) and thus unique to the specific work or culture?” There are others as well: “What is the purpose of musical analysis? Is it a pedagogical tool to introduce students to disciplined thought practices, or is it a mode of inquiry into the unique qualities and values to be found in works of art?” Also, the recurring question: “Is the meaning of music intrinsic, that is, found only within the work itself; or extrinsic, having meanings beyond the work?”

In attempting to answer these questions, we are led through a maze of fundamental issues having to do with our nature as beings. Since art is an expression of ourselves, the nature of art is related to the nature of ourselves and to the very fundamental questions of existence. It is no accident that Langer’s explorations of these issues led her to write a trilogy on the mind, the essence of our being (*Mind, An Essay on Human Feelings*).¹

Over the years, these basic questions have formed the axes of divergent viewpoints. For example, in 1903 we find the famous conductor Wilhelm Furtwengler praising Heinrich Schenker’s analysis of Beethoven’s

Ninth Symphony by commenting that, “...I was profoundly affected. Here, for the first time, were no hermeneutics ...” (*Ton und Wort*, see references).² Now, Ferrara’s new book praises and details a hermeneutic analysis of music as a suggested approach to musical analysis for students of music.

Ferrara takes the controversial position that it is acceptable to discuss emotional and referential qualities of a musical work in scholarly analysis and supports it with a thorough review of philosophical literature. In so doing, his text provides:

1. a thorough review of recent philosophical literature on music; and
2. a concise outline of an eclectic analytical method (with two examples) for research papers, theses, and dissertations combining reports on the affective and referential qualities of music with scholarly analysis of the techniques employed by the composers.

Both of these are valuable purposes which should give this book wide usage. Why is such a book necessary at this time? The author discusses this in the first chapter, beginning with a litany of the case against referential meaning in music. He starts with Hanslick’s famous diatribe against Wagner and for Brahms, a diatribe which probably would have been forgotten except that Brahms became the most powerful absolute music composer of his time, and Wagner was, and remains, a controversial figure in music history. The case against referentialism continues with Stravinsky’s famous proclamation in *The Poetics of Music*, “[M]usic is powerless to express anything,” a statement probably intended primarily to shock, as Stravinsky was wont to do. The author could have cited Hindemith’s book, *The Craft of Musical Composition*, in which the author attempted to relegate inspiration to popular mentality by establishing craft as the basis for

Robert C. Ehle is Professor of Music Theory and Composition at the University of Northern Colorado. His specialties include musical acoustics, twentieth century music, and music technology.

composition. Hindemith also coined the famous term "*gebrauchsmusik*," a word he used to describe any music composed for practical use.³

All of these writings helped to standardize "neo-classicism" in twentieth-century composition, wherein it is claimed that in order to compose, one need not have any emotion to express or any extra-musical idea to describe. One need only learn the tools: eighteenth-century classical forms and development techniques, sixteenth- and eighteenth-century counterpoint, and twentieth-century harmony. By combining these elements, one produces "good" music.

Nineteenth-century writing on music, as is well known, abused subjectivity and as every teacher who grades student papers knows, students love to wallow in subjective responses to music. It is no surprise that recent scholarly tradition has rejected all mention of subjectivity in professional publications. The reasons for this rejection differ for each of the three different audiences for a work of music, these being, as Sessions observed: listeners, performers, and other composers.⁴ Each group responds in its own unique way. Professional orchestra musicians are the most cynical group when it comes to extra-musical meanings and expressions because their careers depend upon accurate performance of written instructions. They scoff at conductors who emote from the podium and criticize composers who call for emotion in interpretation. They say, "Just tell us what you want: speed up, play louder, or whatever, and we'll do it." Suggestive performance instructions are easily misunderstood.⁵ Mahler discovered this early and removed the programs from his symphonies, as the Mahler literature shows.⁶ Some composers, notably Stravinsky and Hindemith, are also skeptical of subjectivity and prefer to emphasize "craft."⁷

Writing about emotion and meanings in music is dangerous on nearly all levels and is customarily reserved for the program note or record-jacket blurb. It is condemned in professional publications. Still, secretly, most of us cherish some particular musical experience that changed us, and we sometimes wish we could talk about it, although we

doubt that we would be understood, and no one else's experience would match ours, anyway. Perhaps Ferrara's book will provide the needed cross-relationships to make such discussions possible and beneficial. Ferrara makes a good case for allowing subjective evaluations and extra-musical meanings in scholarly writing so long as they are: (1) rigorously controlled; and (2) carefully compartmentalized so as to tie them to objective analytical criteria. The rigor is to align subjective analyses with objective analyses on a measure-by-measure basis. This is a much-needed corrective, and Ferrara provides the scholarly apparatus necessary to do the job by means of his ten-step analytical process. A student who works through Ferrara's process and reports the items called for will learn much and may achieve significant insights to musical understanding.

While Ferrara discusses well-known writings on meaning in music by Meyer, Langer, and others, the heart of his case is drawn from the writings of two recent German philosophers: Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Martin Heidegger (1899-1976). Their work is discussed in great detail, and the specifics of their philosophies (known as Phenomenology and Hermeneutics, respectively) are presented thoroughly. Ferrara includes direct translations into English of the peculiar, grammatically incorrect, compound-word inventions as found in the original German texts. While these make for difficult reading, they also convey more of the flavor of the originals than a paraphrase would have done. Three chapters are devoted to the writings of Husserl and Heidegger, then their ideas are applied to contemporary analysis of music in an additional chapter. These chapters have nothing to do with writings on aesthetics but are specifically devoted to art and music.

The Phenomenological Approach

To summarize very briefly, Husserl's approach, called Phenomenology, claims that a simplification of conceptualization took place in the era of early Greek philosophy, resulting in the substitution of categories of concepts for actual things perceived. Today, this approach has become so ingrained that one rarely sees things as they are but simply as members of categories. For example, we

have developed such categories as Baroque music, chorale style, and cantata, yet we do not allow ourselves, at least in scholarly writing, to study a particular Bach cantata with the intent of discovering how Bach's chosen sounds affect us directly, no matter how moving we might find the work to be. Husserl's motto was "back to the things, themselves," and he provides an elegant process for stripping away the categories and revealing original perceptions for the purpose of discerning how we are affected by the phenomenon itself.

In applying Husserl's approach, the musical analyst strips away common terminology and presents music's basic sounds as they are heard, rather than as they have been described categorically, theoretically, or historically. This approach is derived from Husserl's analysis of human experience of sound in time. The intent is to uncover specific meanings in sound that are normally overlooked because of categorical conventions.

Ferrara discusses in great detail the six steps of Husserl's phenomenological method in a way that permits the reader to visualize their application to musical analysis. These involve various types of thought experiments, similar to those found in quantum mechanics and relativity, that are so attractive that the reader cannot resist trying them on a favorite piece right on the spot. The six steps follow:

1. Descriptive Phenomenology;
2. Essential Phenomenology;
3. Phenomenology of Appearances;
4. Constitutive Phenomenology;
5. Reductive Phenomenology; and
6. Hermeneutic Phenomenology.

Finally, Ferrara reviews several books, articles, theses, and dissertations which employ this approach.

Hermeneutics

Heidegger's philosophical approach, Hermeneutics, differs from Husserl's in that Heidegger perceived that a unique individual might rise above the group through an unusually keen awareness of mortality, which knowledge frees the individual to express the existential nature of life in a work of art. It is this process which, Heidegger says, takes a work of art beyond the ordinary, by introducing "strife" of a particular sort into the work. This strife in the work results in truth

resounding through the work, and, as Heidegger says, "Art then is the becoming and happening of truth" (Ferrara, 1992, p. 139). One can see Wagner, Mahler and *Ein Heldenleben* here, of course, but Heidegger claims that the becoming and happening of truth is present in every great work of art, although perhaps in subtle ways, and that this is the basis for the work's greatness. Again, several books and articles are reviewed as examples of the application of hermeneutics to musical analysis.

Ferrara gives an extensive description of the various types of musical analysis. In Figure 1, these types of analysis are condensed so as to show the relationships between traditional types of analysis and those of Meyer, Langer, Husserl, and Heidegger.⁸

Ferrara then presents his concept of eclectic analysis, in which the analyst follows a series of ten steps:

1. Historical background;
2. Open listenings;
3. Syntax (Roman numeral or Schenker analysis);
4. Sound-in-time (phenomenological description);

Two broad categories and a middle ground:

- A. Formalism (absolute meaning)
 1. Musical syntax (Roman numerals, sets, layers, etc.)
 2. Formal meaning (form and motivic structure)
 3. Intrinsic meaning (Schenker and neo-Schenker, trees)
 4. Intramusical meaning (style analysis, etc.)
- B. Absolute expressionism (Leonard B. Meyer's area)
 1. Bridge from musical syntax to emotion
 2. Drawn from John Dewey's theory of emotion
- C. Referentialism
 1. Socio-linguistic theories (Kant, Whitehead, Cassirer)
 2. Theories of Symbolism (Susanne B. Langer)
 3. Extrinsic meaning (Husserl's Phenomenology)
 4. Cultural world of composer (Heidegger's Hermeneutics)

Figure 1. Types of Analysis

5. Musical and textual representation;
6. Virtual feeling (hermeneutic analysis);
7. Ontohistorical world (hermeneutic analysis);
8. Open listenings;
9. Performance guide; and
10. Meta-critique.

Each step is quite concise, and all of the approaches are thoroughly addressed. Two musical compositions are given detailed, ten-step analysis, taking a third of the pages of the book. Clearly, the author has directed the entire book toward a specific method to be employed in the classroom rather than the writing of a philosophical treatise. Ferrara has directed numerous students in these methods, which are thoroughly documented in the notes. A teacher may apply this book directly to classroom use on many different levels. It could be used in an undergraduate honors course, not just with music majors; and it fits well into graduate projects in musical analysis. It could play a large role in an interdisciplinary studies program, too. The great beauty of the book is that it is complete in itself, although references are provided for those wishing to read further in the subjects covered.

Ferrara's basic concept is that people do have some consistent responses to music, and this is of interest to music analysts. The issue of *whose* experiences to report is a problem, however. In the examples given in the book, the analyst reports his or her own experiences. If no two people have the same experience with a work of music, as it is claimed, the results would be of interest only to psychologists, and there would be no need of phenomenology. The text does not clarify whose experiences are to be discussed, though, since the passive voice is employed by the author and general nouns (i.e., man, one) are used. These may refer to an individual or to everyone.

Husserl mentions sociology, but asserts that his theories have nothing to do with that field. His theory begins with the individual and moves toward community, but never arrives (see Ferrara's text beginning on page 75). Of course, psychology and sociology are scientific, not philosophical fields; and Husserl and Heidegger are attempting to design scientific/philosophical theories of interpretation. Therefore, science is the model and philosophy is the mode. It would seem,

though, that phenomenological and hermeneutic theories fall somewhere between sociology (analysis of behavior of large groups of people) and psychology (analysis of the behavior of the individual) in that they explain things that some, but not all people experience (truth). Heidegger and Husserl work very hard at including some but not all people (called "communities" by Husserl), and it seems they often fail at getting beyond their own individual experience (defined as solipsism and discussed at length in the text). So does Ferrara, since his analyst reports personal experience and obtains no validation from others. There is no intent to collect and summarize experiences from dozens of subjects; this is not a psychology experiment. Likewise, it is not an experiment in sociology, since only a brief attempt is made to analyze group behaviors under influence of a work of art. (Adorno's and Ballentine's theories of the sociology of music are mentioned briefly in this context.) Ultimately, one is left with the realization that it is the individual analyst who is here allowed and encouraged to discuss personal responses to particular moments in music. This is at once contrary to current practice, radical, and innovative.

Conclusion

In the past, searches for emotional or referential meanings in music have been carried out in a general way as individuals searched for the "meaning" of a piece. Ferrara's process gives much greater refinement in that the meanings of every or any moment in the piece are sought and are plotted against traditional analyses (form, time line, chord symbols, and layers, etc.). This makes it possible to track down the meaning of one measure, or even one note or chord, and to plot it against the other analyses for correlations. If any approach is to find specific referential meanings in music and disprove Hanslick, Stravinsky, Hindemith, and others, this one should do it. It is an exciting intellectual line of inquiry and should be carried out as a large-scale research project on college campuses across the nation. It would be beneficial to have a system for charting all of the analyses of a piece of music in parallel on a single diagram (perhaps a chart extending around the room), and someone might de-

vise such a scheme that would permit easy reading and cross-referencing. A workbook and a number of practical exercises would be useful and illuminating, as well. Yet this approach is dangerous if put in the hands of the musically naive, and for this reason the requirement for concurrent syntactic and referential analyses is made. One incapable doing a syntactic analysis of music has no business here.⁹

There is one more interesting consequence of this line of analysis: it is possible to turn the whole thing around. If it should be proven that referential meanings are present in significant works of art and music, then, by implication, they might have something to do with the value of those works. By implication, one might assume that referential meanings have something to do with the state of mind or the approach taken by the artists and composers while creating the works; also, one might deduce that it would be beneficial for the would-be artist or composer to mimic such states of mind or approaches when producing a new work of art or music. This could be a line of reasoning that will finally serve to distinguish the artistic creation from the pedantic one. Such a tool would have great pedagogical benefit for the creative studio teacher.

To summarize, it is the correlation of traditional analyses with phenomenological analyses which gives Ferrara's approach its novelty and power. The question of the meaning of music is more likely to be resolved by this approach than by any other.

Footnotes

1. Susanne Langer is almost certainly the only philosopher to attempt a complete philosophy of life based upon artistic impulses. The trilogy on the mind is the capstone of her work, wherein she tries to draw all the diverse strands together into one cohesive document.

2. The point here is to show the poor repute of hermeneutic analysis at this time and Furtwengler's preference for Heinrich Schenker's layer analysis.

3. Hindemith's deliberate use of the word "craft" in the English edition of his book and the concept of "music for practical use" were intended to counteract subjective tendencies in the public view of music.

4. Roger Sessions discusses the differences in needs and interests of these three classes of music users in considerable detail in his book, *The Musical Experience of Composer, Performer, and Listener*.

5. Not only are professional musicians expected to perform written performance instructions accurately

and thus are opposed to vague instructions requiring subjective interpretation, they also are aware of the fact that young, inexperienced composers tend to fill their first scores with poetic verbiage, hoping perhaps to cover their lack of skill in writing for orchestra.

6. This fact is well-documented in the Mahler literature. Mahler apparently needed the programs in order to compose but did not wish his listeners or performers to see his programs for personal reasons. See, for example: Donald Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler, The Wunderhorn Years*. (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), pp. 145-241, (Chronology of Symphonies I-III).

7. The Hindemith examples have already been cited. Stravinsky is supposed to have said that composing is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration. It is curious that composers who seem to be highly inspired in their early years often turn to the most precise methodical composition systems in their later years. Examples include Hindemith's method, whereby he rewrote his own early compositions, usually to their detriment, and Schoenberg's 12-tone method, adopted after the most extravagant series of subjective compositions were completed in his "atonal" period.

8. Roman numeral analysis may be found in nearly any undergraduate music theory text. Schenker was an Austrian music theorist (1868-1935) who invented the concept of analysis known as "Layer Analysis," currently fashionable in graduate music schools. Allen Forte is chair of the theory department at Yale University, and inventor of a system of analysis involving unordered sets that serves well for the analysis of twentieth-century music.

9. Linguistics recognizes three elements in any communication: phonology, syntax, and semantics. In describing a communication, it is necessary to show how the three are related. Phonology is the material, syntax, structure and semantics—the meaning in a communication. This parallels our analyses. The thorough analyst is asked to describe all three categories and to draw effective relationships among them.

References

- Ferrara, Lawrence. (1991) *Philosophy and the Analysis of Music: Bridges to Musical Sound, Form and Reference*. New York: Greenwood.
- Furtwangler, Wilhelm. (1954) *Ton und Wort*. Wiesbaden: Brockhaus.
- Hindemith, Paul. (1937, 1939, 1970) *Unterweisung im Tonsatz*, 3 vols. Vols. 1 and 2 translated as *The Craft of Musical Composition*. London: Schott & Co. Ltd.
- Heidegger, Martin. (1962) *Being and Time*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Husserl, Edmund. (1980) *Collected Works*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Langer, Susanne K. (1967) *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Sessions, Roger. (1950) *The Musical Experience of Composer, Performer, Listener*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Stravinsky, Igor and Roland Manuel. (1956, 1947) *The Poetics of Music*. New York: Vantage Books. 