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Locating Beauty in Modernism – The Concepts of Beauty and Value in Modernist Music and Art

Joanna Chiang

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Department of Music

School of Culture and Creative Arts

College of Arts

University of Glasgow

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the concepts of beauty and value - particularly aesthetic value - with special attention paid to beauty in relation to modernism and modernist music. Although beauty is, generally speaking, not often regarded as an important aspect of modernism, I hope to show that this is a misconception, and that beauty can in fact be located within modernist music and art. Beauty, I believe, is not a physical quality which can be objectively assessed but is instead subjective, and only ever present within experience and the relationship of subject and object. This distinction between the two main points of view regarding beauty is something that I will address within the course of this thesis. I will question whether or not the subjective/objective divide hinders the recognition of beauty in modernism, and shall consider whether or not these two opposing views are equally valid and, if so, how they might be combined. Furthermore, the relevance and significance of aesthetic value – the value of *l'art pour l'art* – can at times be called into question due to the fact that *l'art pour l'art* is, by definition, not a means to any end and is therefore ‘quite useless’.¹ I will discuss the idea of art for art’s sake, in addition to considering other ways in which art may be valued. Finally, I will turn to modernism itself and consider why many people find it so difficult to locate beauty in modernism

Beauty is a concept which has occupied philosophers and thinkers for centuries and, as this is the case, I have selected the works of only a few key figures to refer to. Ideas about beauty have changed and evolved over time therefore I have chosen to take a broad approach when selecting readings in an attempt to show the wide range of ideas about beauty. The philosophers I have selected span from Plato up until the present day, and show the breadth of the discussion of beauty.

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, first published 1891 (This ed. Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 4

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Introduction

The Question of Beauty

The subject of beauty is a major philosophical question which many people have attempted to address over the centuries. As this is the case, I shall only attempt to address a small area within this topic, specifically the question of whether beauty can be located within modernist music and art, or whether beauty, as a central element in artistic creation and aesthetic appreciation, is a thing of the past. In order to determine this, it is first important to form an understanding of pre-modernist ideas about beauty and to consider how traditional notions of beauty have evolved, before it will be possible to identify where, if anywhere, beauty can be located within modernism. In this dissertation I will discuss the idea of beauty - what beauty is, and the value attached to beauty – but I shall also consider modernism, and beauty in relation to modernism. In addition to this I will take a closer look at the concept of value and our reasons for valuing beauty, music, and beauty in music.

Generally speaking, there are two main points of view when it comes to the question of beauty: that of beauty as subjective, and therefore personal and linked to experience; and that of beauty as an objective quality belonging to objects, which is not dependent on personal taste. These opposing views dominate thinking on this topic; however, while they are both valid and can be argued convincingly, I believe that it may be useful to find a way to think beyond these existing ideas and, perhaps, even find a way to combine them in such a way that they can be reconciled with each other.

In her introduction to *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in 20th Century Art* Wendy Steiner writes that ‘In modernism, the perennial rewards of aesthetic experience – pleasure, insight, empathy – were largely withheld, and its generous aim, beauty, was abandoned’.² However, I will argue that beauty is indeed present within modernist art and music, and that although the ‘rewards of aesthetic experience’ may be found through a seemingly less direct route, they are nonetheless there, waiting to be discovered by those with minds open enough to allow it. Furthermore, the suggestion that modernism withholds the experience of insight is one that I cannot agree with, therefore I hope to show that modernist art is often highly insightful and relevant to a particular time or culture. If we are open to the suggestion that there has evolved a different kind of beauty, then it may be possible to overcome the common cultural supposition that beauty is no longer an end point in modernist art and music, and to reclaim beauty in the 20th and 21st centuries. Georges Braque is quoted by Steiner as having said - in 1910 - that what he aimed to do, and felt that he must do, was to ‘create a new sort of

² Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in 20th Century Art*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. XV

beauty’, a beauty that appeared to him ‘in terms of volume, of line, of mass, of weight, and through that beauty interpret my subjective impression... I want to expose the Absolute, and not merely the factitious...’³. Braque’s acknowledgement of the possibility of the existence of new and different types of beauty is highly significant and will be a key point for consideration within this discussion. His attempt to create a new sort of beauty indicates that beauty was in fact not, as Steiner suggests, abandoned, but that it remained ‘the generous aim’ of aesthetic experience in modernist art.

Beauty all Around Us

In our day-to-day lives it is often easy to describe things as beautiful – beauty, some would say, is all around us if we look hard enough. As John Cage has observed, ‘Beauty is now underfoot wherever we take the trouble to look.’⁴ The word ‘beautiful’ can be applied to many things: days; people; buildings; images; sounds; flowers; landscapes; clothes; music – to the music of Vivaldi, Beethoven, Stravinsky or Schoenberg - the list goes on, but what is it that makes all of these things ‘beautiful’? What is it that links them in this way? There appears to me to be no quality that could be common to each of these things – other than perhaps their ability to affect the way we feel in one way or another - yet they can all be described using the same word, so, what does it mean to be beautiful? If beauty was to be located within an object it makes sense to expect all beautiful objects to share some common attribute, however as this is not the case, beauty must be located outside the object itself, and so the question now is what is beauty and what does the word ‘beauty’ actually mean?

Glenn Parsons expresses this question in his essay on beauty and public policy thus:

‘When we say ‘this is beautiful’, what are we saying? One simple and intuitive answer is that we are simply expressing a liking or preference for the thing in question. So saying ‘that dress is beautiful’ equates to ‘I like that dress’. This answer to our question gains plausibility from the great diversity of things that people call beautiful: dresses, faces, sunsets, cars, paintings, songs, scientific theories, chess moves, and so on. What could all of these very different things have in common, except the fact that in each case, the speaker likes that thing? The beautiful dress has a striking colour, but the chess move has no colour at

³ Georges Braque as quoted in Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in 20th Century Art*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p.44

⁴ John Cage, quoted in Michael Kimmelman, ‘Clowning Inventively with Stuff of Beauty’, *New York Times*, September 19, 1997, accessed via <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/09/19/arts/art-review-clowning-inventively-with-stuff-of-beauty.html>

all; the beautiful song has a catchy melody, but the beautiful sunset is silent; and so forth. Thus, we seem to be left with only the positive feeling of the speaker — a liking — as the only common element that makes them all beautiful.’⁵

Parsons’ problem with this answer is that it is too simple. Equating beauty with liking is not a satisfactory explanation because ‘if we can explain our liking for something in terms of its beauty, then its beauty cannot be the reason for that liking. If it was, then our explanation would be no explanation at all: in response to ‘why do you like it?’ we would say ‘because I like it’. If beauty can be a reason for our likings, as it clearly can, then beauty cannot be equated with those likings.’⁶ I would be inclined to agree with Parsons on this point. Expressing a liking for something cannot, in my opinion, be the same as saying that we find it beautiful, because we appear to place a value on beauty that is not implicit when we simply state that we like such and such a thing. For this reason beauty cannot be reduced to a question of likings – to find something beautiful means more than simply liking it, although I do not intend to suggest that this is the same as disliking beauty - but the question of why we value beauty in this way remains unanswered. If I were to say that it is possible for people to dislike beauty, it would still not equate beauty with ‘liking’.

If we consider those things which can be called beautiful, some of them merely happen to be beautiful, for example the natural beauty of a landscape or a flower; some things can be beautiful while also being functional, having been designed to serve a practical purpose but also to be aesthetically pleasing, for example a beautiful building - impressive architecturally, but ultimately intended to be functional; but then there are other things like music and art which may, in some cases, be designed and created purely to be beautiful, and to be the objects of aesthetic appreciation, without the composer or artist necessarily intending for them to be functional in any way. What is the value of this? According to Steiner ‘To be beautiful is to be valued’,⁷ suggesting that beautiful objects, such as beautiful artworks or musical works, need have no merit or purpose other than simply being, in order for them to be valuable. Furthermore, in saying this, Steiner implies that something is automatically of value because it is beautiful, which means that the concepts of beauty and value are inextricably linked. Steiner states that ‘Value is thus always central to the meaning of beauty. We often say that something or someone is beautiful, in fact, when what we mean is that they have value *for us*.’⁸ Here

⁵ Glenn Parsons, ‘Beauty and public policy’, (The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, 2010), p. 8

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in 20th Century Art*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 127

⁸ Ibid. p XXIII

she, like Parsons, adopts the view that beauty is subjective, or ‘in the eye of the beholder’, as opposed to the idea of beauty as an objective quality. If something that we find beautiful has value for us but not necessarily for everyone else, this surely means that we cannot expect everyone else to find it beautiful. This may seem obvious, however, as we shall see, it is not the case. The type of value Steiner refers to here is intrinsic and of an aesthetic nature. Aesthetic value is the value of an object based entirely on its own merit and is often linked to beauty, however this does not necessarily mean that beauty and aesthetic value can, or should, be equated with one another - although Steiner does refer to beauty as the aim of aesthetic experience. The concept of value is in itself problematic, but the term ‘aesthetic value’ is yet more difficult to define. ‘Value’ can be ascribed to things for many different reasons, some of which are extrinsic – having to do with the object in relation to other objects, people, needs or uses – and others which are intrinsic, or based solely on the object itself. The type of value any one person places on an object, and the reasons for which they value it, can vary greatly; therefore it is near impossible to say that one thing is valuable and that another thing is not valuable, or that one thing is more valuable than the other. The closest one can come to this is by saying that ‘*x*’ is more valuable *to me* than ‘*y*’ is, or that ‘*a*’ is not valuable *to me*, or that ‘*b*’ is valuable *to me*, for whichever reasons apply. When we make a judgement of value in this way - a judgement of extrinsic value - we don’t necessarily think that everyone else ought to agree with us, and we can appreciate that the value of the object in question depends on a person’s needs and circumstances, or on the point of view from which it is viewed. One exception to this is the monetary value of an object. The monetary value of an object is arguably an objective extrinsic value and therefore not dependant upon a person’s needs, however, I believe that the monetary value of an object becomes more or less significant depending on the person evaluating it, and that this in turn means that may be deemed valuable by one person while not of much value to another.

If I say that a certain object is of value to me because I require it to carry out a task, I don’t expect that another person not intending to carry out the same task should value the object in the same way. This differs from judgements of aesthetic value such as beauty because when we value something for its beauty our valuing it is not dependent on our needs or circumstances, and this means that we can struggle to see how someone can disagree with us and fail to see the beauty that we see in something. Furthermore, if to be beautiful is indeed to be valued, then our saying that something is beautiful is an acknowledgement of some intrinsic value belonging to that object, and our acknowledgement of that intrinsic value says that we don’t require that thing to have any purpose or function for it to be of value to us.

Music and art, when appreciated for their aesthetic value, may be valued because of their beauty – ‘to be beautiful is to be valued’⁹ – however, one could say that music and art, particularly modernist music and art, in many cases does not aim to be beautiful – or its opposite - at all, and, if this is so, what is the value - assuming that it has no obvious extrinsic value - of this type of art? The answer to this question must be twofold, as it is dependent on whether or not modernist music and art are truly completely without beauty; however, it is also necessary to attempt to define what modernist music is as the term ‘modernist’, when applied to music, can be interpreted in different ways.

Modernism in Music

I believe that it is important at this point to decide upon a definition of modernism in order to set the parameters for further discussion. Modernism as a movement in art is characteristic of a certain period in time and could be seen as a major turning point in the development of music and the other arts. Modernism in music began making its first public appearances during the late romantic period, with Dahlhaus highlighting the year 1890 as a pivotal point in music history – a time when the beginnings of modernism’s emergence crossed-over with the era of the late romantics.

Dahlhaus wrote that:

‘In order to characterize turn-of-the-century music in terms of intellectual or stylistic history, journalists have been eager (scholars less so) to appropriate concepts from literature and the fine arts [...] Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that no matter how divergent the terms from stylistic or intellectual history bandied about by music historians, they all seem to hover about the year 1890, which lends itself as an obvious point of historical discontinuity [...] The “breakthrough” of Mahler, Strauss and Debussy implies a profound historical transformation [...] If we were to search for a name to convey the breakaway mood of the late 1890s [...] but without imposing a fictitious unity of style on the age, we could do worse than revert to Hermann Bahr’s term “modernism” and speak of a stylistically open-ended “modernist music” extending (with some

⁹ Ibid. p. 127

latitude) from 1890 to the beginnings of our own twentieth-century modern music in 1910.’¹⁰

The breakaway mood Dahlhaus refers to is, at least in part, due to a period of innovation and rejection of existing stylistic, tonal, colouristic and rhythmic norms. I by no means intend to suggest that all composers active at this time embraced modernism and its revolutionary spirit in this way; however, it was a defining feature of the period. Taruskin names Debussy as ‘the first modernist’, stating that he is ‘the man with whom modern music begins.’¹¹ Debussy’s breakaway from the prevailing musical mood of the time foreshadowed the emergence of other modernist composers such as Ravel, Messiaen, Schoenberg, Stravinsky and Varèse, to name but a few. Taruskin goes on to write that ‘Debussy alone managed, at a time when the dominant musical mood was one of exhaustion, to turn over a new leaf.’¹² Debussy, in Taruskin’s opinion, revitalised music at a point in time when it had begun, in some ways, to stagnate. His breaking away from musical convention sets him apart from other composers of the age and is a key moment in musical history.

Daniel Albright characterises modernism in music as ‘a testing of the limits of aesthetic construction’, also writing that ‘the Modernists tried to find the ultimate bounds of certain artistic possibilities: volatility of emotion (Expressionism); stability and inexpressiveness (the New Objectivity); accuracy of representation (Hyperrealism); absence of representation (Abstractionism)...’¹³ Albright’s definition of modernism draws attention to the feelings of newness, experimentalism, innovation and the pushing of boundaries which are present within, and indeed beyond, modernist music and art. Moreover, his description of the Modernists as people in search of the ultimate bounds of artistic possibilities – people whose aim it was to push boundaries and take risks – is suggestive of a general sense of change and progression - an undercurrent of atonality, serialism, unusual rhythms and experimental writing swirling just beneath the surface of musical culture. Modernist music, and modernist art in general, so it seems, is much less concerned with pleasing listeners and catering to their tastes than it is with expanding their horizons, challenging, or even shocking them. To be modernist means to disregard what came before, or to try to create something new and different in order to break ties with the past. In short, the essence of modernism is this rule-breaking quest for newness.

¹⁰ Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson, (California: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 332-334

¹¹ Richard Taruskin, ‘The First Modernist’, in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays*, ed. Richard Taruskin, (California: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 195-201, p. 195 - first published in *New Republic* 197, no. 26, Dec. 1987, pp. 36-40

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Daniel Albright, *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources*, ed. Daniel Albright, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 11

Schoenberg, himself a major figure in the development of modernism in music, posed the question ‘What is new music?’ and answered it by claiming that ‘Evidently it must be music which, though it is still music, differs in all essentials from previously composed music. Evidently it must express something that has not yet been expressed in music. Evidently, in higher art, only that is worth being presented which has never before been presented.’¹⁴ This feeling that only what is new and has never been seen or heard before is worth writing encapsulates the prevailing attitude amongst modernists. Modernist music is therefore music that ‘differs in all essentials from previously composed music’, or, as Daniel Chua puts it:

‘Modernity is therefore driven by a need to overcome the past in the name of progress, so that the ‘new’ is constantly consigned to be ‘old’ by history. Its only point of reference is an idealized ‘ancient world’ against which it defines itself by an endless process of self-mutation. Unlike the ancient cosmos, the modern world is no longer grounded in a static, hierarchical structure in which one is simply born with pre-assigned duties, but is fashioned by historical pressure that turns the world into a mass of potential waiting to be transformed by the assertion of the human will. [...] similarly, the music of modernity, from *Ars Nova* to the avant-garde, is driven by the same process of human control and assertion over space, time and matter.’¹⁵

Chua’s claim that the music of modernity is driven by a process of control and assertion over a mass of potential waiting to be transformed is in many ways simply a further comment upon modernism’s quest to push boundaries, and the modernists’ attempts to find the ‘ultimate bounds’ of artistic possibilities. In modernism, what was once considered new soon loses its newness and very quickly becomes old. This constantly evolving and reinventing of the genre of modernist music perhaps contributes in some way to its reputation for being difficult, inaccessible and lacking beauty.

¹⁴ Arnold Schoenberg, ‘New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea’, (1946), in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black, (California: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 113-123, p. 114

¹⁵ Daniel K. L. Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.10

What Does it Mean to be ‘Classically Beautiful’?

I believe that it would be largely accepted among most people that modernist music is not classically beautiful, in the same way that modernist art is not beautiful in the traditional sense of the term or in the way in which we have become accustomed to; however, I do not believe that this necessarily means that beauty disappeared with the advent of modernism. Classical representations of beauty, or open and obvious representations of classical beauty, may have become a rarity, but I find it hard to accept that this means that beauty is no longer a part of music or of art. Steiner asks the question: ‘Are we *taught* to identify certain traits – in people, nature, art – as beautiful [...]?’¹⁶ If the response to beauty is learned, then how should we react to the fact of this acculturation?¹⁶ Steiner’s suggestion that we may be taught to identify certain traits as beautiful is of course problematic if we adopt the point of view that beauty is subjective. Nevertheless, that being said, it is a theory which strikes me as not only plausible, but probable. If one were to view beauty as an objective quality, rather than as something subjective and therefore only existing within the relationship of a subject and an object,¹⁷ the idea of people being taught to identify certain traits as beautiful is much easier to understand. Let us for a moment adopt the view that beauty is an objective quality: the traits which we are taught to identify as ‘beautiful’ – perhaps traits such as proportion, harmony and symmetry – then, form the essence of ‘classical beauty’. A definition of beauty is offered by Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz in his article *Did Aesthetics Progress*,¹⁸ in which he lists certain propositions concerning beauty that were essential to classical theory. Tatarkiewicz writes that ‘Beauty was also called *harmony*’, especially with reference to beauty of sound, and called *symmetry*’ with particular reference to visual beauty.’¹⁹ This suggestion that beauty, harmony and symmetry were more or less synonymous with each other is highly revealing of attitudes towards beauty and what was required of something for it to be considered beautiful

In subsequent propositions Tatarkiewicz states that:

‘Beauty consists in the *proportion* of parts [...] may also consist in the appropriateness of things to their end, in their adequacy, aptness, *suitability*.

The Greeks called this kind of beauty *‘to prepon’* [...] They were aware that this

¹⁶ Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in 20th Century Art*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. XVIII

¹⁷ This is a point that I will return to and expand upon later in this dissertation. If beauty is viewed as subjective, it is by necessity dependent upon a personal relationship, or experience, between a person and the object in question.

¹⁸ Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, ‘Did Aesthetics Progress’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Sep. 1970, pp. 47-51

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 47-48

is a relative beauty and opposed it to the absolute of proportion. They appreciated it less. *Classical theory considered harmony and symmetry as the only perfect beauty* [my italics].²⁰

Having established that classical beauty is based on harmony, symmetry and proportion, the ideas of balance, rhythm and, to some extent, of conforming to certain criteria to do with cultural norms, can also be attributed to classical beauty. A further way in which to define what is classically beautiful in music can be drawn from Carol C. Mattusch's article 'Naming the 'Classical' Style', in which she proffers a definition of what it is to be 'Classical'.²¹ Mattusch writes: "Classical" is a "notion" about the height of achievement, acknowledged excellence, the standard of perfect beauty. Classical music has "clarity, regularity, [and]... established forms."²²

If we now combine these two definitions - what beauty is according to classical theory, and what it means to be classical - music which is classically beautiful can be described as that music which displays harmony, balance, symmetry, proportion and a sense of conforming to certain criteria; can conceivably be viewed as a standard of 'perfect beauty' or the height of achievement; and has clarity, regularity and established forms. Modernist music, clearly, does not fit this definition. Modernism did away with conventional harmony and rejected established forms. Held up for scrutiny, pieces of modernist music would not be found to be the standard of perfect beauty because they do not fit the criteria required to be 'classically beautiful'. We must of course not forget that this is all said under the assumption that beauty is an objective quality, however the fact that this definition of classical beauty is possible only when approached from this point of view suggests that if someone can understand only what is 'classically beautiful' to be beautiful – viewing modernist music and art as inherently not beautiful - then that person inadvertently shows that they cannot see beyond the concept of beauty as an objective quality belonging only to certain objects.

Changing Perceptions of Beauty

In pre-modernist times, attitudes towards beauty in art and aesthetics differed greatly from those prevalent in today's culture, however popular ideas about beauty and what beauty looks like or sounds like seem to have changed very little. What was once widely considered beautiful is still widely viewed

²⁰ Ibid. p. 48

²¹ A definition she states is taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*

²² Carol C. Mattusch, 'Naming the 'Classical' Style', *Hesperia Supplements*, Vol. 33, XAPIΣ Essays in Honor of Sara A. Immerwahr, 2004, pp. 277-290, p. 277

as being beautiful – take for example the Sistine Chapel, Albinoni's Adagio in G minor or Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* - while modern compositions and artworks are seldom received in the same way. One example of this is Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, which famously sparked a riot during its opening night in Paris in 1913. This seminal work of modernism, shocking in its disregard of conventional harmony and rhythms, being composed instead of what Daniel Chua describes as 'barbaric rhythms and dissonances'²³, and combined with Vaslav Nijinsky's outlandish choreography, has over time become accepted into the mainstream canon of 'classical' music. The main point I wish to draw attention to here is that although *The Rite of Spring* has been accepted by audiences and listeners it is unlikely that many would describe it as being 'beautiful'. But now the question we are faced with is for what reason other than aesthetic pleasure – the generous aim of which, according to Steiner, is beauty – would people choose to listen to or perform this seminal work of modernism? There is no extrinsic value for which to appreciate the work, therefore it must have some intrinsic value for which we hold it in high regard. I believe that the only explanation is that *The Rite* does allow listeners to experience beauty, albeit that it is a savage beauty unlike that of earlier works, and far removed from what the audience at its premier in 1913 were accustomed to.

Peter Bannister, in his article 'The Offence of Beauty in Modern Western Art Music', notes that 'beauty has become a largely unfashionable, even offensive notion within art and philosophy'.²⁴ Although Bannister's suggestion that beauty can be in some way offensive is one worth considering, and I am willing to concede that it, to some extent, became highly unfashionable for a time, it is Steiner's claim that 'Modern artworks may often have been profoundly beautiful, but theirs was a tough beauty, hedged with deprivation, denial, revolt'²⁵ that is of most interest within the context of this discussion. In what way can this tough beauty, experienced through modern art and, presumably, also through modernist music, be connected and likened to the earlier ideas about beauty?

²³ Daniel K. L. Chua, 'Rioting with Stravinsky: A Particular Analysis of *The Rite of Spring*', *Music Analysis*, 26/i-ii, 2007, Blackwell Publishing Ltd. Accessed via onlinelibrary.wiley.com

²⁴ Peter Banister, 'The Offence of Beauty in Modern Western Art Music', *Religions*, 2013, 4, pp. 687 – 700, p. 687

²⁵ Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in 20th Century Art*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. XV

Chapter 1 - Beauty

What is Beauty?

‘The beautiful is that from which nothing can be taken away and to which nothing can be added but for the worse.’

The above statement, attributed to Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), on the surface provides a seemingly elegant description of what it means to be ‘beautiful’ – for something to be described as truly beautiful it must be the perfect version of itself; no attempt to improve upon it can be fruitful, and any such attempt displays an inability to perceive, recognise or appreciate beauty. However, although intriguing and insightful, Alberti’s comment does not actually address the central question of what beauty *is*, or what it means when something is described as beautiful. Moreover, Alberti seems to suggest that beauty is a quality which can be found to belong to certain objects or works - a beautiful thing has beauty while something which is not beautiful lacks beauty – and this in itself, as we shall see, places his statement in opposition to much of the thinking on this subject. Alberti approaches beauty from the standpoint that it is an objective quality, while many others view beauty as subjective. Interestingly, Glenn Parsons suggests characterising beauty in an almost identical way to Alberti. Parsons states that beauty is ‘that which pleases in virtue of its perfection’,²⁶ which, as Ben Rogers adds in his article *On Beauty*, means that ‘we experience beauty when we are confronted with something that we would not know how to improve’.²⁷ There is however a subtle but significant difference between Rogers’ comment and those of Alberti and Parsons: Alberti and Parsons clearly view beauty as a quality which an object can possess, whereas Rogers doesn’t seem to suggest this. For Parsons however this isn’t enough; for him ‘just about everything is improvable in some way; nothing, as they say, is perfect’,²⁸ and that ‘some beautiful things can seem, at first glance, quite imperfect’.²⁹ Rogers’ use of the word ‘experience’ is important to note because it roots beauty in experience – in the subject’s experience of the object – rather than in the object itself.

²⁶ Glenn Parsons, ‘Beauty and public policy’, (The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, 2010), p. 13

²⁷ Ben Rogers ‘On beauty’, *RSA Journal*, Vol. 156, No. 5543 (Autumn 2010), pp. 26-27, p. 26

²⁸ Glenn Parsons, ‘Beauty and public policy’, (The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, 2010), p. 13

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 15

Jumping forward three centuries from Alberti, in Hume's *Of the Standard of Taste* Hume writes that 'Beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them'.³⁰ In saying this, Hume rejects the notion of beauty as an attribute possessed by 'beautiful' objects. Beauty, in Hume's opinion doesn't exist as a quality that can be found in things in the way that one can say that a table is wooden, a cushion is soft or a vase is red; it is something less concrete than that. Furthermore, for one to be able to declare something to be beautiful it must first be experienced, or contemplated – we can't be satisfied by taking someone's word for it that something is beautiful, we have to experience it first hand for ourselves in order to judge for ourselves, and be satisfied that it is beautiful - and for this reason the word 'beauty' could perhaps be more correctly understood as describing the reaction of the observer to the object or work in question, or as describing a quality of the experience, than as describing the object or work itself. If I am asked to listen to a piece of music and then asked to comment upon it, I might say that I find the music beautiful, however, by this reasoning, if I say this I am in fact not referring to a quality of the music itself, I am instead describing the way I feel about the music. I am stating that my reaction upon experiencing and connecting with this piece of music through listening to it is one of beauty. I listened to the music and I sensed beauty, but that doesn't necessarily mean that I identified beauty in the music. If pressed for an explanation of what exactly I think is beautiful, or makes the piece beautiful, I might say that the melody is beautiful, or that the harmony is beautiful, or that the orchestration is beautiful, but if pressed further it would be impossible to pinpoint precisely *why* that particular melodic line is beautiful, what it is that makes it beautiful, or why that particular harmony is beautiful. This is because the piece is only beautiful due to the response it elicits. The piece is only beautiful *because* I say it is beautiful.

Kant, in his *Critique of Judgement*, notes that '[the feeling of pleasure or displeasure] denotes nothing in the object, but is a feeling which the subject has of itself and of the manner in which it is affected by the representation.'³¹ While not exclusively connected with judgements of beauty, feelings of pleasure or displeasure are closely linked with them, therefore Kant's statement, made in the context of a discussion about judgements of taste, is of relevance here because a feeling of pleasure is associated with beauty. A judgement of something as being beautiful 'denotes nothing in the object' but rather it is 'a feeling which the subject has of itself and of the manner in which it is affected by the representation', meaning that my description of the music as 'beautiful' says nothing at all about the music itself, but instead describes the manner in which I was affected by it.

Writing over 200 years after Hume and Kant, Ferdia Stone-Davis echoes their thoughts, stating that 'beauty is a means by which one understands the process of aesthetic appreciation rather than a quality of the world itself, and meaning is located in the intellectual powers of the subject rather than

³⁰ David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', 1757, paragraph 7, Kindle edition, published 2011

³¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 1790, (this ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 35

the material object...Beauty is only ever latent within the relationship of subject and object'; that it 'emerges from experience'.³² Stone-Davies, like both Hume and Kant, sees beauty not as a quality that an object, person, artwork, or musical composition can possess, but as something which has more to do with a person's reaction to the thing in question than with the thing itself.

Thoughtful consideration of these two notions alongside each other however casts a different light on things: the distinction between the two ideas no longer appears as black and white as it at first seemed, becoming instead more indistinct and uncertain the more closely one considers it. I don't believe that these comments must necessarily be seen to contradict each other, although a cursory glance at them may give the impression that that is the case. Alberti, by not clearly stating what it is that he believes makes something beautiful, leaves open to interpretation his exact meaning. Consider this - by adding or taking away from something we have the ability not only to alter the subject itself, but also to alter others' experiences of that object or work, and in so doing to change their reaction to it, which in turn will change their relationship with it, making it either better or worse, more enjoyable or less enjoyable, or, perhaps, even more beautiful or less beautiful. This last claim – of having the ability to make something more or less beautiful – is a contentious one, because, if we are to understand beauty as the pinnacle of aesthetic success, then it can be argued that ranking 'beauty' is not possible. Taking this into account, by adding or taking away from an experience we can either make it beautiful, or cause it to no longer be beautiful. This kind of beauty – manmade beauty – is artistic beauty, and is of a different nature from that of natural beauty, which is not created or designed by a person or people.

Hegel, in his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* writes that 'artistic beauty stands higher than nature' because 'the beauty of art is the beauty born – born again, that is, of the mind; and by as much as the mind and its products are higher than nature and its appearances, by so much the beauty of art is greater than the beauty of nature.'³³ Here, Hegel's placement of artistic beauty above natural beauty highlights the value placed on artistic beauty. Artistic beauty- beauty born again of the mind – is the type of beauty with which we shall primarily be concerned. Schopenhauer's thinking on natural beauty is mixed however, like Hegel, when he considers artistic beauty alongside natural beauty, he 'locate[s] natural beauty at the lower levels of his aesthetic theory'.³⁴ Robert Wicks writes that 'Schopenhauer's estimation of natural beauty's value is [...] mixed. He affirmatively maintains that aesthetically contemplating a tree (for example) can raise us to a level of universalistic awareness, free from frustrating desire, and produce a measure of transcendent tranquillity [...] When Schopenhauer

³² Ferdia Stone-Davis, *Musical Beauty*, (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), pp. 81-85

³³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, Chapter 1, 'The Range of the Aesthetic Defined, and Some Objections Against the Philosophy of Art Refuted', section α , (England: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 4

³⁴ Robert L. Wicks, *European Aesthetics: A Critical Introduction from Kant to Derrida*, (London: Oneworld Publications, 2013), p. 104

contrasts natural beauty with artistic beauty, however, [...] his attitude towards natural beauty becomes disapproving. From this angle, he states that natural beauty can deceptively fix our attention upon mere appearances, as it fills us with joy in the presence of a sunset's bright colours, or a flower's soft petals and fragrance.³⁵

A further interesting point can be found towards the beginning of Hegel's *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, namely that he seems almost to equate beauty with art, making them appear interchangeable – or at least closely linked - while at the same time maintaining a clear distinction between the two concepts. He states that 'Beauty and art, no doubt, pervade all the business of life like a kindly genius, and form the bright adornment of all our surroundings, both mental and material',³⁶ suggesting that art cannot be without beauty, and, also, that beauty and art are both necessarily positive.

Stone-Davis writes that beauty is something we can continually pursue and yet never make our own.³⁷ No matter how long we spend seeking beauty, it remains just beyond our grasp – tangible, but impossible to hold on to. We can experience beauty, but once we have experienced it we can't take it away with us; we can't capture the feeling and make it last. While listening to a piece of music or viewing an artwork we may be able to experience beauty, however when the music stops, or upon stepping away from the artwork, all that we are left with is a lingering sensation that reminds us of the beauty we just experienced. We still have the same desire for beauty as we had before we began listening to the music or looking upon the painting, it doesn't go away, isn't satiated for a time before reappearing, the way other desires are. As this is the case, the value of beauty is constant and is not dependent upon our needs or a feeling of want.

The pursuit of beauty, then, can never reach a fully satisfying end. There can be no closure for those seeking to experience beauty, as by its very nature beauty denies us this. If we go back further in time, during the dialogue between Socrates and Agathon in Plato's *Symposium*, Agathon poses the question: 'Surely it's not just probable but necessary that desire is directed at something you need and that if you don't need something you don't desire it?'³⁸ People desire beauty, however beauty isn't something that is needed and desired in the way in which other more material things are. It could be argued that there is no 'need' for beauty,³⁹ yet it is still desirable. Once a need is met it can be

³⁵ Ibid. pp. 104-105

³⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, Chapter 1, 'The Range of the Aesthetic Defined, and Some Objections Against the Philosophy of Art Refuted', section β (England: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 5

³⁷ Ferdia Stone-Davis, *Musical Beauty*, (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), p. 73

³⁸ Plato, *The Symposium*, (England: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 34

³⁹ Roger Scruton is of the opinion that this is not the case, and writes that 'Our need for beauty is not something that we could lack and still be fulfilled as people. It is a need arising from our metaphysical condition, as free individuals, seeking our place in a shared and public world...', *Beauty*, (Oxford University Press 2009), p. 174

expected that the desire for whatever was required to meet that need will disappear, but this is not the case with beauty. To say that one can satiate one's appetite for beautiful things implies that beauty is sought out for a purpose; to meet some need, the way a starving man seeks physical nourishment, or a thirsty man seeks a source of hydration. Once these needs are met the desire disappears - even if it will reappear again at some point in the future - however the desire for beauty is not like this. Listening to a piece of music and enjoying its beauty does not mean that someone will have had their fill of beauty for the time being and will have no desire to listen to any more music.

If, as I have argued, beauty is not something that we need in order to live, is it possible that beauty can be something to live for? I believe that beauty can be something to live for, in the same way that happiness can be seen as something to strive towards and pursue. In this situation beauty is an end in itself – the ultimate end - because we have no need that can be met by it and we don't want to do anything with it once we have found it. Rather, our goal is beauty itself. If we live for beauty our pursuit of beauty is disinterested, and, in the same way, our desire for beauty is also disinterested.

Our desire for beauty is disinterested, and we know this because we do not view beauty as a means to an end – 'wanting something for its beauty is wanting *it*, not wanting to do something with it'.⁴⁰ It follows from this that our interest in art *qua* art or music *qua* music is also disinterested, as in order to appreciate a musical work or a work of art solely on its musical or artistic merit it is necessary to set aside any feeling of 'need' and appreciate the work as an end in itself. Only by viewing something as an end in itself is it possible to see clearly the work as it is, without the risk of judging it based on extraneous matters. This emphasis on seeing something as an end in itself is a Kantian idea and is central to his thinking on beauty. In order to appreciate something or someone as an end in itself a person must be disinterested. Kant writes, of beauty, that 'of all these three kinds of delight [the agreeable; the beautiful; and the good], that of taste in the beautiful may be said to be the one and only disinterested and *free* delight; for, with it, no interest, whether of sense or reason, extorts approval.'⁴¹

It is true that musical works and works of art can be used purposefully, in order to achieve an aim or with an aim in mind, however, in such a situation the work is being appreciated for some extrinsic value as opposed to for its own intrinsic value. The idea of value is something which I will return to at a later point, for now however it will suffice to say that when music or art is being valued in this way the work of art is not being appreciated or valued *as* art, but as a means to an end. It is being valued for its instrumental value, or value as a tool for some purpose, rather than its artistic and aesthetic value. With this in mind, it can be argued that art, including music, if it is to be appreciated purely for

⁴⁰ Roger Scruton, *Beauty*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 19

⁴¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 1790, (this ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 41

its aesthetic merit, is inherently lacking a purpose or function. In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant raises the idea of purposive purposelessness – being purposive yet without purpose; being meaningful while being without a function. ‘Free or pure beauty’, as he calls it, differs from dependant or adherent beauty in that it is not dependant upon the concept of purpose. The pure beauty of something can be appreciated and valued without knowing what it is and what, if any, its purpose is. This type of purposiveness, Wicks writes, ‘arises at a higher level of abstraction’.⁴² Absolute music is music at its highest level of abstraction; however even in absolute music there is beauty through purposiveness. The purposeless purposiveness that Kant refers to can also be thought of as a type of ‘designedness’, or ‘meaningfulness’ - a beauty born of the mind, such as what Wicks describes as ‘playfully aimless formal designs’ which are ‘suggestively intelligent’.⁴³ Another way to think of this might be to understand ‘meaningfulness’ as a central point in the discussion of beauty and purposive purposelessness. Describing something as meaningful does not mean that it has a specific discernible meaning, but it does mean that it is of value. Kathleen Stock writes that ‘works of art, generally, are essentially meaningful; which is to say that what they are ‘there for’ is to be understood. This is not just to say that meaning can be found in them [...] but something stronger: that, in some sense, their nature prescribes that one try to understand them’.⁴⁴ Stock’s comment supports Kant’s idea of purposive purposelessness albeit in relation to art itself rather than beauty or artistic value. Works of art, in Stock’s opinion, exist for a purpose more significant than conveying meaning, and their purpose – or what they are ‘there for’ - which is specific to themselves, has nothing to do with being functional but is instead simply to be contemplated and appreciated for their own sake. They have a purposiveness which is not dependent on them being functional.

Kant describes beauty as being: ‘the object of disinterested satisfaction’;⁴⁵ ‘universal’;⁴⁶ ‘purposive and yet without purpose’;⁴⁷ and ‘necessary’, or ‘an object of necessary delight’.⁴⁸ However, Hume writes that ‘One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every

⁴² Robert L. Wicks, *European Aesthetics: A Critical Introduction from Kant to Derrida*, (London: Oneworld Publications, 2013), p. 24

⁴³ Ibid. p. 11

⁴⁴ Kathleen Stock, Introduction to *Philosophers on Music: Experience, Meaning and Work*, ed. Kathleen Stock, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 4

⁴⁵ ‘Taste is the faculty of judging an object or mode of representation by means of a delight or aversion apart from any interest. The object of such a delight is called *beautiful*.’, Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, First Book, First Moment S5 (This ed. trans. James Creed Meredith, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), P.42)

⁴⁶ ‘The *beautiful* is that which, apart from any concept, pleases universally.’, Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, First Book, Second Moment, S9 (This ed. trans. James Creed Meredith, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). p.51)

⁴⁷ ‘*Beauty* is the form of *purposiveness* in an object, so far as this is perceived in it *apart from the representation of an end*.’, Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, First Book, Third Moment, S17 (This ed. trans. James Creed Meredith, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). P. 66)

⁴⁸ ‘The beautiful is that which, apart from a concept, is cognized as [an] object of a *necessary* delight.’ First Book, Forth Moment, S22, (This ed. p. 71) Immanuel Kant, trans. James Creed Meredith, *Critique of Judgement*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)

individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others',⁴⁹ which does not sit comfortably with Kant's idea of beauty as universal and necessary. When Kant says that beauty is universal what he means is that when we believe something is beautiful we also believe that other people *should* agree with us. This does not necessarily mean that we believe that everyone does agree with us, only that we can't see how any reasonable person could possibly disagree with us.

Kant writes that:

'In all judgements by which we describe anything as beautiful we tolerate no one else being of a different opinion, and yet we do not rest our judgement upon concepts, but only on our feeling [...] The assertion is not that everyone *will* fall in with our judgement, but rather that everyone *ought* to agree with it.'⁵⁰

Another of Kant's key themes in his discussion of beauty is the idea of beauty as something that encourages cognitive free-play, or free-play of the imagination.⁵¹ This differs from some other definitions of beauty in that it describes what beauty should do, rather than what beauty should look or sound like. Beauty, by this definition, is that which encourages and facilitates harmony of the senses and cognition, bringing together the rational and the sensory, and allowing us to free our minds and imaginations. It can entrance and inspire, provoking thought and giving pleasure while not fulfilling any function. If we consider the concept of beauty from this angle, it can be concluded that anything which allows us to experience the pleasure of this free-play can rightly be called beautiful, and that there is no requirement for an object to look a certain way, or for a piece of music to sound a certain way, for it to be beautiful. Furthermore, if one agrees that 'To be beautiful is to be valued',⁵² we now have the basis for an argument that beauty can in fact be located within modernism, and that modernist music and art have value, aesthetic value, by virtue of their beauty.

⁴⁹ David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', 1757, paragraph 7, Kindle edition published 2011

⁵⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 1790, (this ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 70

⁵¹ '... that which Kant places at the core of aesthetic experience, the harmony of the free play of the cognitive powers.', Ferdia Stone-Davis, *Musical Beauty*, (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), p. 81

⁵² Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in 20th Century Art*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 127

Beauty in Modernist Music and Art

What is of great importance in the context of this discussion is how we are to define beauty. Is beauty really about the external appearance of an object, or the way a musical work actually sounds? From what I have written above I think it can be concluded that beauty is not actually to do with any physical quality of an object, but is instead more to do with the effect something has on us, for example, the extent to which it encourages free-play of the imagination; whether or not we desire it without any particular need for it or desire to use it for any purpose; and whether or not we view it as something which cannot be improved upon or changed for the better. A further sign that we find something beautiful is an unwillingness to consider why someone else may disagree with us, therefore, if something encourages free-play of our imagination, we desire it as an end in itself, cannot see how it could be changed for the better and cannot understand why anyone could feel differently towards it, we find that thing – be it a musical work, a painting, a sculpture, a poem or anything else – to be beautiful. Beauty is located within this sphere of subjective, experience-based relationships of subject and object, but this doesn't have to mean that the objective qualities of an object do not contribute towards it. The traits that we are taught to identify as beautiful – the traits that make something 'classically beautiful' – can have an effect on how we relate to something, and this in turn can affect our experience of it and our reaction to it.

Modernist music, take for example *The Rite of Spring*, of which I spoke earlier, is, I believe, often profoundly beautiful – as Steiner suggests that modern artworks may be – however, its beauty isn't of the sort that we are taught and conditioned to recognise. *The Rite* is overwhelming, all-consuming, rough and at times violent, but it demands the attention of listeners and compels you to continue listening. The unearthly plaintive quality of the opening bassoon solo, the earthy and powerful impact of incessantly rhythmic driving passages, the repeated stabbing chords and the moments of almost tranquil stillness all come together to create a piece of music that is truly beautiful, in the fullest sense of the word. This is without a doubt a work that facilitates free-play of the imagination and harmony of the senses and cognition; however, on top of this it is something which is desirable for its own intrinsic aesthetic value - as an end in itself – and it is difficult to see how it could possibly be improved upon, or changed but for the worse.

Other modernist works can be considered in this way and found to be similarly beautiful, take for example Anton Webern's *Symphony* Op. 21. Webern's *Symphony* is, like *The Rite*, not beautiful in a conventional way, but it is beautiful nonetheless. The shifting harmonies and textures, which seem to grow out of the horn entry at the opening of the work and weave in and out of each other, create a sonorous space in which the mind of the listener can wander freely, engaging both their cognition and senses in what Kant describes as free-play of the imagination. This is because Webern's use of

serialism, symmetry and variation within the work - particularly when combined with the complex and concentrated nature of this miniature 'symphony' - mean that it can challenge and stimulate listeners intellectually, while at the same time allowing them to enjoy the music on a sensual level.

When speaking of Webern's opus 21 George Benjamin is quoted as having said:

'Paradoxically, this product of hermetic constructivism seems infused with intense emotion, that emotion evenly diffused across the whole surface of the music. Gone is the mono-directional thrust of Classical and Romantic music; in its place a world of rotations and reflections, opening myriad paths for the listener to trace through textures of luminous clarity yet beguiling ambiguity.'⁵³

It is within the 'world of rotations and reflections' which Benjamin speaks of that listeners have the chance to 'trace through textures of luminous clarity yet beguiling ambiguity' that beauty is located. Beauty, again, is found in the experience of listening to and connecting with the music. Although Webern's Symphony may not be beautiful in the way that Classical or Romantic music was, it is no less beautiful. The beauty of this work, like Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and many other modernist works, is due to the effect that it can have upon listeners and not because of any particular feature of the work itself. The features and qualities of a work do, however, affect the way in which listeners will experience it, and this is perhaps where some of the confusion surrounding this subject stems from.

Modernist music and art may not be obviously beautiful in the narrow sense of the word, but, with a little consideration, the indefinable quality which draws people to it can be identified as true beauty. Composers such as Stravinsky, Webern, Ligeti, Bartok, Ives, Varèse and Salzedo have all written music of great beauty, but the beauty of their music – to varying degrees - when compared with the music of earlier composers, may not always be so obvious. To be able to experience the type of beauty found in modernist music listeners must be open to it and willing to concede that their preconceived ideas about beauty may not be correct, rather than being opposed to the idea that something must be unbeautiful because it doesn't sound the way they expect something beautiful to sound. The effect that music has on a listener is of more significance than the way it sounds. That being said, the elements of 'classical beauty', or the elements that traditionally make something beautiful – proportion, balance, harmony, symmetry and even rhythm – are still very much a feature of modernist music. What is it that makes a composition feel 'finished', makes a rest or note feel the right length, or makes a phrase sound correct? It is the central elements of proportion, harmony, balance and symmetry that have this effect. Beauty is rooted in experience and a subject's relationship with the object they are

⁵³ Tom Service, 'Symphony Guide: Webern's op 21', *The Guardian*, 17th December 2013

experiencing, meaning that an object need not be ‘classically beautiful’ for it to be beautiful, however, the things that cause an object – be it a piece of music, a painting, a sculpture or anything else - to affect a person in a certain way are physical qualities of the object. Proportion, balance, harmony and symmetry – the traits that mark something out as ‘beautiful’ – are concealed within modernist music and art. However, I believe that it is still these traits which cause people to find this type of art – modernist art – beautiful. Beauty in modernism therefore could be said to stem from the same place as classical beauty, though they appear very different in character. Scruton uses the novels of Zola as an example of this, writing that ‘Even in the brutal presentations of thwarted and malicious life that fill the novels of Zola we find, if not the reality of beauty, at least a distant glimpse of it – recorded in the rhythm of the prose...’⁵⁴

Further examples of beauty in modernism can be found in other art forms, such as in the paintings and sculptures of Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Gustav Klimt; in poetry – take for example *The Waste Land*, written by T. S. Eliot; and in dance – in the choreography of Vaslav Nijinsky and the technique developed in the 1920s by Martha Graham. Much modernist visual art differs from earlier styles in that it is less concerned with attempting to represent things, people or places as they appear, and instead adopts a more abstract approach to creating images. Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2*, Picasso’s *Girl Before a Mirror* and Braque’s *Woman with a Guitar* all depict women; however, none of them attempt to show the subject of the painting in a realistic way. Form, shape and line become the main focus of the work, and this is where beauty can be found. Georges Braque’s comment that the new type of beauty he sought to create would appear ‘in terms of volume, of line, of mass, [and] of weight’, is made manifest through works such as the ones mentioned above. These works allow the beholder to form a relationship with the images through which they feel the purposiveness of the shapes and lines that come together in such a way as to provoke cognitive free-play and an awareness of beauty. Nijinsky, who is widely regarded as one of the greatest male dancers of the 20th century, pushed boundaries in ballet, scandalising audiences with his daring new style of choreography and dance; Martha Graham revolutionised modern dance and influenced it in the way Stravinsky influenced music and Picasso influenced visual art; T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is one of the most significant works of modernist poetry and is filled with themes such as death and desolation, yet in its portrayal of the damaged state of modern humanity it has a beauty that cannot be denied. Beauty isn’t only found in what is pretty or charming; beauty can also be found in the distorted and the unfamiliar, in sadness and desolation, in the provocative and in the shocking.

⁵⁴ Roger Scruton, *Beauty*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 176

Scruton writes that ‘some of the most meaningful works of recent times have been downright ugly and even offensive in their raw-nerve impact [...] To call such works beautiful is in a way to diminish and even trivialise what they are trying to say’, however he goes on to say that ‘Art, he [Schiller] suggests, takes us out of the everyday practical concerns, by providing us with objects, characters, scenes and actions with which we can play, and which we can enjoy for what they are, rather than what they do for us [...] In play, elevated by art to the level of free contemplation, reason and sense are reconciled [...] In appreciating art we are playing; the artist too is playing in creating it. And the result is not always beautiful, or beautiful in a predictable way. But this lucid attitude is fulfilled by beauty...’.⁵⁵ The type of beauty that Scruton first speaks of is that which is classically beautiful, or, to use his own words, ‘beautiful in a predictable way’. The ugliness and raw-nerve impact of the works he refers to may not be immediately beautiful, but in the way in which they enable us to play and engage in free contemplation - which is what Kant describes as free-play of the imagination - they allow us, as listeners, viewers or performers, to encounter beauty. These types of works may not be beautiful in an obvious way but this is because their beauty lies in the way they are able to affect us. A further suggestion put forward by Scruton is that when we ‘praise works of art that we deny to be beautiful’ ugliness could be said to be ‘absorbed into, redeemed by, a higher beauty’.⁵⁶ The higher beauty that Scruton refers to here is, I believe, the beauty of the way in which the works can affect us by allowing us to engage in play and free contemplation. It is beauty that goes beyond being pretty or charming and affects us – the listener or viewer - in a deeper, more visceral way; which is not to say that it cannot also affect us intellectually, only that its effect upon us is stronger and more instinctual than the beauty of more superficially or predictably beautiful art.

Theodor Adorno’s thoughts on ugliness, beauty and art are set out in his *Aesthetic Theory*. In it Adorno posits that the categories of the ugly and the beautiful are dynamic, and writes that because of this they ‘Both mock definitional fixation’.⁵⁷ If the concept of beauty, or the category of the beautiful, is dynamic and ever changing – as Adorno says it is – this confirms that modernist music and art need not be anything like earlier music or art in order to be beautiful. As discussed earlier, modernist music is indeed vastly different from what came before it, and yet it can still be beautiful. This highlights just how dynamic and unfixed the category of ‘the beautiful’ is. Beauty, according to Adorno, is ‘the result not of a simple equilibrium per se, but rather of the tension that results.’⁵⁸ This tension is the result of the way in which disparate elements are brought together in a composition or artwork. I believe that ugliness – the impression of which ‘stems from violence and destruction’⁵⁹ – can be used effectively to

⁵⁵ Ibid. pp. 127-128

⁵⁶ Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 373-374

⁵⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor, (New York: Bloomsbury, 1997), p. 64

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 63

⁵⁹ Ibid p. 64

create this tension, and that being part of the resulting beauty is a further way in which it can cease to be ugly. Adorno expresses this idea when he writes that ‘There is nothing putatively ugly that would not be able through a transformation of its position in the work [...] to discard its ugliness.’⁶⁰

On the subject of art and society, Adorno states that:

‘The concept of art [...] refuses definition [...] The definition of art is at every point indicated by what art once was, but is legitimated only by what art became with regard to what it wants to, and perhaps can, become [...] Because art is what it has become’.⁶¹

Art, including music, has changed dramatically over time, and modernist music was - for a time - what music became. With modernism came an alteration in the relationship between beauty and art, but also in that of art and society and, so it follows, beauty and society. A new type of beauty emerged in modernist music, and the categories of the beautiful and the ugly overlapped and intertwined. Society has to some extent come to accept and embrace this new type of beauty in art, however modernism and modernist art remain to be seen as difficult and inaccessible by some people. In Adorno and Eisler’s *Composing for the Films*, they write of the ways in which ‘big business has fettered the freedom of artistic creation’ and there was an ‘unjustifiable oversimplification of musical language.’⁶² This fettering of artistic creation and oversimplification of musical language is just one way in which music has been adapted to fit societies needs and wants, and it shows how the relationship between music, or art in general, and society is not always equal or balanced.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 65

⁶¹ Ibid. pp. 2-3

⁶² Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler, *Composing for the Films*, (this ed. London; The Athlone Press, 1994), pp. 62-64

Chapter 2 - Value

Values of Art

Up until now I have focused on the concepts of beauty and aesthetic value but at this point in our discussion I shall turn my attention to examine the idea of value more closely. Beauty and value can be linked to each other in a way that is central to the meaning of each concept because, as has been established above, describing something as beautiful denotes not just a liking, but also a valuing of the object – ‘To be beautiful is to be valued’.⁶³ This much is true, but several questions are left hanging in the air: What does it mean to be valued? What does it mean to value something? What is value? Why do we value beauty? How do we demonstrate that we value something? In what ways is it clear that we value beauty? In the following chapter I will address some of these questions, starting with an elucidation of the term ‘value’ and the different ways in which it can be used.

Any one thing can have many different kinds of value, depending upon the person evaluating it and the point of view from which they make this judgement. One person may value something for one reason while another values the same thing for an entirely different reason, and because of the different ways each person views the object – what they intend to use it for, or the reasons for which they appreciate it - the type of value involved in each case is different. One person may value a phrasebook as a useful tool to help them communicate while holidaying in a foreign country while someone else may see the same phrasebook’s value as a doorstop, or as a product that they could sell to make a profit. All of these are examples of extrinsic values of the phrasebook; they are examples of how the book can be valuable by being useful in some way, in other words, they show that the book can have several instrumental or extrinsic values.

‘Whatever can be evaluated, can be evaluated from different points of view, and corresponding to the point of view from which it is assessed, the value attributed to it will be of a different kind. So a work of art can have many different kinds of value – a cognitive value, a social value, an educational value, a historical value, a sentimental value, a religious value, an economic value, a therapeutic value... ‘artistic value’ or ‘the value of a work of art *as a work of art*.’⁶⁴

⁶³ Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in 20th Century Art*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 127

⁶⁴ Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art – Pictures, Poetry and Music*, (England: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 1-2

This is the kind of value with which this paper is concerned; the value of art, specifically music, as art, without any wish to exploit it or use it for any end. Budd writes that ‘if a work possesses artistic value, this does not consist in the work’s actually accomplishing some valuable end in the case of one, some or many of us’.⁶⁵

It is worth noting that Budd uses the term ‘artistic value’, not ‘aesthetic value’. Dominic McIver Lopes raises the question of whether or not it is possible to have artistic value without aesthetic value in his article ‘The Myth of (Non-Aesthetic) Artistic Value’. As he correctly points out, the idea of whether or not it is possible to have non-aesthetic artistic value is dependent on our definition of artistic value. If artistic value is taken to be nothing more than value in art, the term ‘artistic value’ can include ‘aesthetic value, cognitive value, moral value, therapeutic value, political value, propaganda value, economic value, decorative value, entertainment value, hedonic value, distraction value, prurient value, theological value, communicative value, bragging value, [and] collector value’⁶⁶ which allows artistic value to be possible without aesthetic value; however, if artistic value is understood as ‘the value of a work of art *as a work of art*’ or if, as Lopes puts it, ‘artistic value is not mere value in art; it is value *as art*, value that an art work has by its nature’,⁶⁷ then non-aesthetic artistic value cannot exist. As reasonable as this premise is, how is one to decide which values are values *in* art and which values are values *as art*? Value as art, I believe, can be characterised as the intrinsic and non-instrumental value of the work of art, which, as I discussed above, is known as aesthetic value. Lopes’ conclusion – with which I agree – is that ‘Artistic value as distinct from aesthetic value is not an option.’⁶⁸

I believe that by valuing something we are expressing a feeling, whether consciously or subconsciously, that this particular thing, object, artwork, or piece of music has something to offer us – there is something which can be gained by possessing it or experiencing it – and we desire to have it; however, if music, appreciated solely as music, or art appreciated solely as art, is useless – lacking a purpose and of no material use to anyone – then what is the explanation for our valuing it? What is it that it offers us that we are unable to find anywhere else? I say ‘if’ because I believe that it is important to remain open to the possibility of other ideas, however the fact is that to appreciate something as an end in itself means that this must be to the exclusion of all instrumental or extrinsic values.

Even within the realm of music we at times exhibit a ‘desire for the particular’; a desire not just for music, but for a specific piece of music. It would be conceivable for someone to desire music without desiring a specific piece of music, for example desiring some music to be used as background music to

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 6

⁶⁶ Dominic McIver Lopes, ‘The Myth of (Non –Aesthetic) Artistic Value’, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 61, Issue 244, (July, 2011), pp. 518-536, p. 520

⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 523

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 536

fill silence without having any real preference for what music was used, however, in this situation the music is being valued as a means to an end – a means to fill silence. When we desire a particular piece of music we could also desire it for some reason related to an extrinsic value, but in some cases we may desire it for no reason other than to listen to it and enjoy it as a piece of music. The value we place on the musical work which we desire in this way is of a specifically aesthetic nature; it is a desire for beauty, and this brings us to the question of why we value beauty and beautiful things. Why do we value aesthetic value?

The Value of Beauty and Aesthetic Value

For something to have aesthetic value does not mean that it has to be devoid of any other value, but if it is being valued based on its aesthetic merit any other extrinsic value it has must be disregarded.⁶⁹ The question of why people do, or should, value beauty, or art purely as art, at all, or why aesthetic value matters takes us back to the idea of purposive purposelessness. In general, if an object has a function or purpose we value it because it can be useful in some way; however, music, or indeed art in general, when appreciated as an end in itself has no function and no apparent purpose. This suggests that there must be some other reason for valuing it. If the aim of art is to be beautiful – not necessarily beautiful in the narrow sense of the word which is associated with classical beauty, but in a wider, more thoughtful and considered sense – then as long as art achieves its aim, because it is beautiful we value it, and this is apparent through our desiring of it, but this still does not answer the question ‘why do we value and desire beautiful things?’ “If it is their beauty that we desire, why should we value beauty in this way? ‘The lover of beautiful things has a desire – what is it that he desires? That they become his own...’”⁷⁰. This dialogue between Socrates and Diotima can be found in Plato’s *The Symposium* and it highlights the almost irrational nature of our desire, but it also shows that even in our desire for aesthetic value we express the same feeling as we do with other types of value – that the thing in question has something to offer us; that it is able to give us something that we need and can’t find elsewhere.

⁶⁹ This is an idea that is discussed by Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols*. Nietzsche compares the notion of *l’art pour l’art* to a worm chewing its own tail – ‘altogether purposeless, aimless and senseless’. He is of the opinion that art must have some purpose, and that ‘The fight against purpose in art is always a fight against the moralizing tendency in art [...] When the purpose of moral preaching and of improving man has been excluded from art it still does not follow by any means that art is altogether purposeless, aimless, senseless [...] Art is the great stimulus to life: how could one understand it as purposeless, as aimless, as *l’art pour l’art*?’ – Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, section 24, first published 1889, accessed via lexido.com

⁷⁰ Plato, *The Symposium*, (England: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 41

There is something in music, and indeed art in general, which we as a society are in constant pursuit of. This sets it apart from the other things in life, which have a use and are valuable for a defined purpose. Roger Scruton writes that ‘the interest in information is satiable; as is the interest in food. But there are interests which are by their nature insatiable. Aesthetic interest is like this.’⁷¹ Our insatiable appetite for whatever it is that drives us to seek out beautiful music or beautiful artworks again and again points to the intrinsic value of music. John O’Neill examines the different kinds of intrinsic, i.e. non-instrumental, values that are possible in his article ‘The Varieties of Intrinsic Value’ which appeared in *The Monist* in April 1992.⁷² Extrinsic value can be linked to dependent beauty – as opposed to free beauty, which is the kind of beauty that ‘attaches to the object of perception viewed not as of a kind but solely as an individual in its own right’⁷³ – and differs from intrinsic value in a number of ways. If we value music or art for an extrinsic value its value is likely to be obvious, and if we value it due to dependent or adherent beauty its value as an example of its kind should be clear, but, if we value something for its ‘free beauty’ this is when the reason for valuing it may be less obvious.

All music appreciated as music, or all art appreciated as art is, as was acknowledged by Oscar Wilde in the Preface to *A Picture of Dorian Gray*, ‘quite useless’,⁷⁴ and it is for this reason that the value of music as music or art as art can come into question.

In his book *A Theory of Art* Karol Berger writes:

‘The need to answer the question of art’s function becomes more acute as the autonomy of the artist grows [...] Much of what today would be classified as art was produced to accompany, embellish, and enhance the public and private rituals and ceremonies of religious, political and social life [...] But it is a defining feature of modern art that it is autonomous, that the goals of its producers are internal to the practices of the various arts themselves, and not imposed on them from without, It is precisely the autonomy of modern art that gives rise to the question of the function of art and makes the question so difficult to answer. Once

⁷¹ Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 369

⁷² John O’Neill, ‘The Varieties of Intrinsic Value’, *The Monist*, Vol. 72, No.2, The Intrinsic Value of Nature (April 1992), pp. 119-137

⁷³ Stephen Davies, ‘Aesthetic Judgements, Artworks and Functional Beauty’, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No 233 (April 2006), pp. 224-241, p. 228

⁷⁴ ‘We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless.’ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, first published 1891 (This ed. Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 4

art has been emancipated from the context of social practices that gave it significance, what is its point? What is the function of functionless art?⁷⁵

The point Berger makes here is that when art is valued for an extrinsic value – its ability to be functional– it is much easier to see the purpose of art, but because modern art is autonomous the question of its function is difficult to answer; however, being functionless does not necessarily have to mean being purposeless. In his article ‘Aesthetic Judgements, Artworks and Functional Beauty’, Stephen Davies discusses this subject, writing that:

‘Sometimes art is described as lacking a practical function, which perhaps implies that it is useless and therefore worthless. A more accurate account attributes to art a distinctive function, which is to provide an aesthetically (or artistically) pleasurable experience when contemplated for its own sake [...] the value of art is held to be intrinsic and self regarding’.⁷⁶

Art has a function distinctive to itself, and because of this, even when it ‘lacks practical utility’⁷⁷ it can still be purposeful. According to Davies, the value of art and its aesthetic value lies in its ability to provide a pleasurable experience.

The pleasurable experience that comes from engaging with art is central to our reasons for valuing art for art’s sake, which confirms that the value of art is located in our experience of it and our relationship with it. Davies’ claim that the value of art is held to be intrinsic and self regarding seems to me to be the only answer to the question of why we value aesthetic value. The aesthetic value of art, or the value of art as art, cannot be explained. We value beauty because it is beautiful, and we value things with aesthetic value because they have aesthetic value. Aesthetic value can be defined as the intrinsic and non-instrumental value of something, and it is for this reason that it is not possible to justify it rationally.

⁷⁵ Karol Berger, *A Theory of Art*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 4-5

⁷⁶ Stephen Davies, ‘Aesthetic Judgements, Artworks and Functional Beauty’, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 56, No. 223 (April 2006), pp. 224-241, p. 228

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Chapter 3 - Changing Attitudes Towards Modernist Music

Beauty and Value in Modernist Music

Modernist music, it seems, is often considered as being without beauty or any particular value by people who lack the understanding or open-mindedness to appreciate it. In 2010 Alex Ross wrote an article entitled ‘Why do we hate modern classical music?’⁷⁸ which was published in *The Guardian*. In it Ross states that: ‘Avant garde art and architecture are loved, but in music we cling to the past. We’re missing out.’⁷⁹ This differentiation between modern music and the other ‘modern arts’ is puzzling because music, although perhaps the most abstract of the arts,⁸⁰ had, until relatively recently, enjoyed a status equal to that of other arts. Ross puts forward an interesting suggestion as to why this may be the case which highlights the different ways in which we interact with different art forms and may explain the difference in attitudes when it comes to embracing modernism across the art forms. He writes that ‘because concert audiences are essentially trapped in their seats for a set period, they tend to reject unfamiliar work more readily than do gallery visitors, who can move about freely, confronting strange images at their own pace.’⁸¹ This is a highly perceptive observation that may perhaps explain the disparity in attitudes towards modernist music and modernist art and architecture.

When something is new to us it is often more comfortable to approach it on our own terms and at our own pace, and to know that we can escape if we wish. The thought of being ‘trapped’, as Ross puts it, for a prolonged period of time and being forced to listen to unfamiliar music may put many people off, however familiarisation with something can often have the effect of making us more comfortable with it – the mere exposure effect is an example of this. According to the mere exposure effect, people tend to develop a liking or preference for things simply because they are exposed to them and become familiar with them. If this theory is applied to modernist music then it can be surmised that people who ‘hate modern classical music’ would find – if they keep listening to it - that they don’t actually hate it at all. As Ross writes, ‘All music is an acquired taste; no music is everywhere beloved’⁸²,

⁷⁸ Alex Ross, ‘Why do we hate modern classical music’, *The Guardian*, 28th November 2010, accessed via www.theguardian.com

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ See ‘Music as an Abstract Art’, in Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art – Pictures, Poetry and Music*, (England: Penguin Books, 1995)

⁸¹ Alex Ross, ‘Why do we hate modern classical music’, *The Guardian*, 28th November 2010, accessed via www.theguardian.com

⁸² Ibid.

however the thought of attending a concert of ‘modern classical music’ where they would be expected to stay and listen until the end may be unappealing or even intimidating to some people – people who have not experienced much exposure to this type of music before - and this prevents them from becoming familiar with it and appreciating it in the way they appreciate other modern art.

In order to locate beauty in modernist music listeners must be able to relate to it, and if they are unable to do this it will be impossible for them to appreciate the intrinsic value of the work. This is one of the main struggles faced by modernist music. Modernism can alienate people, but it also has the power to touch people and has the ability to encourage free play of the imagination. The problem with determining the value of modernist music is that its intrinsic value lies in its beauty, meaning that if listeners are unable to connect with modernist music in such a way that they are sensible of the promise of beauty and the aesthetically pleasurable experience it has to offer they will be equally unable to see any value in it as art.

Modernist works, which were at first reviled by many, later became important works in the mainstream canon of western art music. *The Rite of Spring* is one example of this. A question to ask ourselves is whether the reason for this is that people eventually recognised that they are beautiful, or if the canon of classical music was expanded to include works which are not beautiful. I believe that what happened was a combination of these two things, and that this came about because people grew more accustomed to modernist music - in so far as modernist music has been welcomed into the canon of classical music. The works of Berg are another example of this. Scruton refers to the operas of Berg and the novels of Zola as examples of successful aesthetic objects – or works of art – that succeeded despite not being beautiful in the idealised sense. He writes that:

‘Even in Zola and Berg, however, beauty shows its face – as in the lovely invocation of the young Françoise and her cow at the opening of *La Terre* or the equally lovely music with which Berg’s orchestra sorrows over Lulu. Zola and Berg, in their different ways, remind us that real beauty can be found, even in what is seedy, painful and decayed. Our ability to *tell the truth* about our own condition in measured words and touching melodies, offers a kind of redemption from it.’⁸³

La Terre is a novel set in rural France and includes themes of immorality, lust, greed, jealousy, death, violence and rape, however, in addition to telling the truth about our own condition, it includes

⁸³ Roger Scruton, *Beauty*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 167

passages of highly descriptive and beautifully written prose.⁸⁴ Beauty shows its face throughout this painful and seedy novel. In *Lulu* Berg addresses some themes similar to those found throughout *La Terre*, however, like Zola, Berg shows how beauty can be found in unexpected places. Schopenhauer, according to Wicks, believed that ‘the aesthetic representation of horrible subject matters is beneficial if it reveals those subjects sufficiently well to render their reality reprehensible’, however he found ‘traditional artistic representations’ to be wanting in this respect because ‘they do not convey the full reality of the objects they portray.’⁸⁵ Scruton’s claim that our ability to tell the truth about our own condition through art offers redemption from it is similar in a way to Schopenhauer’s feeling that representations of distasteful or uncomfortable subject matter can be beneficial if they represent it accurately enough to ‘render their reality reprehensible’. The main difference separating their thinking on this matter is that while the traditional artistic representations which Schopenhauer speaks of failed to achieve this, the modernist works which Scruton refers to successfully conveyed the ugly truth of our own condition. This is one other way in which *La Terre* and *Lulu*, and indeed modernist art in general, can be beautiful.

Modernism can be beautiful and valuable through not being afraid to embrace the harshness and ugliness of reality, however the way in which it does this allows us to distance ourselves from it just enough to contemplate it freely and imaginatively. In *Pyramids at the Louvre – Music, Culture and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists* Glenn Watkins writes that ‘Marcel Proust purportedly once asked his housekeeper, “Do you ever read novels, Celeste?” “Occasionally, monsieur,” she replied. “Why?” he continued”. “They take me out of myself”, she responded; to which Proust retorted, “They should take you into yourself.”’⁸⁶ This idea of novels being able to take you into yourself is not unlike that of using art to tell the truth about our own condition. In both examples a work is having the effect of making us turn inwards, either to look at society or at ourselves, at the same time as giving us pleasure. Modernist art and music gives us this opportunity, and its ability to do so, although it may be shocking or disturbing, is at the same time part of what makes it beautiful.

⁸⁴ For example, the passage Scruton refers to: ‘Jean was coming down for the last time when he perceived, approaching from Rognes, a large red and white cow, the halter of which was held by a young girl, almost a child. The little peasant-girl and the animal were coming along the path which skirted the valley at the top of the plateau; and, with his back turned to them, he had gone up and finished the field, when a sound of running, mingled with stifled cries made him look round...’ Emile Zola, *La Terre*, (London: Vizetelly & Co. 1888), p. 7, or the opening passage which reads: ‘That morning Jean, with a seed-bag of blue linen, tied round his waist, held its mouth open with his left hand, while with his right, at every three steps, he drew forth a handful of corn, and flung it broadcast. The rich soil clung to his heavy shoes, which left holes in the ground, as his body lurched regularly from side to side; and each time he threw you saw, amid the ever-flying yellow seed, the gleam of two red stripes on the sleeve of the old regimental jacket he was wearing out.’ Ibid, p.5 – accessed via <https://archive.org>

⁸⁵ Robert L. Wicks, *European Aesthetics: A Critical Introduction from Kant to Derrida*, (London: Oneworld Publications, 2013), p. 111

⁸⁶ Glenn Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre – Music, Culture and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), p.10

Modernism Becomes Familiar

The difficulty of locating beauty in modernism is a relative thing because the newness and shockingness of modernism is something that is often greatly reduced with familiarisation. What was once uncomfortably new and modern, over time, may lose these qualities and become old and familiar. This can make it easier to appreciate the beauty in modernist art and music because when we become more comfortable and open around it we are more able, or willing, to engage in cognitive and imaginative free-play, to see purposiveness in the seemingly aimless, to accept that ‘real beauty can be found even in what is seedy, painful and decayed’ and perhaps even recognise elements of classical beauty in the modernist work.

Taruskin described Debussy as the first modernist, and in his article ‘The Assault on Modernism in Music’, which was published in *The Musical Quarterly* in 1921, R.D. Welch acknowledges that the music of Debussy was at first seen as ‘strange, new sounds’, but he also writes that it wasn’t long before his [Debussy’s] name became ‘a symbol for the delicate and imaginative and suggestive in all modern art’.⁸⁷ The change in attitudes that took place regarding Debussy’s compositions shows the way in which art that was at first not regarded as beautiful can, with time, come to be seen as beautiful – ‘some beautiful things can seem, at first glance, quite imperfect’.⁸⁸ For example, a listener hearing the music of Xenakis, Birtwistle or Berio for the first time may hear it as ‘strange new sounds’, but upon a second listening, or a third listening, they may find something new in it. Each time they return to the music they will learn to engage with it in a new and more meaningful way and will become more sensitive to its promise of beauty. What it is important to remember is that the music did not become beautiful - nothing in the music changed - the only thing that changed was the attitude towards it and the willingness of people to be open to the possibility of finding beauty in modernist music.

A listener indicates that they find a piece of music beautiful and intrinsically valuable by returning to it and listening to it again and again, even though nothing new can be gained through this. It is valuable to them as an end in itself because even though there is nothing new that they hope to do with it they still wish to experience it again; it is through their actions that it can be seen that they value the work, and that the value they place on it is of an aesthetic nature. The same could be said of someone who wishes to look upon a modernist artwork even after they have seen it before. The viewer enjoys a pleasurable experience through simply looking upon the work of art, without any desire to do anything with it – they are appreciating it in a disinterested way and therefore valuing it only for its

⁸⁷ R. D. Welch, ‘The Assault on Modernism in Music’, *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 3, (July, 1921), pp. 408-417, p. 408

⁸⁸ Glenn Parsons, ‘Beauty and public policy’, (The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, 2010), p. 15

aesthetic value. Although it may not be an image that is immediately beautiful, familiarity with it can make one grow to see more in it and experience more pleasure while looking at it. As I mentioned above, this is not the same as other recurring desires because at no point is the listener's desire for the piece of music or the person's desire for the artwork fully satiated; at no point will they find that they have experienced enough beauty and cease to desire it.

When discussing how to encourage more people to engage with modern classical music Ross writes that 'What must fall away is the notion of classical music as a reliable conduit for consoling beauty – a kind of spa treatment for tired souls. Such an attitude undercuts not only 20th-century composers but also the classics it purports to cherish.'⁸⁹ The answer to the problem of helping people realise the value and beauty of modernist music may be to convince them to change their perceptions of what classical music should be like, and to broaden their views regarding beauty and what it consists in. Expectations of what music and art ought to be like, how they ought to make one feel and what beauty ought to look or sound like, I believe, are the main barriers for people when it come to locating beauty in modernism.

⁸⁹ Alex Ross, 'Why do we hate modern classical music', *The Guardian*, 28th November 2010, accessed via www.theguardian.com

Conclusion

Concluding Thoughts

Having now considered the ideas of beauty, value and modernism, I will take some time to gather together the different strands of this argument and set them out before us.

One of the questions I posed at the beginning of this dissertation was whether beauty can be located within modernist music and art, or if beauty as a central element in artistic creation and aesthetic appreciation is absent in modernist music and art. Throughout the course of this discussion I have kept that question at the forefront of my thinking. The emergence of modernism in music resulted in a new style of composition which bore little resemblance to the music of the past. Conventionally beautiful melodies and harmonies, and conventional structures and forms became unfashionable, and it seemed that beauty was no longer a feature of music. Composers adopted a new approach to music which saw them pushing boundaries and challenging listeners with new and unusual sounds, but did this really mark the end of beauty? Beauty, as it was most commonly recognised, may have become almost obsolete, but this does not necessarily have to mean that it vanished altogether.

Modernism in music paralleled the rise of modernism in other art forms where beauty appeared to be cast aside as something that was no longer relevant or interesting. Artists were experimenting with new techniques and styles in the same way that composers of modernist music were doing, but in their attempts to develop their new style I don't believe that beauty was truly lost. Braque's comment stating that what he wished to do was create a new sort of beauty is key to understanding the way in which modernism developed. Braque said that what he aimed to do was to create a new type of beauty, not that he wanted to turn his back on beauty entirely. I believe that this was also the aim of other modernist artists and composers, for example Stravinsky, of whom I have already spoken. Modernist composers needn't be seen as having abandoned beauty, which, according to Steiner, is the generous aim of aesthetic experience; however they did move in a different direction, creating a new path towards beauty and pleasurable aesthetic experiences.

Beauty has been a subject of interest for many centuries, but in some ways little has changed in the way we think about it. Two opposing points of view – that of beauty as subjective and that of beauty as objective – dominate thinking, but I believe that it is possible to look beyond this divide and see that they are connected in some way. I believe that beauty is subjective and that it exists only within a subject's experience of an object and the relationship between the two, however I also recognise that the objective qualities of something affect a subject's experience of it and influence their relationship

with it, and, because this is the case, that the objective qualities of something can have an effect on whether or not someone finds it beautiful. Further to this, popular conceptions of what beauty is are often based on objective physical qualities of objects because we have been taught to identify certain traits as beautiful. As a society, we have become accustomed to a certain type of beauty, and because modernist music and art aren't beautiful in this way it is difficult for people to see how they could be called beautiful. That being said, if we consider beauty in a fuller sense it becomes easier to understand the beauty that is located in modernism.

Having established that beauty does not consist in the physical qualities of an object, the problem now is deciding what it is that makes something beautiful. Artistic beauty lies in an object's ability to inspire free-play of the imagination and cognition, it is beauty born again of the mind and has a purposiveness which is not to do with any function. We know that we find something beautiful when we cannot see how it could be changed in any way but for the worse, and perhaps most significantly, we can't understand how anyone could disagree with us. Beauty affects us in a certain way; it doesn't matter how something looks or sounds, or whether it is classically beautiful or not, because beauty is much more than the physical qualities of an object. The beauty of modernist music - the new type of beauty referred to by Braque and developed by modernists such as Stravinsky - is this sort of beauty. It is the sort of beauty that affects listeners, viewers and readers without them necessarily realising that what they are experiencing is beauty. Beauty can also be experienced through representations of subject matter that would not normally be considered beautiful because it has the ability to be in some way redemptive.

From here, the next point to consider was what counts as modernist music since the term 'modernist' could be interpreted in different ways. The main preoccupations of modernism were experimentation and innovation. Modernist music was music which broke rules and moved away from the conventional music of the time; however, as modernism developed composers continued to push boundaries by experimenting further with harmony, atonality and rhythm, and so modernism became more extreme as time progressed. One of the things that modernism did was draw attention to the true condition of society, but it also proved that beauty can be found in unexpected places, for example in the seedy, the distorted, the painful, the shocking and the sorrowful. Modernist music is not a 'reliable conduit for consoling beauty' or a 'spa treatment for tired souls' because it, like other art forms, refuses to sooth us by gently glossing over the less attractive elements of ourselves and our nature, but, nonetheless, it is full of the promise of beauty.

The concept of value was also of interest to me because beauty is inextricably linked with value, and, furthermore, because art can be seen as being 'useless' and purposeless, making it is easy to say that it has little or no value. When someone says that an object - be it a work of art, a piece of music or

anything else - is beautiful, they are also saying that they value it. The value of music as music or art as art is intrinsic and non-instrumental, and it is for this reason that it can be difficult to say why precisely it is valuable to us, and this can call into question whether it is of any value at all. If something has extrinsic value it can be useful to us in some way and therefore our reasons for valuing it are more obvious than if its only value is intrinsic and non-instrumental. The aesthetic value of an object is its intrinsic and non-instrumental value.

All art, including music, can have many different values depending on who is valuing it and the way in which they perceive it, however, art appreciated for its aesthetic value has a function distinct to itself, which is to provide an aesthetically pleasurable experience. The value of art, therefore, lies in its ability to please us and provide us with pleasurable aesthetic experiences. Because modernist music is beautiful, and to be beautiful is to be valued, modernist music is also valuable.

In answer to my earlier question, artistic creation, beauty and aesthetic appreciation and value go hand in hand with one another. Beauty has remained a central element of art, albeit a different sort of beauty from that which people have been used to. It is clear to me that beauty can be located within modernism, although modernist music and art may not always be obviously beautiful in the way in which people are used to. What it is important to remember is that 'beauty' is not an objective quality – at least, it is not truly an objective quality.

One last question that still has to be addressed is why the subject of this thesis –the concept of beauty – is relevant, or, to put it another way, why beauty matters. Does beauty still have any relevance in today's society?

Scruton writes that:

'Our need for beauty is not something that we could lack and still be fulfilled as people. It is a need arising from our metaphysical condition, as free individuals, seeking our place in a shared public world. We can wander through this world, alienated, resentful, full of suspicion and distrust. Or we can find ourselves at home here [...] The experience of beauty guides us along this second path; it tells us that we *are* at home in the world, that the world is already ordered in our perceptions [...] But – and this is again one of the messages of the early

modernists – beings like us become at home in the world only by acknowledging our ‘fallen’ condition, as Eliot acknowledged in *The Waste Land*...⁹⁰

Beauty is still an important aspect of our lives, however the beauty that can be found in modernist music and art for many people remains overlooked and unappreciated. Modernism’s main achievement was creating a new sort of beauty, but the way in which we think about beauty may have to change if we are to appreciate it fully.

⁹⁰ Roger Scruton, *Beauty*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 174-175

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