

Music: Some Philosophical Questions

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1 Some Initial Distinctions

A **song** includes both **music** and **lyrics**. So the *lyrics* are not part of the *music*.

Music comes in many different **genres**. It is not clear what a genre is, or what we are doing when we divide music into genres. This is one of the questions a philosophy of music seeks to address.

There are lots of important differences between **western classical music**, **jazz**, and **contemporary popular music**. The literature often focuses on western classical music and excludes jazz and popular music.

2 What is Music?

Necessary Conditions: Everything that is music satisfies condition X.

Sufficient Conditions: Everything that satisfies condition X is music.

A1. Music is *sound*.

Counterexamples to sufficiency?

A2. Music is *organized* sound.

Counterexamples to sufficiency?

A3. Music is organized *musical* sound.

What makes a sound a *musical* sound?

- Gershwin, American in Paris (taxi horn)
- Vaughn Williams, Sinfonia Antartica (wind machine)
- Leroy Anderson, The Typewriter <https://youtu.be/g2LJ1i7222c>
- Yoko Ono, “Toilet Piece/Unknown” <https://youtu.be/Ni01pevvUds>

Is sound a necessary condition? Silent music?

- John Cage’s 4’33” <https://youtu.be/JTEFKFiXSx4>

A4. What makes music music is not what it is like, but how it is meant to be experienced or judged.

- Ono’s “Toilet Piece/Unknown” is music not because it has musical features (e.g., organized rhythm or pitch) but because you are supposed to listen *for* such sounds in order to appreciate it correctly.
- Cage’s 4’33” is music not because it has musical features (e.g., organized sounds of the appropriate sorts), but because you are supposed to listen *for* musical sounds in order to appreciate it correctly.

But what settles that something is meant to be judged this way, if not that it is music?

Bonus Puzzle: What distinguishes music from poetry?

- Sound poetry: Kurt Schwitters, Ursonate <https://youtu.be/6X7E2i0KMqM>

3 What is a Musical Work?

Music and musical practice involves lots of different entities: composers, performers, instruments, audiences, critics; works, performances, scores, recordings, albums, singles.

Philosophers tend to start by focusing on the *work*, and tend to start by focusing on classical music. So, e.g.,

- What kind of entity is Beethoven's 5th Symphony?
 - it is *repeatable*, in the sense that it can be performed many times. (are all musical works repeatable?)
 - it was *composed* by Beethoven (are all musical works composed?)

Mentalism Musical works are mental experiences or ideas

Abstract Entities Musical works are abstract sound structures

Concrete Reductionism Musical works are nothing over and above the particular concrete copies of the score and the particular concrete performances.

Nihilism There are no musical works.'

- Can the some musical work be composed twice?
- Can two works agree note for note but have different aesthetic properties (e.g., one is original and the other is not)
- Are musical works created or discovered?
- If you destroy all copies of the score, have you destroyed the work?

4 The Work/Performance Relation

Musical works are performed. What is the relationship between a performance and a work?

What makes a performance an "authentic" performance? Is a performance of the Goldberg Concertos on the harpsichord more authentic than one on the piano?

- Pure sonicists: producing all the right pitches in the right order
- Timbral sonicists: producing all the right pitches with the right timbre in the right order
- Instrumentalists: all the right pitches with the right timber in the right order produced by the instruments specified in the score.

The perfect synthesizer thought experiment, and the difference between performing a piece and playing a recording.

- Is a less authentic performance always worse?
- If I get too many notes wrong, is it no longer a performance at all?
- Are "less authentic" performances still performances of the piece?
 - "arranged for piano"
 - Wendy Carlos, "Switched on Bach"
 - "A Fifth of Beethoven"
- Is there a difference between a performance and a "cover"?
- Can there be unperformable musical works?

5 Genre

What are we doing when we divide music up into genres?

- Genre and “musical features” (see the “Musical Genome Project”)
- Genre and Aesthetic Standards
- Genre and Aesthetic Imperatives (think of Punk and Metal here)
- Genre and Marketing (are there “Genres” that are really just marketing ploys?)

6 Some Special Puzzles Deriving from Jazz

- In Jazz, a performance will often consist of improvisation, perhaps along a set chord progression or harmonic structure. Is this a performance of a work?
- Maybe Jazz does not involve the performance of works, in the same way that western classical music does. How does that affect our questions?
- Even when Jazz does involve performance of a work, often the work seems to have secondary importance (think of all the recordings of “jazz standards”).

7 Some Special Puzzles Deriving from Contemporary Popular Music

- Given the prominence of recordings, does the “album version” replace the “work” for aesthetic purposes?
- Why are there so many subgenres of metal?
- How are sampling, remixing, and quoting related? What gets sampled? The work or a recording of the work?