

Countering Constriction: Modest Proposal for a Discursive Reversal

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Further, there is a certain lack of urbanity in music, in that, primarily because of the character of its instruments, it extends its influence further (into the neighborhood) than is required, and so as it were imposes itself, thus interfering with the freedom of others, outside of the musical circle, which the arts that speak to the eyes do not do, since one need only turn one's eyes away if one would not admit their impression.

Immanuel Kant

While many might find themselves in agreement with Kant regarding the excessive character of music in everyday life, there seems to be a tacit understanding of its nature that is at work even in the most radical attempts of re-defining it in practice and in theory: at the most basic level, music is a (rational) construction of sounds and nothing else. Whatever else it may be, whatever relations it may have to other phenomena, whatever meaning it may attain, it achieves all this only *by means of* being a construction of sounds. Even though a lot of people would object to this rather dogmatic definition (and the topic of this volume seems to explicitly challenge it), the vehemence of their objections only proves the power that it still has. Music, it seems, has boundaries, and to cross these boundaries is an act of defiance, of redefinition or of revolution. Incorporating non-musical material, stressing and composing musical situations, relating it to other media and to our sociopolitical reality may all be commonplace today, but nonetheless they still appear as acts that are subversive and change a given state of music that continually reinstates itself – even after a hundred years of musical revolutions.¹

The omnipresent reference to expansion bears witness to this. To give just two recent examples: Seth Kim-Cohen refers to Rosalind Krauss' seminal article *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* from 1978 to propose an "expanded sonic field";² Johannes Kreidler proposes an expanded concept of music referring back to Joseph Beuys' expanded concept of art (*erweiterter Kunstbegriff*), before going one step further by advocating its "dissolution".³ But

no matter how resolute and aggressive these claims are formulated, calling for an expansion remains a move from a defensive position because the notion it attacks appears as overwhelmingly powerful or, what's worse, self-evident.

It is not surprising that such an understanding of music influences the way its relation to philosophy is conceived. At first glance it may seem that music is an object of philosophical thought like many others, but in fact the coupling of music and philosophy has a much stronger ring to it: it seems to touch upon the very essence of things. This is particularly clear in the German *Musikphilosophie*, probably much more than in the more innocent "philosophy of music". While the sociology of music may seem to entail a certain disenchantment of music, *Musikphilosophie* leaves enchantment in place or even enhances it. With its own means of the search for essences, it uncovers the depth and significance of this human practice that seems to infinitely exceed any practical and quotidian concerns. It seems that we cannot help finding ourselves in Schopenhauer's footsteps here.

The strongest possible version of this is the understanding of music *as* philosophy. This is more than the acknowledgement that music is a mode of human articulation in its own right that is irreducible to language but as fundamental as it, and almost inevitably it leads to the thesis that music is itself *better* philosophy because it is able to articulate, embody, express, show or hint at truths that elude discursive thinking but are fundamental to our being in the world or the world as such.

Such an understanding relies on a tacit conception of music similar to the one I started out with. In order to be all it promises to be, music has to have a kernel or an essence, a type of structure or articulation that is musical and only musical. While this essence may not have historical priority, it must lie at the bottom of all musical practice and has to be the point of reference of all discussions about music. A discussion of music then is a discussion of essences and boundaries, no matter whether the crossing of these boundaries is called for and celebrated or if it is denounced.

But what if we turn this understanding around? When we speak about music we really speak about something that cannot be contained by the concepts, the rules and the boundaries we apply to it and impose on it. It seems to me that music itself has to be considered an excessive practice, and not just because it bothers the neighbors. Conceptualizing it this way changes our understanding of some of the recent and not so recent debates about the nature, the situation and the future of music: if music itself is excessive, its boundaries call for an explanation just as much as their transgression. Speaking of an *expanded* field still presupposes music in the narrow sense as a neutral point of reference, and it would be more appropriate to consider it the result of a *constriction*. There is nothing wrong in constricting a specific musical practice to a very reduced set of materials (like tones), just as there is nothing wrong in exploring the messy field of musical practices, but there is a problem when the constricted field is considered primary and is made into

the touchstone of all musical practice, the point of reference it has to be measured against. So instead of evoking an expanded concept of music, we should be talking about how to get out of the constricted field.

I know that this understanding of music is debatable and will be contested because it goes against the grain of a long and influential tradition. But when we speak about music in the context of excess and surplus, as I think we have to, we have to speak about a lot of other things as well. It is true that music exceeds any attempt of definition, philosophical or otherwise, but there are two radically divergent ways of understanding this (besides the rather trivial one that *any* phenomenon necessarily exceeds definition): one that assumes that music is always deeper than philosophy can possibly capture, and one that acknowledges that what we call music is a field of practices that can be concurrent, related, intertwined, divergent, or radically opposed to each other and that are kept together by a Wittgensteinian family resemblance rather than by a common essence. It is this field that any discussion of music has to take as its starting point and its point of reference.

Evidently, this designation of music as excess does not presuppose or, indeed, allow for a concept of music that clearly defines its new boundaries. There is an obvious philosophical objection to this excessive concept, namely that it isn't a concept at all. A real concept would have to include some sort of definition of its intension, i.e. its conceptual content, or its extension, i.e. the set of objects it refers to, or both. I would counter this objection by asking why we need such a concept – what we have are sets of practices, some of which are clearly within the boundaries of an everyday understanding of music and some of which challenge, extend, or ignore those boundaries while still wanting to be recognized as music. The latter unavoidably pose problems and prompt debates that concern their quality, legitimacy, and artistic status. The question "Is this (still) music?" will inevitably be asked, but rather than attempting to answer it, I would like to turn our attention to the context it is asked in: who asks for this kind of definition in what situation with what aim?

Asking for a clear-cut concept is asking for constriction. There will be situations that call for such a constriction, which will turn out differently depending on the context of the demand for a definition. A working definition agreed upon by artists in order to distinguish their field of competence from that of others has a different status than a definition that is related to questions of financial and institutional support. But I don't think we should continue to base our theoretical understanding of music on such a constricted view or look for philosophical support for any such view. Of course calling music excessive and pointing to the variety of practices it encompasses cannot be the last word in the philosophical discourse on music, and it leaves more questions open than it answers. In fact, my aim would be to *open* more questions rather than definitively answering them. Reversing the discourse on music from calling for expansion to countering constriction might have

interesting effects because it reverses the charges, as it were, and shifts the need for justification from those calling for expansion to those operating within a seemingly self-evident narrow concept of music. In the end, however, the aim would be to do away with the game of calling for justification and contesting the legitimacy of any kind of practice. The problems of GEMA and ASCAP aren't those of artists and philosophers who should have more interesting things to do. Maybe we don't need a "new discipline" – why not just call it "music"?

But, one may ask, is this *true*? Maybe there is something wrong with that question. Susanne K. Langer speaks of "working myths" she finds in artists' understanding of their own practices, and she is not using the term "myth" in a derogatory way. What she means is a common understanding that guides their work and makes it intelligible to themselves, a description that *works*. She writes: "Their vocabulary is metaphorical because it has to be plastic and powerful to let them speak their serious and often difficult thoughts."⁴ A vocabulary that is plastic and powerful doesn't seem such a bad thing to strive for.

Now the constricted understanding of music as a rational construction of sounds might be considered a working myth that the majority of musicians and composers still rely on while finding that it doesn't work for them anymore at all. Maybe an understanding of music as an excessive practice can help providing another working myth that is more productive.

It may seem strange that this suggestion should come from philosophy. Shouldn't it be searching for the truth instead of pragmatic descriptions that work for practitioners? After all, that is what Langer herself understands to be the philosopher's job: "But to learn the language of the studios is not enough; his business as a philosopher, after all, is to use what he learns, to construct theory, not a <working myth>."⁵ While she is obviously right in distinguishing concepts that simply work in a pragmatic way from concepts that are developed in a more systematic context, I don't believe that the latter can be completely separated from the impure practice of cultural politics or that they should sever their own ties to the actual practice of the artists if they don't want to become sterile and potentially meaningless. After all: could it be that "theory" is nothing but philosophy's working myth?

1 G Douglas Barrett shares this observation in his *After Sound: Toward a Critical Music* (New York / London 2016) and takes it as a starting point for his intervention.

2 Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-cochlear Sound Art*, New York / London, 2009, p. 155.

3 Johannes Kreidler, "Der erweiterte Musikbegriff", in Armin Köhler / Bernd Künzig (ed.), *und⁺. Komponisten, ihre Musik und ihre anderen Künste*, Mainz, 2014, pp. 82–89; Johannes Kreidler, "Der aufgelöste Musikbegriff", in *Musik & Ästhetik* 80 (2016), pp. 85–96.

4 Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, New York, 1953, p. IX.

5 *Ibid.*, p. X.