

# Critiquing Musical Ineffabilism: Rereading Kant's "Analytic of the Beautiful"

DYLAN J. PRINCIPI

The idea of music's ineffability refracts onto countless other ideas. Among the keywords that permeate musical aesthetics—autonomy, the absolute, the sublime, language, representation, genius—ineffability is the point of concurrence. Whenever it is applied to music, the notion of the ineffable inflects the organization of aesthetic principles. Therefore, to answer the question of musical ineffability is to take a position, explicitly or implicitly, intentionally or not, on how this network of ideas shapes musical knowledge. Studies of *musical* ineffability have preferred to address the ineffable as a property of music, which evidences Gilles Deleuze's thought that "the problem always has the solution it deserves, in terms of the way in which it is stated."<sup>1</sup> But in order to treat ineffability as a property of music one must first adopt a

philosophy of what music is: an ontology of music. As a result, the ineffability debate has become uncomfortably focused on assertions about music. The alternative I propose is to reread Immanuel Kant's "Analytic of the Beautiful" in a way that casts the problem of ineffability as an epistemological question, not an ontological one. Such a strategy addresses ineffabilism with an enabling philosophy of knowledge instead of a constraining philosophy of music. In the end, contemplating music as a shared idea, and not as a positively ineffable thing, is what can help us begin to reconsider the fragile yet necessary consensuses that prop knowledge up.

My intervention starts by tracing ineffability's resurgence in music studies, acknowledging other inquiries into the concept and suggesting that ineffability has been repeatedly theorized as a special quality of music. I go on to assess the extent to which Kant's remarks on the lack of content in (textless) music may have

---

<sup>1</sup>Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1988), 16.

contributed to the ascent of musical ineffabilism throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with particular attention, first, to how music's imputed lack of representational content implicates it in the issues of nature and genius, and, second, to the way the rest of the Analytic draws back from the claims of contentlessness by making aesthetic contemplation depend on communicability. Pulling harder on the thread of contentlessness shows that music's special status as nonrepresentational "free beauty" hinges on a historically specific criterion of representation and not on any qualities inherent to music.

Next, I correlate two pro-ineffability arguments (that music either precludes or exceeds utterance) with the "precognitive" and "multi-cognitive" interpretations of Kant's Analytic as described by Paul Guyer. Against these, Guyer applies his own "meta-cognitive" reading in which aesthetic contemplation begins only after the beautiful object has been delimited with a concept. Guyer's reading differs significantly from ineffability theories by locating concepts, and their construction in language, prior to aesthetic experience rather than after it.

Finally, I rehearse Kant's triangulation of beauty with agreeability and goodness in order to position beauty as a synthesis of subjective sensation and rational objectivity. As the product of this special synthesis, beauty attaches itself to what Kant calls common sense (*sensus communis*): a loaded term that nevertheless expresses how individuals can strive together toward an inclusive idea of beauty by cultivating and communicating their own aesthetic ideals. The uncertainty of common sense, which expresses both the hope for agreement and the potential for disagreement, is built into the very communicability that permits aesthetic experience to be cognized. It is this sense—not so much common sense, but a sense in common—that offers the possibility of replacing musical ineffabilism with a more flexible view of music that reimagines the Enlightenment aspiration for equality through discourse. What emerges is an alternative explanation for the plurality of music's meanings, one that neither requires nor maintains the strong ontological claims that ineffability is specifically

musical, or vice versa, that music is uniquely ineffable.

## I

In the years since the New Musicology voiced a growing desire to articulate new horizons of musical meaning, the idea of music's ineffability has regained attention in Anglophone scholarship, primarily through the work of Carolyn Abbate.<sup>2</sup> Her translation of Vladimir Jankélévitch's *Music and the Ineffable* reunites the domains of ethics and aesthetics at the same time that it theorizes anew the relationship of music and musical talk, asserting that music is "inexpressive not because [it] expresses nothing but because it does not express this or that privileged landscape, this or that setting to the exclusion of all others; music is inexpressive in that it implies innumerable possibilities of interpretation, because it allows us to choose between them."<sup>3</sup> Jankélévitch redoubles this claim, writing, "As an ineffably general language (if such is what 'language' should be), music is docile, lending itself to countless associations. . . . Music, with its double meanings, its readiness to oblige the most diverse interpretations, will evoke just as easily anything it pleases us to imagine . . . choose your chimera, imagine what you will, anything is possible."<sup>4</sup> At first glance, Jankélévitch's statements set up what Stephen Rings has described as a "Jekyll-and-Hyde" dichotomy between an absence and abundance of discourse invited by music. Rings, however, interprets this dichotomy as causal rather than paradoxical: "It is music's very ineffability that underwrites endless talk: all talk about music is 'infinitely equivocal' and is thus in principle unlimited."<sup>5</sup> This dualism is what Abbate

<sup>2</sup>Abbate's keynote 2018 keynote speech to the Society for Music Theory demonstrates the disciplinary value accorded to thought about musical ineffabilism. "Lightness, Improvisation, and What Is Knowable" (keynote presentation, Annual Meeting of the Society for Music Theory, 3 November 2018).

<sup>3</sup>Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 74.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>5</sup>Stephen Rings, "Talking and Listening with Jankélévitch," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65, no. 1 (2012): 219.

directs against a tradition of musical hermeneutics stretching from the New Musicology back in time to Theodor Adorno and beyond. Her most strenuous argument is that sustained emphasis on decoding and explaining hidden meanings has usurped attention from and eclipsed “real music”—defined as the embodied experience of the “event itself,” or “music-as-performed”—which is what expresses both a plethora of meanings and none at all.<sup>6</sup> For Abbate’s camp, Jankélévitch’s ineffabilism provides a tool for excising music from authoritarian interpretation while rehabilitating descriptions of sensory experience in one stroke.

It has been well documented that the idea of music’s ineffability far predates Jankélévitch and Abbate. While its historical and cultural origins extend beyond the Western canon of aesthetics, proponents and critics alike agree that music’s relationship with ineffability took decisive shape during the nineteenth century. Holly Watkins’s article “From the Mine to the Shrine: The Critical Origins of Musical Depth” gives an account of how instrumental music came to represent, for the Romantics, “precisely what could *not* pass over into discourse.”<sup>7</sup> If Romanticism replaced the transparent self-knowledge of Enlightenment rationality with a subject who experiences its own immeasurable depth as sublime, then it was E. T. A. Hoffmann who sought to plumb that depth by exploring music’s perceived interiority.<sup>8</sup> Wye Jamison Allanbrook similarly identifies Hoffmann as an original theorist of “the Behind, the Beneath, and the Beyond” who helped spread the belief that truth lies somewhere beneath music’s apparent surface.<sup>9</sup> According to Watkins, the metaphor of depth enables its own kind of dualism. It “preserves the impenetrable mystery” of musical genius at the same time that it “claims

for the work a rational construction belied by its disjunct surface.”<sup>10</sup>

In *Musical Vitalities*, Watkins describes a similar binarism in Eduard Hanslick’s post-Kantian aesthetics: “Hanslick’s separation of musical causes and effects, of music’s effable building blocks and its ineffable beauty which ‘pleases us in itself,’ splits music into incompatible experiential and discursive dimensions.”<sup>11</sup> Caught between his allegiance, on one hand, to Kant’s dictum that instrumental music has no representational content, and his desire, on the other hand, to apply the methods of *Wissenschaft* to that contentless music, Hanslick concludes, in Watkins’s words, that “we can say nothing about the beauty of a [musical] passage other than that it is beautiful. Musical beauty thus serves as the silent enabler of an onslaught of talk.”<sup>12</sup> Both Hoffmann’s and Hanslick’s dualisms are protective: at the same time that they make music available for discussion, they preserve an unsayable remainder in music with axiomatic force, or rather, they create music’s ineffable dimension by fiat. Watkins finds this same defensive dualism in present-day ineffabilism. Because Abbate rules out efforts to articulate music’s significance by allowing it to attract or repel meanings according to experiential contexts, she renders music impervious to “ideological scrutiny.” Critiquing hermeneutics in this way reverts to Hanslick’s “ban on idea- and feeling-centered criticism” by accepting the premise that music does not signify anything “reliably enough to support the quest for meaning.”<sup>13</sup>

Numerous other critics have leveraged the logic of Romanticism and its attendant pitfalls against Jankélévitch and Abbate, taking particular

<sup>6</sup>Carolyn Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004): 532.

<sup>7</sup>Holly Watkins, “From the Mine to the Shrine: The Critical Origins of Musical Depth,” this journal 27, no. 3 (2004): 179–207.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 191–99.

<sup>9</sup>Wye J. Allanbrook, “Theorizing the Comic Surface,” in *Music in the Mirror: Reflections on the History of Music Theory and Literature for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Andreas Giger and Thomas J. Mathiesen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 196–98.

<sup>10</sup>Watkins, “From the Mine to the Shrine,” 201.

<sup>11</sup>Holly Watkins, *Musical Vitalities: Ventures in a Biotic Aesthetics of Music*, New Material Histories of Music (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 49.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.* Hanslick’s early espousal and later disavowal of a musical *Wissenschaft*, as well as the influence of scientists like Ernst Mach and Ludwig Boltzmann over the humanities at the University of Vienna throughout the nineteenth century, are detailed in Kevin C. Karnes, *Music, Criticism, and the Challenge of History: Shaping Modern Musical Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century Vienna*, AMS Studies in Music (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup>Watkins, *Musical Vitalities*, 42–43.

exception to ineffability as a potential censor of interpretive discourse. Roger Scruton attributes confusion about ineffability to the question, imparted by Kant, of whether transcendental knowledge is possible by reaching beyond the empirical world; he notes that this question, rather than being resolved, was superseded by Hegelian absolute idealism around the same time that the term “absolute” made its way into the aesthetics of music. The attempt to apply ineffability productively to music, Scruton seems to think, amounts to a cop-out: it sidesteps the question of whether we can reach transcendental knowledge with language by approaching it through other (musical) means.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Judith Lochhead outlines similarities between Jankélévitch’s ineffabilism and the notion of the sublime, warning us that the baggage of this Romantic category runs contrary to intellectual efforts for social justice.<sup>15</sup> More condemnatory still, James Hepokoski regards ineffabilism as an effort to intimidate hermeneutics, “a sidelining of critical discourse in order to urge a commitment to an abundant existential experience.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, James Currie senses in Jankélévitch’s book a disingenuous omission of its debt to the fraught Germanic philosophical canon as well as a bad-faith ethicizing of music, which otherwise offers respite from moral necessity.<sup>17</sup> Finally, Lawrence Kramer has linked the desire for ineffability to W. J. T. Mitchell’s “ekphrastic

fear,” or “the fear that language will destroy the immediacy of whatever it comes to describe.”<sup>18</sup> Each in their own way, the critics of musical ineffabilism arrive at Karol Berger’s sentiment that “we are hermeneutic creatures through and through.”<sup>19</sup> They reject talking about musical experience as though it were unmediated by language as a harmful Romantic illusion, and instead see language as a formative component of musical experience.

Michael Gallope’s book *Deep Refrains* goes a long way toward defending Jankélévitch’s thought by giving a fuller account of its precedents and reception.<sup>20</sup> With a tacit mixture of regret and reproach about how the recent ineffability debate has confined itself to scrutinizing Jankélévitch, Gallope warns that the fate of ineffability cannot be decided by a single thinker.<sup>21</sup> This warning also furnishes the premise of his book, which begins by considering the traces of musical ineffability in ancient Greece, advances to a detailed narrative of ineffability’s transformation in the long nineteenth century, and arrives at the twentieth century with case studies of a select handful of thinkers from Adorno to Deleuze and Guattari. Instead of arguing a particular side of ineffability’s ongoing dichotomy, Gallope positions himself outside of the debate by seeing the dialectic itself as a productive paradox, proposing that “music appears as a sensuous immediacy at the same time that it always remains mediated by forms and techniques. It is this paradoxical structure that allows music to serve as a magnet for philosophical conundrums. For music attracts meanings in fluid and unpredictable ways.”<sup>22</sup>

This thesis statement is in keeping with Gallope’s principal defense of Jankélévitch: that his work beyond *Music and the Ineffable*

<sup>14</sup>“I take it that those who have turned to music in this dilemma have done so precisely because approaching the transcendental through music does not require the belief that we can approach it through language, or through our ordinary conceptual powers. In this way we can maintain the belief that the transcendental is incapable of being defined or described while surreptitiously offering a back route to it, so to speak. We offer a way of effing the ineffable. Just such a move was made by Schopenhauer.” Roger Scruton, “Effing the Ineffable,” *Big Questions Online*, 11 April 2010, <https://www.roger-scruton.com/homepage/about/music/understanding-music/187-effing-the-ineffable>.

<sup>15</sup>Judith Lochhead, “The Sublime, the Ineffable, and Other Dangerous Aesthetics,” *Women and Music* 12, no. 1 (2008): 63–74; “Can We Say What We Hear?—Jankélévitch and the Bergsonian Ineffable,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65, no. 1 (2012): 231–35.

<sup>16</sup>James Hepokoski, “Ineffable Immersion: Contextualizing the Call for Silence,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65, no. 1 (2012): 225.

<sup>17</sup>James Currie, “Where Jankélévitch Cannot Speak,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65, no. 1 (2012): 247–51.

<sup>18</sup>Lawrence Kramer, *The Thought of Music* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 54; W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>19</sup>Karol Berger, “Musicology According to Don Giovanni, or: Should We Get Drastic?” *Journal of Musicology* 22, no. 3 (2005): 497.

<sup>20</sup>Michael Gallope, *Deep Refrains: Music, Philosophy, and the Ineffable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>22</sup>Gallope, *Deep Refrains*, 10.

demonstrates that he never truly thought that musical experience could be presented apart from its mediation through language.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, *Deep Refrains* attempts to separate ineffability from the absolute and its connotations,<sup>24</sup> and to rebut the objection that ineffabilism is a call for interpretive silence.<sup>25</sup> All said, Gallope depicts an optimistic view of ineffability's paradox—in which music vacillates between the presence and absence of linguistic mediation—as constituting music's specificity. The interesting philosophical question raised by music, then, is how its dialectical specificity is “summoned to do a certain kind of philosophical work that no other medium can do in quite the same way.”<sup>26</sup>

The aim of this brief survey is to point out that, although authors have addressed musical ineffabilism both positively and negatively, the majority of approaches deal with music as the unique site of the ineffable. Put differently, ineffability theory tends to pin itself to a purportedly essential aspect of music (music itself, “real music,” music-as-performed, etc.), and thus institutes a kind of musical exceptionalism. As a result, a historically and culturally specific, yet underacknowledged (and thus fuzzy) conception of music is made to bear the full weight of ineffability. The effect is the same even when music is invoked as grounds for criticizing ineffabilism—doing so just bolsters the binary from its other side. When the crux of ineffability rests on music per se, and when claims about music's ineffability border on the universal, the myriad ontologies denoted by the empty signifier “music” risk being suppressed.

Kant's “Analytic of the Beautiful” can help dislodge the paradox of ineffability by offloading its weight from music and putting it back onto language. In the process, music's multiplicity of meaning emerges, not from music's exceptional specificity, but from a lack of certainty inherent in discourse: that ongoing negotiation of terms within language, which makes it possible to delimit an object for the contemplation of

beauty. Put in this light, music's apparent ineffability has more to do with the function of language than it does with music.

To use Kant in this way is to take seriously Kramer's question: “How is listening to music ineffable in any way that these are not: hearing the wind as it rustles in the trees, recognizing a voice . . . contemplating the evening as it gathers?”<sup>27</sup> Or more simply, “why should music be any different?”<sup>28</sup> Turning what allegedly makes music special—its apparent lack of meaningful content or specificity—back onto language prevents music from having to do any extra duty among the arts. And while ineffability may not be reducible to the absolute or the sublime, neither is it separable from them. To deprioritize music as a special site of the ineffable is to heed Lochhead's call to resist “the sedimented meanings of the sublime” in favor of rehabilitating its “dead and maligned sister, the beautiful.”<sup>29</sup> For the beautiful, not ineffability or its adjuncts, is the idea that opens up the relationship of language and music to include the diversity of individuals' aesthetic ideals. Far from being antiquated, the notion of the beautiful in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* points up the fundamental role of language in enabling knowledge of and discourse about aesthetic experience, musical experience included.

## II

To the current ineffability debate, Kant might seem an unlikely or untimely contributor. Unlikely, because his categorization of music as free beauty, lacking in representational content, is commonly thought to anchor the Romantic and formalist trends described above. Untimely, in that music scholars are seeking new voices and perspectives that reckon with, as Philip Ewell articulated it, the white racial frame through which the field of music studies has viewed the past.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Michael Gallope, “Jankélévitch's Fidelity to Inconsistency,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65, no. 1 (2012): 238.

<sup>24</sup>Gallope, *Deep Refrains*, 30.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>27</sup>Kramer, *The Thought of Music*, 46.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>29</sup>Lochhead, “The Sublime,” 72.

<sup>30</sup>Philip Ewell, “Music Theory's White Racial Frame,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 43, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 324–29.



Concerning the first charge, a growing body of scholarship, represented by one of Matthew Pritchard's recent articles, casts doubt on the identification of Kant as an archformalist and encourages new understandings of how concepts function within Kant's aesthetics.<sup>31</sup> Reevaluating music's place within the Analytic shows that its supposed contentlessness stems from Kant's emphasis on representation, which has to do with the presence or absence of lyrics and not with anything specifically musical. This insight detracts from the parts of the Analytic that seem to grant music a special relationship to nature, genius, and the sublime—categories that owe their value to post-Kantian Romanticism—and puts music back in context with other arts as they relate to aesthetic contemplation.

Concerning the charge of untimeliness, if there remains any value in looking to the past to illuminate the present, then identifying a fissure—a tension within Kant's thought hovering over music—might help divide music history's homogeneous facade against itself and reveal new points of entry. Moreover, while Kant is able to begin (but not end) a fresh conversation about ineffability, he does not speak alone; rather, his arguments belong to a tradition of philosophers who, according to Alain Badiou, continue to hold merit for the way that they assail the conflation of truth, meaning, and language.<sup>32</sup> Far from offering a naive argument like "Kant was right about ineffability," a critique

of ineffabilism by way of Kant invites the reader to appreciate the still-relevant implications of his logical maneuvers.

At first, Kant's "Analytic of the Beautiful" sets a precedent for distinguishing music from the other arts by classifying textless music as free beauty. This distinction relies on a division between two types of beauty—free versus adherent beauty—made possible by what Michel Foucault identified as the Classical era's preoccupation with perfect representation.<sup>33</sup> This criterion of perfection sorts beauties into two types: those that can be judged according to the perfection of their representations and those that cannot. On the difference between free and adherent beauty, Kant explains, "Free beauty does not presuppose a concept of what the object is [meant] to be. Accessory [adherent] beauty does presuppose such a concept, as well as the object's perfection in terms of that concept."<sup>34</sup> Thus, in instances of beauty the presence or absence of a concept determines whether a judgment of perfection is possible. An instance of adherent beauty is perfect if it adequately portrays the concept it aims to represent. On the other hand, because free beauties represent no conceptual content, the criterion of perfection cannot apply to them. As long as a form of art takes representing some object as its purpose, then its adherent beauty is tethered to the perfection—the success or failure—of that representation.

When listing examples of free beauty, Kant writes, "Designs à la grecque, the foliage on borders or on wallpaper, etc., mean nothing on their own: they represent nothing, no object under a determinate concept, and are free beauties. What we call fantasias in music . . . indeed all

<sup>31</sup>Matthew Pritchard, "Music in Balance: The Aesthetics of Music after Kant, 1790–1810," *Journal of Musicology* 36, no. 1 (2019): 39–67. Decades earlier, Lawrence Kramer challenged the idea that Kant's treatment of music is formalism for its own sake: "In preferring poetry to music, therefore, Kant is striving, indeed rather desperately striving, to shield a group of higher values—culture, reflection, subjective autonomy—from encroachments and appropriations by a group of lower values—enjoyment, sensation, subjective contingency. Music is the loose cannon in this process. . . . In denying meaning to music, Kant not only theorizes but also legislates; he responds less to an absence of thought than to the presence of danger." *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 4.

<sup>32</sup>Alain Badiou, *Lacan: Anti-Philosophy 3*, ed. Kenneth Reinhard, trans. Susan Spitzer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 151. Badiou calls Kant's critical philosophy the "border-line" of anti-philosophy: a tradition that includes Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Jacques Lacan, among others.

<sup>33</sup>Michel Foucault argues that the perfection of representation, expressed in resemblance, was a primary concern of the Classical episteme: "In the Classical age [resemblance] is the simplest form in which what is to be known . . . appears. It is through resemblance that representation can be known, that is, compared with representations that may be similar to it, analyzed into elements (elements common to it and other representations), combined with those representations that may present partial identities, and finally laid out into an ordered table." *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 68.

<sup>34</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 76.

music not set to words, may also be included in the same class."<sup>35</sup> Without words, Kant thinks, music becomes devoid of conceptual content like other nonrepresentational, purely decorative arts. Thus free from the standard of perfection, wordless music can be judged according to its beauty alone. Without lyrics, the beauty of music does not concern how well it represents those lyrics, and the craft of composing becomes unmoored from the art of text setting.

Alexander Rueger explains textless music's nonrepresentationality as a separation of conceptual content and form: "Lack of content means that no rules of art can be applied to choose (or judge the suitability of) the art form. In other works—e.g. music with a text—the content to be presented calls for certain appropriate art forms, according to conventional rules; but if there is no content, no such connection between content and form exists. The art form in freely beautiful works is undetermined."<sup>36</sup>

According to Rueger, conceptual content serves as a guide for creating and judging aesthetic form. For example, the Analytic suggests that whereas a strophic poem invites a strophic musical setting, and whereas a dramatic lyric calls for word-painting, instrumental music receives no such direction for its composition or interpretation. And even in the event that untexted music represents an aesthetic idea about its own form—if untexted music's conceptual content is a reflexive metacommentary on music—this is still too vague to govern music's aesthetic form clearly enough to warrant a judgment of perfection.<sup>37</sup> If other arts have representations of the world as their content, Kant assumes that the free beauty of instrumental music has comparatively no content to offer.

By categorizing all instrumental music as free beauty, the Analytic establishes it as unique among the arts and grants it a special communion with nature and genius. First, the arts that

Kant describes as freely beautiful—ornamental Greek designs, foliage on wallpaper, and wordless music—are unequal bedfellows. The sheer volume of instrumental music composed during Kant's life is vast enough to make his comparison to wallpaper, or to a narrow style of architectural ornamentation, incongruous. Rather, instrumental music stands out as a uniquely abundant and expressive medium among the freely beautiful arts. Second, even among the major adherent forms of art, instrumental music is set in opposition by its supposedly nonrepresentational character. Together, these two inferences establish instrumental music as the paradigm of freely beautiful art: the purest, most abstract, least conceptual mode of artistic creation. And as the paradigm of a category that includes flowers, birds, crustaceans, and all found beauties, instrumental music's uniqueness is transmuted into a unique alliance with nature. Likewise, if the beauty of instrumental music occurs as naturally as the beauty of a flower—if music and flowers owe their beauty not to representation but to an inexplicable act of creation—then music relies more heavily than other arts on the concept of genius, which Rueger paraphrases as the special faculty of presenting aesthetic ideas that are too rich for the understanding to grasp entirely.<sup>38</sup> By forging *ex nihilo* the pleasing formal arrangements that grant wordless music its beauty, genius guides the path to perfection when representation cannot. In short, if music's beauty does not refer to the world beyond music, then it must come from within.<sup>39</sup>

In the decades following the publication of Kant's Third Critique, Guyer tells us, an increasing number of aestheticians identified

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 76–77.

<sup>36</sup>Alexander Rueger, "Beautiful Surfaces: Kant on Free and Adherent Beauty in Nature and Art," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 16, no. 3 (2008): 554.

<sup>37</sup>"It is clear that the concept presented in [contentless] works, the concept of formal purposiveness, is not a concept that could determine any particular art forms for these works." Ibid., 556.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 550.

<sup>39</sup>Compare Eduard Hanslick's statement, more than half a century later: "The composer cannot transform anything; he must create everything new. What the painter or poet encounters as a result of his contemplation of nature, the composer must elaborate out of his own introspection. He must wait for it, in its own good time, to sing and sound within him. He then becomes totally involved in it and creates from it something which has no counterpart in nature and hence none in the other arts, indeed none in this world." *On the Musically Beautiful*, trans. Geoffrey Payzant (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1986), 74.

and valued music as a superlatively sublime art.<sup>40</sup> To what extent can this trend claim Kant's "Analytic" as its inspiration? More than the other arts, music might be seen to align with both the mathematical and the dynamic sublime because Kant places it in a special relation to genius and nature.<sup>41</sup> If the faculty of Reason is what segments experience into ascertainable units, then an experience of the mathematical sublime occurs when something immeasurably large or complex (the night sky, for instance) indefinitely lengthens the process of segmentation, thus overwhelming the faculty of Imagination's estimation of size. In the mathematical sublime, an experience of infinitude causes the quick traversal from Reason to Imagination to languish. On the other hand, the dynamic sublime allows a spectator to experience the terrifying, superhuman strength of nature within the safety of an aesthetic encounter. If music has ever been thought to suspend recognition beyond comprehension or to channel nature's overpowering might, music's possible status as sublime depends on its power to astonish a listener beyond understanding.

Judging music as sublime on the basis of astonishing the subject appears to conform to Kant's principal distinction between the beautiful and the sublime: "For the beautiful in nature

we must seek a basis outside ourselves, but for the sublime a basis merely within ourselves and in the way of thinking that introduces sublimity into our presentation of nature."<sup>42</sup> Whereas beauty strikes a balance between subject and object, the sublime is a purely introspective category. Guyer pinpoints this as Kant's innovation over his predecessors: with Kant, the sublime is no longer a property of objects; rather, the object of the sublime is the human subject.<sup>43</sup> By putting textless music into close proximity with nature and genius, the Analytic inclines music, more than other arts, toward the mathematical or dynamic sublime. Viewed from this angle, whenever the complexity or strength of music inspires awe, it appears to support the notion that music's lack of words makes it devoid of content—a void that renders music as inexplicably and independently beautiful as nature, whose creation involves genius bordering on the divine. In this way, one might read into Kant a precedent for thinking of music as an exceptional, contentless, immediate force. Because the Analytic remains open to this interpretation, Richard Taruskin argues that "Kant, for whom music was more to be compared with perfume . . . nevertheless provided willy-nilly the means for the elevation of music to the status of philosophical model for all the other arts."<sup>44</sup> Considered apart from its ideological consequences, however, this interpretation cannot be reconciled with a fuller account of Kant's Analytic.

If music enjoys a special status in the "Analytic of the Beautiful," it comes with two significant asterisks. First, Kant distinguishes music only to the extent that it is nonrepresentational; his comments in favor of music's

<sup>40</sup>"One way of reading the history of aesthetics after Kant is to see his cognitivist approach to the dynamical sublime as spreading not only to the treatment of the sublime in general but also to the treatment of the beautiful, with the sublime ultimately being absorbed into a cognitive interpretation of the beautiful as merely one species of it or even just one stage on the way to the realization of beauty proper." Paul Guyer, "The German Sublime after Kant," in *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Timothy Costelloe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 105.

<sup>41</sup>Kant does not discuss music in relation to the sublime, and he strictly opposes the sublime and the beautiful on the grounds of nature and genius. Whereas the sublime presents itself as a subjective sensation that is hostile to understanding, the freely beautiful strikes us as though "it were predetermined for our power of judgment, so that this beauty constitutes in itself an object of our liking." On one hand, beauty's predetermination requires genius to forge a link between nature and art. On the other hand, the difference between beautiful and sublime objects lies in how they strike us: either as hostile or amenable to subjective judgment. The question taken up by later theorists is whether art can trigger an experience of the sublime. See Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 98–101.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>43</sup>Kant explained the complex feeling of this experience as a response to the limits of our own imagination, and the power of our own theoretical and practical reason. Kant reduced the natural objects other theorists took as the proper object of the experience to mere triggers, the proper object of the experience being ourselves." Paul Guyer, "The German Sublime after Kant," 102.

<sup>44</sup>Richard Taruskin, "Is There a Baby in the Bathwater? On Aesthetic Autonomy," in *Cursed Questions: On Music and Its Social Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 101.



uniqueness do not apply to music in general, but, as noted, only to nonrepresentational music. And if music without lyrics is nonrepresentational, then conversely music with lyrics is a representational art just like all the others. Thus, whatever features are shared in common by texted (representational) music and untexted (nonrepresentational) music—rhythm, pitch, form, etc.—cannot be what make music special.

Put another way, in the *Critique of Judgment*, music's exceptionality does not depend on any feature of "music itself," but hinges on the Enlightenment ideal of perfect representation. It is only later, after the effects of music's distinction outlast the historically specific value of representation, that music's exceptionality is presumed to be inherently musical. Taken together with Watkins's observation that "Kant was uncertain about just how fine music really was," it becomes difficult to maintain the significance of music's distinction from other arts within the larger context of the Analytic.<sup>45</sup> Second, even if the challenge of judging instrumental music stems from a lack of representation that places it in close proximity with the sublime, Kant did not view this proximity as something to be valued. Pritchard points out that instrumental music's status as free beauty does not elevate it above the other arts, which require a judgment of adherent beauty.<sup>46</sup> And granting the gendered valuation of the sublime over the beautiful noted by Lochhead in Kant's earlier work,<sup>47</sup> *The Critique of Judgment* describes the sublime in its external aspect as a lower form: "The concept of the sublime in nature is not nearly as important and rich in implications as that of the beautiful in nature."<sup>48</sup> Thus, the disproportionate value or prestige accorded to music as a sublime art cannot be wholly attributed to Kant; this too was a later addition, once the sublime began to supersede and absorb the beautiful.

Although the *Critique of Judgment* appears to mark music as special because of its lack of

representational content, that mark applies only to instrumental music and not to music with text; and if music's alleged specialness does not apply to all music equally, then this specialness can be neither specifically musical nor inherently valuable to a general aesthetics of music. Contrary to appearances, Kant did not contribute to the history of musical ineffabilism the beliefs that the specifically musical is innately unique or powerful: those emerged with the rise of Romanticism. Kant's remarks on instrumental music should be seen for what they are: a dismissal of instrumental music on the grounds of representation. Kant did not portray instrumental music as a purely abstract art form in order to celebrate it; therefore, instrumental music's purported lack of content cannot merit the prestige that ineffabilism wants to award to it. Rather, Kant sidelined instrumental music in order to foreground the normative status of art as representational. But music did not wait in the wings for long. Although instrumental music later took center stage in nineteenth-century aesthetics, Kant's dismissal must be chalked up to a historically specific attitude toward representation. Seen this way, his treatment of untexted music yields priority to the much richer connections among art, language, and knowledge which the Analytic reserves for the beautiful.

### III

The question of whether music can be ineffable attaches to a more fundamental question about the point at which language engages with aesthetic experience. Does language enter before or after the self-aware realization that one is having an aesthetic experience? Professional readers of Kant's "Analytic of the Beautiful" disagree on this point. In the text, Kant explains that the experience of beauty is pleasurable because it evokes a state of free play between the subject's faculties of Imagination and Understanding. The disagreement arises from uncertainty over the role of determinate concepts in this process. Readers question whether free play results from apprehending a concept of the beautiful object or from an inability to cognize the beautiful object completely. Guyer's reading of Kant

<sup>45</sup>Watkins, *Musical Vitalities*, 48.

<sup>46</sup>Pritchard, "Music in Balance," 47. Pritchard also observes that the *Critique of Judgment* abandons discussion of music as a free beauty in order to address art as adherent beauty.

<sup>47</sup>Lochhead, "The Sublime," 64–65.

<sup>48</sup>Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 100.

divides the various understandings of free play into three camps: the “precognitive,” “multi-cognitive,” and “meta-cognitive.”<sup>49</sup>

The precognitive interpretation defines free play as “a state of mind in which the manifold of representations furnished by the perception of an object satisfies all of the conditions for normal cognition of an object *except for that of the actual application of a determinate concept to the manifold.*”<sup>50</sup> Under the precognitive thesis, beautiful objects are unique because they cannot be cognized. In satisfying nearly all of the requirements for ordinary cognition, a beautiful object resembles an ordinary object until the moment when the faculty of Understanding would normally apprehend a concept for what it is contemplating. The state of free play comes about precisely because the Understanding’s final moment of apprehension never arrives. In this scenario, the interaction of Understanding and Imagination in the absence of cognition is what brings about an aesthetic experience.

The precognitive interpretation of Kant’s Analytic empowers the idea that music is ineffable. If the psychological state of aesthetic contemplation can begin before a listener ever arrives at an understanding of what one is listening to, then a musical experience of that kind would be immediate and prelinguistic: it would preclude reflection. Jankélévitch’s argument that music wears an inexpressive mask in order “to express infinitely that which cannot be explained” aligns with this mode of musical experience that either precedes language or presumes access to nonconceptual meaning.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, Abbate’s opposition of drastic and gnostic modes of musical experience imposes a separation between musical events and conceptual language: “It is real music, music-as-performed, that engenders physical and spiritual conditions wherein sound might suggest multiple concrete meanings and associations, conflicting and interchangeable ones, or also none at all, doing something else entirely. Real music, the event itself, in encouraging or

demanding the drastic, is what damps down the gnostic.”<sup>52</sup>

Any attempt to commune with the immediate, purely psychological aspect of musical experience apart from the apprehension of concepts or the introduction of language tacitly adopts a precognitive understanding of free play. And because precognitive theories require that aesthetic contemplation never fully cognize its object—that the stimulus of aesthetic experience remain always unnamed—the conclusion that music is ineffable seems like a natural corollary.

The interpretation of free play that Guyer calls “multi-cognitive” maintains that free play satisfies all of the conditions for cognition by presenting an overwhelming surplus of indeterminate concepts.<sup>53</sup> In this model, aesthetic pleasure results from the cognitive faculties leaping among a manifold of “conceptual possibilities.” While the precognitive thesis offers no concept for the subject to contemplate, the multi-cognitive thesis presents too many, such that the subject must play freely with the innumerable concepts capable of completing the process of cognition. Jankélévitch draws close to this interpretation when he writes, “The ineffable . . . cannot be explained because there are infinite and interminable things to be said of it: such is the mystery of God, whose depths cannot be sounded, the inexhaustible mystery of love, both Eros and Caritas, the poetic mystery par excellence.”<sup>54</sup> Although Guyer concedes the textual evidence for the multi-cognitive interpretation, he takes issue with it nevertheless, arguing that there is no de facto reason why the act of flitting among conceptual possibilities should be pleasurable. He further suggests that the multi-cognitive thesis is incompatible with Kant’s insistence that “the proper object of taste is pure spatial or temporal form.”<sup>55</sup> Aesthetic contemplation must ground its reflection in something more concrete than an open-ended conceptual play.

<sup>49</sup>Paul Guyer, “The Harmony of the Faculties Revisited,” in *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 77–109.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 80. Emphasis in original.

<sup>51</sup>Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, 71.

<sup>52</sup>Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?,” 532.

<sup>53</sup>Guyer, “Harmony of the Faculties,” 81.

<sup>54</sup>Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, 74.

<sup>55</sup>Guyer, “Harmony of the Faculties,” 93.

While the multi-cognitive and precognitive theses may suggest opposite solutions to the problem of free play, they perform a common gesture: neither thesis allows for a specific concept to serve as the object of aesthetic contemplation. In the same manner, Jankélévitch's notion of ineffability—whether it means that music can be interpreted as expressing nothing or as expressing everything—resists an articulable concept of music. By foreclosing a concrete description of music with the arguments that music presents either no concepts or too many from which to choose, ineffability drives an intractable wedge between music and language.

To remedy the difficulties of the other interpretations, Guyer advances his own “meta-cognitive” interpretation. Instead of avoiding the cognition of a determinate concept, the meta-cognitive thesis embraces it. Guyer suggests that free play is induced when the perception of a beautiful stimulus unifies sensory experience into a determinate concept such that “the understanding's underlying objective or interest in unity is being satisfied in a way that goes beyond anything required for or dictated by satisfaction of the determinate concept or concepts on which mere identification of the object depends.”<sup>56</sup> The meta-cognitive thesis argues that aesthetic contemplation takes a determinate concept as its point of departure, since a subject must first identify the object of aesthetic pleasure in order to contemplate it. The beautiful object first completes the ordinary process of cognition by arriving at a determinate concept and then touches off a subsequent process of aesthetic reflection. For Guyer, contemplation comes after the act of recognition, not before it.

The pre- and multi-cognitive theses attribute the contemplation of beauty to an inability to define the beautiful object. But if it is impossible to name whatever sparks reflection on the beautiful, then statements to the effect of “this music is beautiful” are equally impossible. Likewise, the argument that “music is ineffable” ceases to make much sense. As Guyer explains, a key implication of the multi-cognitive thesis is that knowledge depends on naming experience with

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 98–99. Emphasis in original.

a determinate concept: “We could not know what object we are responding to with a pleasurable feeling of beauty, or which object we should attend to in order to confirm for ourselves another's judgment of beauty, except by using a determinate concept to delimit some portion of our total visual or other experiential field.”<sup>57</sup> Contemplation can begin only once we name the object of our attention. And if free play cannot proceed until the subject arrives at a determinate concept, then free play implicates language—and its constructedness—in the cognition of beauty. Unless we deny the conceptual knowledge of beauty by submitting to the pre- or multi-cognitive theses, it follows that *all* aesthetic contemplation, drastic or gnostic, is reflective, posterior to the introduction of the effable. Claims of ineffability censor aesthetic contemplation by isolating beauty in a space outside of cognition.<sup>58</sup> But all descriptions are reflective because they happen after an act of recognition. If music were truly ineffable, it could not be called “music.” Therefore, if what we describe when we describe “music” seems to fall short of musical experience, that's language's problem, not music's. The reason for this, Kramer explains, is that ineffability is an intralinguistic, not an intramusical, process: “The strong idea of the ineffable . . . does not unfold *beyond* words but *in* them”; language is “the medium of the unsayable itself” because it exhibits an original failure to “say the divine.”<sup>59</sup> To the extent that musical experiences must be circumscribed with a linguistic concept to be known as “music,” we should not expect this meta-cognitive conception of music to succeed where language does not.

#### IV

According to Kant's Analytic, aesthetic contemplation navigates between purely subjective

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 95.

<sup>58</sup>For example, Abbate writes, “Perhaps we should simply acknowledge once more that both formalist and hermeneutic approaches to musical works mean dealing in abstractions and constructs under the aspect of eternity, as activities that will have little to do with real music.” “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?,” 512.

<sup>59</sup>Kramer, *The Thought of Music*, 45–49.

sensations and objective criteria by attaching itself to the human capacity to communicate agreement about beauty. The Analytic presents beauty along with agreeability and goodness: the three kinds of likability. The relationship of agreeability, beauty, and goodness can be represented as a triangle, as in figure 1. Beauty shares equally in the sensory pleasure of the agreeable and the conceptuality of the good; beauty sits poised between the two but remains separate from both because of its disinterestedness. Because agreeability and goodness both incline toward an end, they always entail an interest: one in satisfying a subjective appetite, the other in objective logic or ethics. At one point of the triangle, the agreeable is purely appetitive because it refers only to the pleasure of the subject's sense; as pure sensation, agreeability has no need of concepts. At the other point, goodness is objective, conceptual, and therefore verifiable. In Kant's theory, a keen judgment of goodness is bound up with morality and intersubjective universality. As opposed to agreeability and goodness, beauty must be judged for its own sake, not directed toward any aim. Beauty is nonteleological; that is why it is not simply a midpoint on the axis between agreeability and goodness but a third, opposing term occupying its own point of the triangle. Beauty's mandate of disinterestedness also explains why Kant distinguishes between free beauty—which allows a pure judgment—and adherent beauty, whose dependence on perfect representation entails an interest in goodness.

In this section of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant aims to show how beauty shares in agreeability and goodness symmetrically, without being merely a combination of the two; to define beauty as a synthesis of the agreeable and the good that stands in opposition to their interestedness; and to articulate beauty as simultaneously subjective, objective, and disinterested. It is not difficult to imagine how beauty shares in agreeability, for both are subjectively pleasing. However, unlike nonconceptual agreeability, beauty, as Guyer has shown, has a need of concepts. That is why beauty is also invested in goodness. The model of a triangle demonstrates the balancing act performed by beauty's disinterestedness. Whereas goodness is universally objective and lacks subjective reference, and whereas agreeability refers only to the subject and lacks universality, beauty is a synthesis of the subjectivity of the one and universality of the other. Its disinterestedness elevates beauty above a mere mixture of the other two. Kant's phrase "subjective universality" expresses beauty's independence from and double connection to agreeability and goodness. By poising beauty between agreeability and goodness, he acknowledges that beauty can be both personally pleasing and collectively valued, but he also secures for beauty a special existence that cannot be reduced to or justified on purely subjective or objective grounds.

In the same moment that disinterestedness separates beauty from agreeability and goodness, it also polarizes beauty's connection to them. In other words, beauty's connections to agreeability and goodness each have an interested and a disinterested pole. Thus even though beauty and agreeability are connected through subjective referentiality (shown by the left side of the triangle in fig. 1), they refer to this subjectivity differently; otherwise, they would be identical. The question of interest divides their connection, so that agreeability is interested and nonconceptual, while beauty is disinterested and (we now realize) conceptual; one could say that interest divides the subjective reference shared by agreeability and beauty into two kinds. As a result, agreeability's purely selfish interest in satiety is what secures its nonconceptuality, while beauty remains aligned with the conceptuality of goodness because of its disinterestedness.

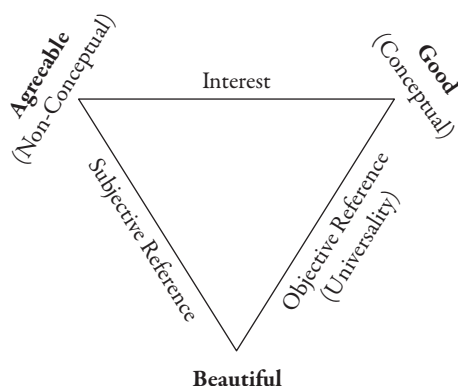


Figure 1



This much agrees with Guyer's assertion that beauty must be conceptual, but it only addresses one half of beauty's dual synthesis. Significantly, the issue of interest also bisects beauty's connection to goodness (the right side of the triangle in fig. 1), creating two kinds of universality.

According to Kant, goodness is inherently objective and universal; it applies intersubjectively through logical concepts to all people and situations and may be defined using general rules. While beauty also appeals to universality, its difference from goodness means that it cannot be similarly explained with objective criteria. In this vein, Kant argues, "a universality that does not rest on concepts of the object (not even on empirical ones) is not a logical universality at all, but an aesthetic one: i.e., the [universal] quantity of the judgment is not objective but only subjective."<sup>60</sup> Beauty's aesthetic universality has the logical appearance of objective universality, except that its judgment only ever refers to subjectivity, like agreeability. Accordingly, experiences of beauty, which are innately personal, can be shared with others by virtue of subjective universality—the belief that all humans can experience aesthetic contemplation's free play of the Understanding and the Imagination.

Identifying human experience with the capacity for free play is what enables Kant to argue that a judgment of beauty speaks with a "universal voice." Thus, while beauty evades an objective definition, the state of free play "must hold just as much for everyone, and hence be just as universally communicable, as any determinate cognition, since cognition always rests on that relation as its subjective condition."<sup>61</sup> This is the significance of beauty's dual synthesis: were beauty not connected to goodness, it would be entirely nonconceptual, identical to agreeability; in this case, aesthetic experiences could not be communicated or agreed upon. Without the conceptuality granted by beauty's connection to goodness, the judgment of beauty would be a purely solipsistic judgment of satiety. If the presence of beauty depends on free play, and if we can experience free play regardless of the uniquely personal stimuli that trigger it, then

the shared capacity for free play anchors the subjectively agreeable aspect of beauty to goodness as an intersubjective framework for understanding. Thus, when we judge whether or not a musical experience is beautiful, we assess whether the state of free play is active in that experience; and because other people can experience free play, our judgment of beauty carries the potential to resonate with others' musical experiences. Hence, the judgment of beauty speaks with a "subjectively universal" voice.

## V

The subjective universality of free play might explain how different people share a sympathetic experience of beauty, but Kant develops a theory of taste in order to describe how people communicate and cultivate shared knowledge about what is beautiful. In order to define a taste for beauty, similar to the subject's taste for sense (agreeability) and for morality (goodness), Kant proposes the notion of common sense as a synthesis of subjective judgment with intersubjective logic. Even though beauty cannot be defined with universal rules, the judgment of taste acts as though this were possible.<sup>62</sup> By appealing to common sense *as if* it were universally objective, judgments of taste offer their verdicts to other subjects for agreement: "As a necessity that is thought in an aesthetic judgment, [such a judgment] can only be called *exemplary*, i.e., a necessity of the assent of *everyone* to a judgment that is regarded as an example of a universal rule that we are unable to state."<sup>63</sup> A judgment of taste is therefore a judgment of common sense, and common sense is itself only a utopian (speculative and not fully realizable) idea. For Kant, the dignity of the human person is to possess an *ideal* of common sense—an inner vision of beauty by which to render judgments of taste. In order to move beauty beyond the strictly personal sphere, to

<sup>60</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 58.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>62</sup>On defining beauty universally, Kant writes: "If we search for a principle of taste that states the universal criterion of the beautiful by means of determinate concepts, then we engage in a fruitless endeavor, because we search for something that is impossible and intrinsically contradictory." *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 85.

allow aesthetic discourse to circulate and communities to form around values of beauty, Kant advances common sense as a putatively universal phenomenon in a space where there would otherwise be widespread disagreement.

Gilles Deleuze helps to explain the importance of common sense to Kant's aesthetics, but he also expresses concern about its potentially prescriptive implications. Deleuze identifies common sense as a requirement for aesthetic knowledge to be communicable: "Knowledge implies a common sense, without which it would not be communicable and could not claim universality."<sup>64</sup> The idea of common sense provides a publicly accessible avenue for communicating about what is beautiful, for agreeing on knowledge about beauty. However, after identifying Kant's mandate of communicability in aesthetic knowledge, Deleuze decries the normative connotations that common sense implies. Because Deleuze associates Kant with a doctrine of faculties, a theory of universal morality, and resolute generalizations about how humans inhabit and experience the world, he argues that common sense assumes a tacit criterion of "uprightness," one that risks erasing diversity with an oppressive gaze.<sup>65</sup>

But Kant himself was concerned with the normative implications of *sensus communis*. That is why the Third Critique fiercely distinguishes between an aesthetic common sense (*Gemeinsinn*) and common human understanding (*gemeiner Verstand*).<sup>66</sup> Kant laments that the latter common human understanding—which postures as an unprejudiced and consistent way of thinking—is the dominant interpretation of common sense. In order to diminish its prevalence, Kant emphasizes the pejorative aspects of "common" (*gemein*) meaning vulgar or base. Railing against the definition of common sense

as a prejudiced conception of a healthy mind (*gesunder Verstand*), he reinterprets *sensus communis* to mean "die Idee eines gemeinschaftlichen Sinnes": the idea of a joint, collaborative sense or feeling.<sup>67</sup> Because the aesthetic interpretation of common sense avoids "the illusion that arises from the ease of mistaking subjective and private conditions for objective ones," Kant concludes that it is more worthy than "sound understanding" to be called common sense.<sup>68</sup> So while Deleuze rightly highlights the importance of common sense in the "Analytic of the Beautiful" as the communicable condition of aesthetic knowledge, Kant's effort to dismantle its normative connotations offers a welcome palliative to Deleuze's quandary.

Common sense is not a normative concept, but a placeholder. If the extreme diversity of personal musical encounters promises only disagreement, then common sense opens a space to communicate, to share, and to find community (*Gemeinschaft*) by way of agreement. As a placeholder, common sense realizes the need for hypothetical and communicable agreement as the basis for shared knowledge. In the Analytic, common sense bridges the gap between subjective agreeability and objective goodness by extending the utopian Enlightenment ideals of discourse and knowledge. That said, danger comes when the place of common sense is occupied by rigid assumptions, so that whether or not something is beautiful becomes a way of separating those credited with common sense from those without it. This is Deleuze's valid fear: that a particular idea of common sense can cross into ideology if it is enforced. By the same token, when knowledge is no longer communicable through shared ideas—when common sense becomes exclusive and shared ideas are replaced with shibboleths—then it is no longer knowledge, but metaphysics. And as Badiou warns, metaphysics "plugs the hole of politics" wherever it emplaces "a discourse that is assumed to have no holes."<sup>69</sup> That is why finding the place

<sup>64</sup>Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 21.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 21–22.

<sup>66</sup>"[Aesthetic] common sense is essentially distinct from the common understanding that is sometimes also called common sense (*sensus communis*); for the latter judges not by feeling but always by concepts, even though these concepts are usually only principles conceived obscurely." Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 87.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 160–62.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup>Badiou, *Lacan*, 123. Explaining Jacques Lacan's phrase, "metaphysics plugs the hole of politics," Badiou describes metaphysics as referring to a bad-faith philosophy that

of common sense is as dangerous as it is useful: useful in that it unveils the social constructedness of concepts taken for granted; dangerous in that it threatens to cover that constructedness right back up again. Along the same lines, strong claims about music itself must be relinquished on the way to viewing “music” as a dynamic concept brokered through language by continuous interpretation. If aesthetic knowledge about music would move beyond ontological assertions, it must embrace the uncertain hope that all people can know and share experiences of musical beauty.

## VI

Just as ineffability presents a dialectical paradox of immediacy and mediation, so a tension emerges in the Analytic between music as nonrepresentational and the imperative that aesthetic knowledge be communicable. On one hand, Kant’s classification of untexted music as free beauty sets it apart from other arts and destines it for a special kind of judgment, one that depends primarily on the composer’s genius or a special accord with nature. If music is believed to draw its beauty from these mystified sources, then describing music will be equally beholden to mystery and metaphysics (read: politics). The conclusions that instrumental music is less describable, more abstract, or less conceptual than other arts—all incline toward a musical exceptionalism from which ineffability draws its strength.

On the other hand, Kant’s Analytic links aesthetic contemplation to communication with concepts and language in a way that is at odds with the belief that music (or anything beautiful, for that matter) is ineffable. Using Guyer’s terminology, ineffability theories correlate with the precognitive interpretation of Kant’s Analytic when they assert that music is so immediate that it precludes description. Alternatively, ineffability correlates with the multi-cognitive interpretation when it forfeits description in the face of music’s infinite interpretability. In

---

conceals a powerful group’s arrogation of discourse by justifying its own worldview.

both the precognitive and multi-cognitive scenarios, musical experience forestalls or overruns discourse, making a communicable concept of “music” impossible. In contrast, Guyer shows that aesthetic experience is always reflective and conceptual, since nothing can be called beautiful until it is named with a concept and recognized as the cause of free play. It is not possible to say “music is ineffable” without first saying “music”: the argument that “music is ineffable” always has a “music” in mind.

Kant’s notion of subjective universality empowers individuals to share their experiences of beauty against a hypothetical sense in common. Where the diverse individuality of aesthetic experience assures only disagreement, common sense offers the uncertain hope that we might find agreement. In Kant’s Enlightenment aesthetics, every person cultivates a private ideal of common-sense beauty, but it is discourse that enables individuals to foster communities around a shared idea of what is beautiful. And if discourse requires concepts in order to delimit and communicate aesthetic experiences, then the concept of music (that name by which we grasp musical experiences) cannot exist outside of the ineluctably social domain of the effable. At the same time, common sense can be oppressive when it asserts one ideal over others: when, that is, it overreaches. Common sense is useful when it is *only* an idea, the idea of an agreement that invites us to communicate with one another. The truly hegemonic gesture is the one that allows truisms to win out over the uncertainty of discourse.

The conviction that music is ineffable has served as a solution to the riddle of music’s interpretive plurality at the same time that it has perpetuated a strong claim about music’s ontology. But it is neither the only solution nor the best one. Shifting the locus of music’s interpretability—from the question of whether music is or is not ineffable to the negotiation of concepts through language—would preserve ineffability’s democratizing impetus while loosening its claim to epistemological authority.<sup>70</sup> For music’s

---

<sup>70</sup>The phrase “loosening its claim to epistemological authority” is borrowed from Lawrence Kramer, “Haydn’s Chaos, Schenker’s Order; or, Hermeneutics and Musical Analysis: Can They Mix?” this journal 16, no. 1 (1992): 8.

ontologies are neither cut and dried nor universal. With the understanding that knowledge must be communicable in order to be knowledge, that beauty must be delimited with a concept before it can be known, and that concepts are constructed in language and therefore social, music is free to become what it always was: an idea admitting of many ideals.



**Abstract.**

Mapping out several interpretations of free play in Immanuel Kant's Third Critique helps parse the argument that "music is ineffable." Although the argument is an old one, recent scholarship by Carolyn Abbate, Michael Gallope, and others has helped the idea of music's ineffability resurface in recent years as a special, dialectical property of music's sonic presence that perpetually defers statements about music's meaning. However, the polysemy that results from this deferral is anchored, by the claim that "music is ineffable," in the ontology of a preconceived notion of what "music" is.

Examining the conceptuality of free play in Kant's "Analytic of the Beautiful" helps shift the crux of music's meaningful plurality away from the ontology

of "music" to language—which delimits aesthetic experience as "music" and makes it available for contemplation. The ineffabilist arguments that musical experience precludes or overwhelms language accord with the interpretations of free play that Paul Guyer has called "precognitive" and "multicognitive." In contrast, Guyer proposes his own "metacognitive" interpretation, which requires an aesthetic stimulus to be grasped with a concept before any cognition can take place. By linking the beautiful to both the subjectively agreeable and the objectively good, Kant's "Analytic" endows every person with the capacity to experience beauty individually. As a result, the judgment of something as beautiful depends, not on universal criteria, but on a "sense in common" (*Gemeinsinn*), which Gilles Deleuze described as knowledge's precondition of communicability. Kant's principle of common sense is what empowers discourse to communicate a shared idea of beauty by continually brokering agreement among a diversity of personal ideals. The insight that knowledge of an aesthetic experience is always framed with a concept, whose meaning is only ever tentatively agreed upon, preserves and democratizes the meaningfulness of "music" by attaching it to an idea admitting of many ideals, free from ineffability's strong ontological claim. Keywords: ineffability, interpretation, philosophy of mind, aesthetics, Kant

DYLAN J.  
PRINCIPI  
Critiquing  
Musical  
Ineffabilism

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE (SUMMER 2022)

DITLEV RINDOM: Gramophone Voices: Puccini and *Madama Butterfly* in New York, ca. 1907

SIMON MORRISON: Still in Search of Satanilla

SONJA WERMAGER: "Worthy of a Monument in Artistic History": Religion and Nation in the Plans for Robert Schumann's Unrealized Martin Luther Oratorio