INTRODUCTION

Philosophy and music

An ironic reminder of music's central role in many aspects of life in modernity was given not long ago by the report that 'music' had – albeit only temporarily – replaced 'sex' as the word used most often in Internet searches. The likelihood of 'philosophy' becoming the most popular word in Internet searches is, of course, pretty remote. This rather crude sign of the difference in the contemporary importance of these two elements of modern culture can also be read as an indication of a deeper issue. Why this is so can be suggested by the difference between two moments in the changing relationship between philosophy and music in modernity. The heroic period of modern philosophy in Europe epitomised by Kant's claims on behalf of self-legislation in opposition to obedience to traditional authority is contemporaneous with the development of the new 'autonomous' music of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert, as well as with the emergence of new ideas concerning music's connection to philosophy. Professional philosophy, particularly in the Anglo-American world today, has, in contrast, tended to become a more and more specialised academic activity with little direct bearing either on people's attitudes to or on the conduct of their lives. The idea that academic philosophy might now have a fundamental connection to music is, moreover, almost inconceivable in many areas. Music itself, on the other hand, has continued, in albeit sometimes problematic ways, to be a central feature of the everyday lives of people in modern societies.

One of the aims of this book is to show both that some recent directions in philosophy offer ways of re-establishing connections to music and that this is important for the future direction of philosophy. How far

such connections could affect the practice of music itself is a different matter, and the very difficulty of suggesting ways that they might is part of the theme of the book. 'New musicologists' have begun to use more resources from philosophy, such as the work of T. W. Adorno, in recent times, and this has led to some exciting new departures. It might seem, then, that what I propose would belong in the direction of new musicology, but this is not necessarily the case. In my view some of such work using philosophy to look at music puts rather too much faith in philosophy, and too little in music itself. This is a contentious – and somewhat indeterminate – claim, and it will take the book that follows to try to substantiate it. One example of what I mean by putting faith in music is suggested by Daniel Barenboim in a tribute to his recently deceased friend, Edward Said: 'He wrote about important universal issues such as exile, politics, integration. However, the most surprising thing for me, as his friend and great admirer, was the realisation that, on many occasions, he formulated ideas and reached conclusions through music; and he saw music as a reflection of the ideas that he had regarding other issues' (The *Guardian*, 25 October 2004). How this might be possible can be suggested by considering a few aspects of music's relationship to philosophy in modernity.

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the relationship between music and philosophy could no longer be established solely in terms of what philosophy had to say about music, because the development of music itself influenced philosophical thinking, and vice versa. This two-way relationship has largely disappeared in most contemporary professional philosophy, and I think this is both regrettable and instructive. My reasons for this view are not only concerned with the failings of the so-called 'philosophy of music', because what is at issue cannot, as we shall see, be confined to the topic of music.[1] Discussion of music in analytical philosophy often takes the form of attempts to determine what constitutes a musical 'work': is it the score, all performances which 'comply' with the score, any performance that gets near to compliance, etc.; as well as attempts to establish whether music can be said to possess 'meaning' in the way verbal language does, to define the concept of 'expression', and to ascertain whether music 'arouses' emotions or just has 'emotional properties'. Even though the very status of philosophy is itself these days widely seen to be in question,

1 In the analytical tradition there is sometimes a disagreement over whether what is involved here is 'aesthetics' or 'the philosophy of music/art'. I shall ignore this distinction, because, contrary to the claims of some analytical aestheticians, like Arthur Danto, aesthetics was from the beginning not just concerned with beauty.

such approaches unquestioningly assume that the task of philosophy is to establish which concepts can appropriately be applied to music.

My worry about these approaches might, though, sound rather odd. Surely, it is obvious that this should be philosophy's task? There is, however, a growing sense these days that philosophy is actually not very good at establishing the 'real nature' of things, as opposed to exploring our different understandings of things and considering how the contrasting kinds of validity involved in those understandings relate to each other. One reason for suspecting ontological reflections is the simple fact that a useful criterion for valid scientific theories is that they allow one to make reliable predictions, and so do not necessarily raise ontological questions. Philosophical theories, in contrast, rarely allow one to predict, and are even more rarely widely agreed upon, though they may offer resources for re-interpreting an issue or a problem in a concrete situation. Doubts about philosophy's role in such matters can be suggested by asking what would happen if philosophy *were* to come up with the true theory of the nature of music. Would listeners then be able to hear Beethoven's String Quartet Opus 131 and *know* whether it meant anything or not, because philosophy offered irrefutable arguments that music without words does not 'mean' anything? But what if some listeners still thought it 'meant' something, even though they could not necessarily *say* what it meant? Furthermore, would such a philosophical theory invalidate all the ways in which this piece has been reacted to in the past – which from my point of view have to do with its meaning – that do not conform to the theory? Even though each of these ways will be inadequate in some respect, they may yet disclose something about the music.

Music's 'meaning' might lie precisely in the fact that we cannot say in words what it means – why does music exist at all if what it 'says' could be said just as well in other ways? The important issue is, therefore, the differing ways in which something can be construed as 'meaning' something. Gadamer suggests why in his remark that in the everyday use of language: 'The word which one says or which is said to one is not the grammatical element of a linguistic analysis, which can be shown in concrete phenomena of language acquisition to be secondary in relation, say, to the linguistic melody of a sentence' (Gadamer 1986: 196). The tone and rhythm of an utterance can be more significant than its 'propositional content', and this already indicates one way in which the musical may play a role in signification. Judgement on whether music possesses meaning in the way natural languages do would seem to presuppose an account of verbal meaning that allows it to be strictly

demarcated from whatever it is that we understand in wordless music. Analytical philosophers of music tend to assume that an account of verbal meaning has been established, and that this is what allows them to attempt to determine the status of musical meaning. However, there are good grounds for doubting whether such an account really exists in the form relied upon by these philosophers.

The reasons for some of these doubts are already apparent in early-modern thinkers, like J. G. Herder and the early German Romantics, who regard language and music as intimately connected, because both are means of revealing new aspects of being, rather than just means of re-presenting what is supposedly already there. The limitations of analytical approaches are often apparent in relation to the 'poetic', or literary use of language. In poetic usage something is inevitably lost when the particular form of words is paraphrased or translated into another language.[2] It is implausible to assume that what is lost has nothing to do with what is meant in a poem, unless one restricts one's sense of meaning to the idea of reference to concrete and 'abstract' objects (whatever the latter notion might mean). A related case is metaphorical usage, which causes difficulties for semantic theories which assume that words have specifiable 'senses'. Is it possible to establish context-independent criteria for identifying when a piece of language can be understood purely literally, so that metaphorical, performative, 'musical' and other dimensions of language can be separated from it? The assumption that this is possible relies on the claim that the representational aspect of language is the basis of other forms of language, and there are strong grounds for resisting this claim. The sheer diversity of ways in which communication actually takes place in real contexts can suggest why. None of this, one should add, requires one to give up the idea that there are true ways of talking about the world. What is at issue is rather the functioning of language as a social practice, where what one form of language cannot say or achieve may be sayable or achievable by another form, including in ways which cannot be construed in semantic terms.

Meanings and music

Questions which arise in analytical approaches to music and language are, then, connected to questions about the very nature and point of

2 Arguably something can also be gained, but that is not the issue here.

doing philosophy that relate to important tensions between the main traditions of modern philosophy. One of the relatively few analytical philosophers to have extensively concerned himself with music, Peter Kivy, has claimed that 'Music, of all the arts, is the most philosophically unexplored and most philosophically misunderstood where it has been explored at all' (Kivy 1997: 139). Kivy's claim is already undermined by his failure even to mention many of the most important writers on philosophy and music, such as T. W. Adorno and Carl Dahlhaus, or to consider philosophers, like Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, or Davidson, who offer conceptions of language involving assumptions which contradict his own. Moreover, Kivy's own manner of looking at music can be shown to rely on assumptions which seem likely to obscure the significance of music. In themselves the limitations of analytical approaches to music may not be particularly interesting; the motor of much of the analytical tradition was, after all, predominantly the success of the methods of the natural sciences. But if one regards analytical philosophy as a distinctive manifestation of modern culture, the questions raised by its problematic relationship to music can bring to light some major issues. The difficulty lies in how these issues are to be approached.

One of the main characteristics of modern philosophy has been a tension between two approaches to 'meaning'. This tension relates to the tension between the analytical tradition of philosophy that begins with Frege, Russell, and the early Wittgenstein, and the European traditions of philosophy that emerged with Vico, Herder, Kant, and Romanticism, and are carried on in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and Critical Theory. The manifestations of the tension go right across the different disciplines in academic life, and across the different spheres of modern social life. In its more extreme forms – in some of the theories of the Vienna Circle, for instance – the first of these approaches takes as its starting point propositions which convey reliable knowledge in the natural sciences. These propositions are supposed to form the basis of what can properly be called meaning. The idea is that one can demarcate the forms of language which reliably connect with the world from those which do not, and can therefore employ the former to define meaning. The forms in question involve direct observation of objects and rely on a priori logical laws to order the sentences to which this observation gives rise. The other approach begins either with the endless diversity of ways in which people actually use language, or, more controversially, with the 'world-disclosing' aspects of literary language (see

Cooper 2003). It does so in order to explore meaning as the very substance of specifically human existence, and regards the natural sciences as just one, albeit understandably dominant, part of modern cultural practice, rather than as providing what Bernard Williams has termed the 'absolute conception' (on this see chapter 9 below). The reason the sciences could not in fact provide such a conception is that they rely on language in a manner which precludes them, on pain of vicious circularity, from using language to give an account of language in their own terms. We shall repeatedly return to this issue later. The assumption in the second approach is that if people understand a piece of articulation – which is apparent in terms of its effects in social contexts on behaviour, reactions, feelings, and so on – it must mean something. To this extent, as Bjørn Ramberg has argued in relation to Donald Davidson's notion of 'radical interpretation', 'We can, if we like, interpret all kinds of things as speaking' if we can 'correlate some identifiable complex state of our chosen subject with some identifiable state of the world' (Ramberg 1989: 122).

The relevance of this view of language to music is apparent in the question of whether a series of acoustic phenomena is mere noise or is music: if it is the latter, it possesses a kind of 'meaning' that noise does not. This is in part because we may inferentially relate it to other things which we have interpreted as music. Our understanding of music depends on correlations between hearing the production of noises and an awareness that what is produced is not merely arbitrary and so is susceptible to and worthy of interpretation and evaluation in the widest senses, which can, for example, include dancing to the noises. Any noise can become music if it occurs in the appropriate contexts, rather in the way that non-literary language can change its status when incorporated into a literary context, or an object becomes a work of art if put into the right context. We can, furthermore, sometimes think that we hear language when what we hear is not language, and vice versa, because of the context in which we hear it, and the same applies to music. There is no need in these cases to rely on a fundamental division between the musical and the linguistic, because their very status as such depends in both cases on their intelligibility. The basic idea here is, then, that any form of articulation that can disclose the world in ways which affect the conduct and understanding of life can be regarded as possessing meaning. The deliberately open-ended nature of this claim does not preclude the examination of differences between putatively semantic and non-semantic forms of articulation, but it leaves open the question

of how fundamental this difference should be seen as being for the ways in which language and other communicative forms actually function. What *is* fundamental here is the sense that intelligibility in both language and music arises via connections between noises and marks, and states of and processes in the 'inner' and 'outer' worlds.

The founders of the analytical tradition increased the precision of some kinds of argument and got rid of certain confusions regarding the logical status of a number of issues in philosophy. However, they did so at the expense of restricting the scope of what was considered worthy of, or even amenable to, philosophical attention. In the process a great deal was staked on using the analysis of language to obviate traditional metaphysical problems. It is therefore easy to see how absurd speculation in Romantic philosophy about the significance of music as, for example, 'the archetypal ('*urbildlich*') rhythm of nature and of the universe itself' (Schelling: 1/5, 369), would appear in that perspective. We shall see later, though, that it may not really be quite so absurd. Plausible as the analytical strategy seemed to be in the light of the predictive and technological power of the natural sciences, the project of setting up a theory of meaning in this manner is now widely regarded as decisively flawed, and this has led to a new relationship of some analytical thinkers to the European traditions of philosophy.

The problem for the analytical project is that, even with regard to the exact sciences, the relationship between words and the world cannot be *explained* as a relationship between fixed items in the world and linguistic meanings which mirror or 're-present' – in the sense of 'present again what is already there as such' – those items. The relationship between 'extension' and 'intension', or between 'reference' and 'meaning' or 'sense', has, so far at least, proved to be impossible to characterise in a manner which specifies the role of each in isolation. This has led to greater attention being paid to the second approach to meaning. What things are understood to be depends here upon the kind of relationships in which they stand to other things, and something analogous applies to the meaning of words. Instead of the world being seen 'atomistically', as a series of discrete objects, it comes to be seen 'holistically', as an interconnected web, in which what things are also depends on how we speak about them and act in relation to them and to each other. A crucial point about this shift for the present book is that it involves the revival of the ideas of thinkers in European philosophy, like Schelling, Hegel, and Schleiermacher. These ideas were both rejected by the founding fathers of analytical philosophy, *and* accompanied and

were sometimes influenced by the emergence of the greatest Western music. We shall return to a more thorough examination of what I have had to caricature here in the coming chapters. For the moment I want to suggest a possible initial response to the consequences of the holistic understanding of meaning that can illuminate questions of philosophy and music.

Subject and object

A key element of holist conceptions is that they question attempts to fix what belongs on the subject- and what belongs on the object-side of what is intelligible to us. This doesn't mean that such conceptions regard objectivity as impossible, but a philosophical understanding of objectivity does not depend on a characterisation of how the objective 'content' provided by the world is organised into reliable cognitions by a subjective 'scheme' provided by the mind or language. The holist model is often seen as open to question with regard to the physical sciences because there the content is supposed to consist in what John McDowell has called 'bare presences that are supposed to constitute the ultimate grounds of empirical judgements' (McDowell 1994: 24), that is, in pure data that do not require interpretation. There are, though, as McDowell and others argue in the wake of German Idealist and Romantic philosophy, good reasons for suggesting that we don't have access to any such ultimate grounds because we don't apprehend pure sense-data anyway, but rather apprehend tables, trees, chemical elements, notes, etc. Separating the conceptual from the non-conceptual content in perception is seen as involving a misapprehension of what perception is, because perception is of a world which is always already intelligible, not of some intermediary between us and reality, such as sense-data.

Interrogation of the idea of a fixed line between the subjective and the objective depends on the notion that we inhabit a world that cannot in principle be reduced to what it supposedly is prior to any understanding of it. Some of the problems which most concern analytical philosophers of music are themselves generated by the model of a spectatorial subjective mind confronting an objective world of which music is a part. A recurrent issue in such thinking is how to get from the description of a sequence of organised sounds in terms of physics – thus of frequencies, durations, etc., as objective properties of acoustic phenomena – to the characterisation of the same sequence as music. Whereas the former might be seen as the description of an identifiable object, the latter

makes no sense in these terms: what sort of 'object' is the music that is objectively manifest as frequencies, etc.? Is there a further property possessed by the frequencies which is lacking in sound-sequences that are not music? The problem is that the criteria for identifying something as music are of a different order from the criteria for measuring frequencies. Davidson (2001) points out that one can give any number of different numerical descriptions of something's weight which express the same facts, because they will all rely on the relationship of the weight of one thing to other things. The metric one applies does not change the weight, and the same applies to frequencies. The assumption might therefore seem to be that something's being music is irredeemably 'subjective', because it is just constituted 'in the mind' of a listener.

In one sense this is trivially true: there would be no music without listeners and players, whereas frequencies arguably exist whether we apprehend them or not. However, the apprehension of sounds as music also depends upon learning-processes which are not merely subjective, because they originate in the objective world of social action inhabited by the subject. This world is constituted partly in terms of socially instituted norms relating to, but not wholly determined by, the causal pressure of nature. This is the crucial point, because issues such as the 'location' of emotions with regard to music, which often lead to fruitless disagreement if one tries to show how a musical object has 'affective properties' in the way that physical objects have physical properties, look different in this perspective. A vital element in social learning-processes is language itself. Language is, though, also manifest as a physical object, in the form of frequencies, pitches, or marks on pieces of paper, etc. Significantly, the objectifying model has something like the same problem with meaning as it does with music: what makes these particular physical objects into comprehensible signs? The purely physical description of something which we understand as music and of something which we understand as language has to be complemented by an interpretative aspect. In both cases the supposedly purely objective turns out not to be separable from the supposedly subjective because it is inextricably bound up with human action. Ultimately this means that even judgements about physical facts that are available to us via causal interaction with the world involve interpretation because they are couched in a language which has to be understood. This does not, however, lead to subjectivism: the basic point is simply that all kinds of language use involve what Davidson and Habermas refer to as a 'triangulation'

between the subjective, the intersubjective, and the objective. What is *true* about either music or language is independent of the vagaries of interpretation, but this does not mean that there is a reliable method for arriving at that truth which can avoid interpretation.

Foundational philosophy, and the musical alternative

These are still contentious points, and a serious defence of them here would require an examination of many issues in contemporary philosophy, which would prevent us even getting to the main themes of the book. This very situation is, though, central to what I want to say. The requirement to arrive at a philosophically reliable location before dealing with music might seem to make a discussion of philosophy and music effectively impossible. I want to claim that the consequence ought really to be the opposite. The very difficulty of arriving at this location is actually what is most revealing.

Schleiermacher suggested the difficulty involved in connecting aesthetics to the rest of philosophy in his *Aesthetics*. The normal assumption is that one requires a generally agreed system of philosophy in order to be able to establish aesthetic judgements on a firm foundation. Schleiermacher asserts, however, that 'this would mean deferring the matter to infinity' (Schleiermacher 1842: 48), because such a system requires universal consensus. He regards this consensus as a regulative idea, not as something actually realisable, and therefore thinks that aesthetics must get by without firm foundations. Even in the contemporary philosophical situation, where grand foundational systems have largely been abandoned, the problem for the 'philosophy of music' is that it must rely upon whatever other philosophical assumptions are adopted by the person producing it. Such philosophy is therefore likely just to confirm the non- or extra-musical assumptions that precede its application to music; indeed, if it did not, it would be incoherent. Given the wholesale lack of consensus about positions in philosophy, this leads, though, to the uninviting situation in which the 'philosophy of music' inevitably just limps behind whatever philosophical bandwagon happens to be running at a particular time or is adopted by the philosopher of music. There seems to be something mistaken about accepting the result of this situation, even though it is in one sense inescapable: am I myself not just following the bandwagon of contemporary pragmatism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics in my rejection of subject–object-based analytical models in relation to music? It might appear, moreover, that