

Cambridge University Press

0521452368 - Theory, Analysis and Meaning in Music - Edited by Anthony Pople

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

## Languages

## 1

*Metaphor in Roger Scruton's aesthetics of music*

NAOMI CUMMING

This article looks at the role of metaphor in Roger Scruton's aesthetic theory, specifically as it is applied to music. A preliminary exploration of musical understanding is found in *Art and Imagination*, but a more developed statement of Scruton's position on music is reserved for a later book entitled *The Aesthetic Understanding*.<sup>1</sup> Scruton's treatment of metaphor in this work poses questions, first, about the epistemological claims implicit in a musical analysis and, second, about the aesthetic relevance of structuralist approaches to music.

## Hanslick's question of musical meaning

Scruton's concern with metaphor arises from his desire to provide an answer to the question posed by Eduard Hanslick, of how absolute music is capable of having an expressive content, given that emotions usually have an object, and music lacks reference to anything outside of itself which might serve to identify what is expressed. The problem is summed up in the question: 'If music has a content, how can that content be described?'<sup>2</sup> Scruton's strategy in exploring this question is to change the object of discussion from musical expression to musical understanding. Any content attributed to music must, he argues, be the object of a listener's understanding and, if this is accepted, a theory of musical expression should be susceptible to translation into a theory of musical understanding.<sup>3</sup> Scruton believes that access to the cognitive categories

I would like to acknowledge the support of the Rothmans Foundation, Australia, during the writing of this essay in 1991–2. I also wish to thank Professors Graham Nerlich (Philosophy, University of Adelaide) and Marion Guck (Music, Washington University) for helpful comments on earlier versions of the manuscript.

1 Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974); *The Aesthetic Understanding: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture* (London: Methuen, 1983).

2 Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding*, p. 77.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

## NAOMI CUMMING

used by listeners is afforded by an analysis of the descriptive language used by them to characterise musical sounds. He attempts to find the most basic categories of musical understanding by distinguishing language that is appropriate for musical descriptions from that which is used in the scientific description of the acoustic or 'material' properties of sound. Certain basic categories used by listeners are, he claims, non-congruent with any physical property of sound, but are nonetheless essential to the understanding of music. His more general claim is that an 'aesthetic understanding' is quite distinct from a scientific one and that the use of language embodies this difference:

There is a kind of understanding which rests in appearance. I shall call this kind of understanding 'intentional'. A scientific understanding addresses the world as material object, and seeks out the causal connections which underlie and explain appearances. But scientific understanding does not eliminate appearance: it only dispenses with it. An intentional understanding considers the world as intentional object (or, to use the Husserlian idiom, as *Lebenswelt*): it therefore uses *the concepts through which we perceive the world*, and makes no connections or observations that are not in some way already implicit in them.<sup>4</sup>

Scruton sets out to show that musical content is embodied in the 'intentional' object. According to Hanslick's argument it is not attributable to the sounding medium itself (the 'material' object), since content has been defined as reference to an external object, a possibility denied to absolute music. The idea of an 'intentional object' is put forward as a path to solving this problem because it offers one way of describing how the understanding of a perceiver is implicated in the content ascribed to a percept. An intentional object is the object of a thought, belief or other cognitive attitude. While 'intentional objects' may include any objects of thought, whether purely imagined, conceptualised or perceived, Scruton is interested specifically in the object of *perceptions*, which are taken to embody thought and to be influenced by beliefs. Most important for his argument is the observation that the coincidence of an intentional object with a material object is not guaranteed, given that beliefs (and the perceptions founded upon them) may be false.<sup>5</sup> If he can show that the language used in our culture to describe the musical behaviour of sounds

4 Ibid., p. 78 (emphasis added).

5 A well-known example is given by Quine in his discussion of referential opacity. To paraphrase: Tom believes that Cicero denounced Cataline, but not that Tully did, even though (unbeknown to him) Tully *is* Cicero. The intentional object of Tom's thought is Cicero. In this case the intentional object of thought depends on a belief (and therefore, on a believed description) which is false. See W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), p. 145.

*Metaphor in Roger Scruton's aesthetics of music*

is inconsistent with what is known of their material attributes, he can also claim that the properties described belong to the intentional object and not to the material one. This argument serves the purpose of showing that musical content is an imposition on sound of the cognitive categories used in listening. Following this conviction through, Scruton is led to make an ontological claim, that 'music belongs uniquely to the intentional sphere, and not to the material realm'.<sup>6</sup>

Speculation of this kind might seem to be of dubious value, but its significance is found by keeping in mind the question of how music can have expressive content. Scruton takes melody, harmony and rhythm to be the most fundamental categories of music, and develops his case by looking at two properties which are attributed to them in various ways, namely space and motion. He argues that musical space and motion are attributes of the intentional object, not the material one, and then seeks to draw a parallel between the structural content which is described using these (or derivative) terms, and the expressive content which is described with affective language. Starting from an observation that the perceived motion of a pitch in musical space is different from, and lacks reference to, the motion of objects in physical space, he excludes the possibility that it might reflect any physical property of sound. He argues that pitch motion can only be understood by looking at those processes of understanding which create categories of 'space' and 'motion' applicable to music, *not* by examining music itself on the assumption that motion is present in the relationship of pitches. In his terms, 'A theory which tries to explain music in terms of musical movement is not a theory of music at all: it "explains" its subject only by blocking the path to explanation.'<sup>7</sup> By this argument, descriptions of musical motion in the analysis of specific structures are rendered intelligible not by reference to any objective state of affairs, but by reference to cognitive/perceptual proclivities. Scruton believes that the categories of space and motion are so basic to understanding that a description of music which substituted neutral acoustic terms ('change of pitch or frequency' for 'motion') would fail to capture the musical experience. Thus musical 'content', even when described purely in structural terms, is found to be in the intentional object of perception, and not to be an attribute of a material (acoustic) object.

Scruton concludes from his study of space and motion that 'any analysis of music must be an exercise in intentional rather than scientific

6 Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding*, p. 86

7 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

## NAOMI CUMMING

understanding',<sup>8</sup> and on this conclusion builds the first part of his solution to the problem of musical expression. The aesthetic understanding displayed by a listener when expressive content is found in music has characteristics similar to those displayed when formal content is being identified. A description of musical form typically includes reference to the motion of pitches in musical space and this, no less than the use of emotive terms, reflects a cognitive attitude of the perceiver. Scruton believes that the content is, in both cases, in the intentional object. As a consequence, an acceptance of one kind of content as being 'in the music' should lead to an acceptance of the other. Like the 'motion' of a series of pitches, the 'sadness' of a motive derives its meaning from the imposition on music of a mental attribute, and its intelligibility from a common experience of such 'projection'. This does nothing to explain why we might commonly want to apply the epithet 'sad' or 'melancholy' to certain passages of Schubert, but it does attempt to legitimise expressive content as being no more nor less objective than other kinds of musical content.<sup>9</sup>

## Metaphors and music as an intentional object

Scruton pursues a further discussion of how non-referential expressive content can be explained using the doctrine of *Einfühlung* as a more sophisticated substitute for the idea of 'projection', but his argument up to this point is already controversial and it is on this part that I propose to concentrate. It has been seen that Scruton suggests a commonality between the analysis of structural features in music and the analysis of its expressive content, but he does not convincingly reconcile technical analysis and aesthetic criticism without creating some confusion, particularly in the appraisal of how language is used in the two related disciplines. Most obviously problematic is the key word, 'metaphor' which is used, without explicit definition, to designate any term which refers to an attribute of music as an intentional object. The category 'metaphor' is thus taken to include both musical space and motion and terms referring to expressive content such as 'sadness'.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., p. 95:

We project into the music the inner life that is ours, and that is *how* we hear it there. This is not the same as hearing resemblances between music and feeling, any more than hearing musical movement is hearing structural relations on which the movement depends. The experience of transfer is *sui generis*. The emotion that is heard belongs purely to the intentional and not to the material realm.

*Metaphor in Roger Scruton's aesthetics of music*

The argument can now be restated as Scruton typically expresses it, using the idea of metaphor. Stating his position that music is necessarily an intentional object, not a material one, he asserts that a capacity for 'metaphorical transfer' is essential to musical understanding, and that no substitution of literal terms could adequately convey what is perceived:

It seems that in our most basic apprehension of music there lies a complex system of metaphor, which is the true description of no material fact. And the metaphor cannot be eliminated from the description of music, because it is integral to the intentional object of musical experience. Take this metaphor away and you cease to describe the experience of music.<sup>10</sup>

It might appear from his discussion that intentional objects are always described metaphorically, but this is only because he does not deal with more mundane things as the objects of thought, things which might be described using literal (while possibly false) terms. Some clarification of the relationship between an intentional object and the use of metaphor is thus needed. An intentional object could be described using either literal or metaphorical terms: when I believe that Cicero – not Tully – denounced Cataline, Cicero is my intentional object, and I am thinking literally, even though I am partially mistaken. The use of metaphor in description is, however, taken by Scruton as an indicator that an intentional object is being described since the formation of metaphor involves a particular act of understanding where a word is transferred from one realm of experience to another, and is thus not used in its standard sense to designate the object 'in itself'. For the purposes of Scruton's discussion the intentional object (music) must be represented metaphorically.

The argument presented assumes the validity of two strong distinctions. First is the supposition that in all normal discourse a clear separation is possible between literal and metaphorical language. According to Mark Johnson, this position is that typically held in positivist and empiricist treatments of metaphor which, in distinguishing the 'cognitive' and 'emotive' functions of language, maintain an 'attendant belief that scientific knowledge could be reduced to a system of literal and verifiable sentences'.<sup>11</sup> As Johnson's comment suggests, the distinction between literal and metaphorical terms is necessary in a view of science which wants to protect the description of material things from the incursion of subjective or emotional attitudes. An appraisal of language is found to

10 Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding*, p. 85.

11 Mark Johnson, 'Introduction', in Mark Johnson (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 17.

## NAOMI CUMMING

entail the assumption of an epistemological position, and it is this which makes the discussion of metaphor a non-trivial one. The second distinction made by Scruton accords with his empiricist position. Complementary to a separation of literal from metaphorical language is his distinction between a material object, which can ostensibly be described without contamination from the misleading categories of cognition, and an intentional object, which may or may not coincide with it, depending on the efficacy of the cognitive categories used (presumably reflecting the degree to which the thinker's experience is apposite to the situation in hand). Scruton is consistent in affirming the empirical view that when metaphorical language is used to describe something (e. g. 'an angry sore'), it can usually be replaced without loss of meaning by literal language (e. g. 'an inflamed and swollen infection of the skin').<sup>12</sup> The possibility of substitution is taken to confirm the material identity of the object described so that it is both the object of a propositional attitude and a material thing, independent in its attributes from any qualities imposed by an observer.

This assumption, that metaphors can be replaced by equivalent literal terms when a scientific understanding is conveyed, lies behind Scruton's claim about the ontological status of music. According to him, music belongs 'uniquely' to the intentional realm because such substitution is impossible. The terms which are used to describe the perceived structures of music (involving the motion of sounds in musical space) cannot, he suggests, be replaced by literal terms without sacrificing fidelity to what is perceived. Music is defined as distinct from noise by possessing attributes which cannot be reduced to any material property of sound. Scruton is apparently saying that although musical structures are genuinely perceived, they cannot be described as belonging to material reality. While 'there is a material base to the perception of these things, there is more to perceiving them than perceiving their material base'.<sup>13</sup>

What Scruton does not consider in espousing a traditional empiricist view of metaphor (without discussing it directly) is that all language is a product of human cognition and imposes order on the material world, often by transferring words between different realms of experience. Lakoff and Johnson's study of metaphor has shown that a clear delimita-

12 Ibid., p. 17:

Typically, such treatments either ignored metaphor as wholly emotive or insisted that the truth claims of any nonliteral expression could be captured by a literal paraphrase without loss of cognitive content.

13 Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding*, p. 94.

*Metaphor in Roger Scruton's aesthetics of music*

tion of literal from metaphorical speech is by no means transparently obvious (is 'inflamed' really a literal word when applied to a sore?),<sup>14</sup> and if this distinction lacks clarity, it cannot be maintained as a fool-proof key to distinguishing material things (described in literal or 'objective' language) from 'things as the object of thought, belief, imagination or perception' (where metaphorical description acts as the possible marker of an intentional object lacking material reality). Even what we accept as objective descriptions of material things will always, and necessarily, make use of human cognitive categories, which may at times use metaphorical terms for their expression. The abundance of 'dead' metaphors in language warns against the belief that scientific descriptions can entirely exclude them, but the mere fact that an object is observed and described using available terms, with the belief-structures implied in them, does not necessitate a denial that the thing exists, even if more literal terms are substituted with the greatest difficulty. Saying that something is an 'intentional object' is entirely redundant in scientific description because it is taken for granted that something described is the object of perception (which is informed by experience and belief), and that the description coincides as far as possible with reality. When Scruton contrasts 'intentional understanding' with 'scientific understanding' he is interested in explicating those circumstances in which this assumption of congruence between perception and reality cannot be made. There would, however, need to be a convincing pay-off indeed (in the form of an answer to the problem of musical expression) to justify relegating musical structures, as well as musical expression, to the realm of material inexistence.

Forgetting for the time being that 'metaphor' has fuzzy boundaries, the sense in which musical space and motion are metaphors may be questioned according to Scruton's own idea that metaphor involves a transference of concepts from one sphere of experience to another. Taking an empirical stance, it is necessary to find out whether the use of these words in reference to music actually entails any such transfer, and an appraisal of language which accepts a limited standard definition of terms proves to be a handicap here. Following from this discussion it can be asked whether the fundamental terminology of musical description really justifies giving music a unique status as an 'intentional object', distinct from other things. Finally, the impact of Scruton's argument on the problem of musical expression can be assessed. (Is there a genuine

14 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).



## NAOMI CUMMING

connection between words for space and motion, and words denoting affective content?) I will look in some detail at Scruton's discussion of musical space and motion before proceeding to look at his views on affective language in aesthetic description, in order to establish whether any connection between them can be substantiated.

## Musical space and motion: are they metaphors?

The simplest case of perceived motion is found in melody:

Tones, unlike sounds, seem to contain movement. This movement is exemplified in melodies, and can be traced through a 'musical space' which we describe in terms of 'high' and 'low'.<sup>15</sup>

The apparent movement of tones in an auditory space is, Scruton claims, unlike the movement of an object in a physical space because 'it does not involve an act of re-identification: it does not require the perception of the same thing at different places, and the consequent inference of a movement from one place to the other'.<sup>16</sup> In addition to this apparent disanalogy between motion in musical and physical space he finds another disjunction, between a chord in musical space and an object in physical space. He asks how a chord might display spatial orientation and reaches the conclusion that 'there is only genuine orientation in the musical space if a chord can be considered as a single musical object, spread over the "area" which it "occupies"'.<sup>17</sup> Any such perceived unity is, he believes, attributable to an act of the understanding, not to an objective property of the combined pitch frequencies.

Scruton takes these examples to demonstrate that qualities of space and motion are heard by listeners only because a (presumably innate) conception of space guides hearing. He assumes that there is a standard understanding of space which serves to limit the ways in which the word 'space' can be used literally (his discussion being founded on that given by Kant). It is implied that space is a concrete thing even though it is non-physical, because constant factors can be found in the way that objects occupy or move through space.<sup>18</sup> When space is perceived in a context (such as music) where these constants are violated, the space

15 Ibid., p. 80.

16 Ibid., p. 84.

17 Ibid., p. 83.

18 This point is illustrated in a discussion of dimension (Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding*, pp. 81–2):

*Metaphor in Roger Scruton's aesthetics of music*

perceived is deemed to be part of an intentional object which does not coincide with any material thing. Putting a name to the perception, and calling it 'space' (or pitch motion up and down, implying space) thus entails using the term in a sense which is literally false according to the premises of this argument. It is nonetheless true of the intentional object – which is what we experience – and, given that the perception itself would not be possible if the concept of space did not already exist in the mind, Scruton is led to believe that a 'capacity for metaphorical transfer' is essential to musical perception.

I would like to take issue, first, with the limited definition of what might be the literal properties of space. In mathematics 'measure spaces' are not physical things, but the mere fact that space is used to conceptualise abstract measurement does not make it a metaphor.<sup>19</sup> Such non-metaphorical spaces lack many, indeed most, of the features Kant used to characterise physical space, and they provide an alternative model for understanding the simplest characteristics of space perceived in music. That sounds may form a two-dimensional 'measure space' quite literally, providing that each has a definite pitch, is attested by the convention of arranging pitches in formalised 'scales'. The absence of metaphor at this level of description is further supported by the lack of any genuine conceptual 'transfer' in the act of perceiving these pitch relationships. When I hear 'motion through space' in a series of proximate pitches (i. e. a scale) the perception is a direct auditory one and does not require mediation from visual channels. Giving words to this experience, which is founded on the cognitive measurement of pitch distances through time, does seem to require spatial words whose most standard usage occurs in relation to visual objects. The use of 'space' to express measurement in a non-visual perception does not, however, suggest that the act of understanding involves a transfer of this category from the visual realm of experience to the auditory one.<sup>20</sup> The 'metaphorical transfer' is not expe-

A dimension stands in a specific relation to the things that it contains. For example, an object is located *in* space; it *occupies* a certain position which might have been occupied by something else; it is also oriented in space. . . . Orientation is present whenever there is 'incongruity', of the kind displayed between an object and its mirror image.

19 See, for example, R. B. Reisel, *Elementary Theory of Measure Spaces* (New York: Springer Verlag, 1982) or Irving Kaplansky, *Set Theory and Metric Spaces* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1972). I am grateful to Professor Graham Nerlich for pointing this out to me.

20 On musical measurement see Eugene Narmour, *The Analysis and Cognition of Basic Melodic Structures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), part III.