

## Chapter 1

# How We Got Here, and Why

§1 The most widely and persistently pursued problem in aesthetics, or the philosophy of art, is the problem of stating what it is to be a “work of art,” what it is to be “art.” It is sometimes called the problem of *defining* “art.”

This problem was bequeathed to philosophy by eighteenth-century philosophers and critical theorists. It is the result of certain crucial changes in our attitude toward what we now call “the fine arts” that occurred in the age of the Enlightenment. These changes are dealt with and explained in what might be called the “standard account” of the matter. It is an account generally accepted by philosophers of art and intellectual historians, including myself. I have not come to quarrel with the standard account. But I do have a quarrel with the major outcome of things, as the standard account understands them. I have a quarrel with the task that was bequeathed us, of stating what it is to be “art.” But before I can quarrel I must first present the standard account – at least my version of it.

§2 Certain things transpired in the eighteenth century to alter, in very important ways, how we think about and experience works of the fine arts, some of them philosophical or in some other way theoretical, others “institutional” (for want of a better word). There is no particular order in which they ought to be listed, for they are not a chronological series of causes and effects. Rather, they must be thought of as an interrelated, reciprocal system of causes and effects, all operating simultaneously. The following are the philosophical, theoretical, and institutional

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“happenings” I have in mind, listed in an almost completely arbitrary order:

1. The coming into being of the branch of philosophy known as “aesthetics”
2. The forming of what Paul O. Kristeller has denominated “the modern system of the arts”<sup>1</sup>
3. The evolution, in various forms, of what has come to be called, after Kant, the “aesthetic attitude,” or the “attitude of aesthetic disinterestedness”<sup>2</sup>
4. The establishment of the fine arts museum, the concert hall, and the institution of the public concert
5. The rise of instrumental music into an equality with vocal music, both as an occupation for composers and as a focal point for audience interest

§3 When I took my first courses in philosophy, I was told in more than one of them that there were five branches of the discipline: logic, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. The division seemed to me etched in marble. But as most philosophers, and all philosophers of art, know, such a division of labor would have been unthinkable before the middle journey of the eighteenth century. In particular, there was nothing that was, or that could have been called, the autonomous philosophical discipline of aesthetics (or philosophy of art).

This is not to say, of course, that what we call the philosophy of art, or aesthetics, was not practiced until 1746. As is well known, Plato and Aristotle spoke eloquently, and with a philosophical voice, of poetry and painting and something we translate as “music.” They raised clearly philosophical questions about these activities and obviously thought they were in some sense related to one another.

But even so cautious a statement about what Plato and Aristotle were doing as this one must be tempered with more than a grain of salt. For Plato, it is clear from the *Ion*, thought that poetry was radically different from both painting and sculpture, in an absolutely crucial way, since the whole point of the dia-

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logue between Socrates and the rhapsode is that epic and lyric poetry, like divination, come from the god, not from “art,” and two of the “arts” that can be mastered, and hence do not come from the god, are painting and sculpture, along with such other “arts” as generalship, navigation, and driving a chariot. Thus “there is an art of painting as a whole,” but “all the good epic poets utter all those fine poems not from art but as inspired and possessed, and the good lyric poets likewise. . . .”<sup>3</sup> So even in acknowledging that Plato discussed some of the things philosophically that we call the fine arts, it is a mistake to think he was engaging in *the* philosophy of art as we think of it. He simply did not have the subject matter, namely our “modern system of the arts,” to mark out the discipline and, indeed, did not even apparently think of our “arts” of poetry, painting, and sculpture as the same in all crucial respects, witness the separation of the former from the two latter vis-à-vis the sources of creation.

The same caution must be exercised in our reading of what Plato and Aristotle said about “music,” since it is unclear what they were really talking about – certainly not “absolute music” in the nineteenth-century sense. And, indeed, the same caution must be expressed in regard to what philosophers (or any one else) said about music in the High Renaissance, where we do know what the music sounded like. For it was the “science” rather than (in our sense) the “art” of music that was the subject.<sup>4</sup>

Again, it would be a mistake to think that philosophical questions concerning the arts were not discussed in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. It is clear that Medieval “aesthetics” was not solely expressed in theological terms, as is sometimes thought, but “naturalistically” as well;<sup>5</sup> and although the Renaissance did not yet possess either the modern system or the discipline of “aesthetics” to go with it, it was the cauldron in which they both were brewing.<sup>6</sup> In both periods people were philosophizing about beauty and the “arts.”

Without the modern system there could not be *the* philosophy of art – only philosophizing about things that were later to be seen as of a piece. Before they were seen as of a piece, however,

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there was nothing for *the* philosophy of art to be about, that is to say, *the* philosophy of all of *the* arts.

I am not, of course, saying that the arts of music, painting, literature, and the rest did not exist before the eighteenth century. What did not exist was the belief that they formed a separate class: that they belonged with each other. And it was that belief that made the discipline of aesthetics possible: that gave it its subject matter, *the* arts, all of them, and the task of saying why they were *they*.

§4 The evolution of what Kristeller called “the Modern System of the Arts” was “officially” completed just before midcentury. In Kristeller’s words, “The decisive step towards a system of the fine arts was taken by the Abbé Batteux in his famous and influential treatise, *Les beaux arts réduit à un même principe* (1746).” In Batteux’s work, the system is fully in place and named: *les beaux arts*. Equally significant, Batteux gives, in his title, not only the system and its name but the philosophical project they imply: finding the *même principe*. The quest for the real definition of the fine arts was now in full swing and, except for a brief and by no means universally observed Wittgensteinian interlude, continues to the present moment.

Indeed, although Batteux dots the “i,” a number of earlier writers were already engaged in the modern philosophical discipline of aesthetics. In England, Joseph Addison’s “Pleasures of the Imagination” (1712) and Francis Hutcheson’s *Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design* (1725); in France, the Abbé DuBos’s *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (1719); in Germany, Alexander Baumgarten’s *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (1735) – all can be seen as pioneering treatises in the new “science” of aesthetics: the first full-length works devoted solely to the subject, with Baumgarten giving us the name in something like its modern sense.

Thus by midcentury the discipline of aesthetics was a going concern, with its primary goal of a “definition” of the fine arts already set and, for most, seen as *achieved*, in the Platonic and Aristotelian theory of mimesis: the *même principe* of Batteux and various others.

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That representation was the principle on which the first modern definitions of art were based is not surprising. It was a principle venerable with age and with the authority of classical antiquity – in particular, Plato and Aristotle. And the art world had no apparent counterexamples, except for pure instrumental music, which was at midcentury still a minor art, if an art at all, in the eyes of philosophers, literary theorists, and the general public.

Thus the confluence of the modern system of the arts and the autonomous discipline of aesthetics as a recognized department of philosophy laid upon philosophers the task of giving a real definition of art and produced the first modern examples of such a definition in a plethora of mimetic accounts.

Given the classical texts and the apparent nature of the case, it did not seem difficult to encompass all of the literary and dramatic arts as well as all of the visual arts under the umbrella of mimesis or representation. Of what Kristeller characterizes as “all the five major arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, music and poetry,”<sup>8</sup> only music and architecture would have been problematic. Architecture is, of course, a very special case, being both a fine and a useful art. But certainly there were attempts to make it out to be representational, at least in two ways: first, in the rather straightforward claim that its gross, manifest features were indeed representational, columns as trees and that sort of thing; second, in the far more sophisticated Pythagorean claim of Renaissance theorists that architectural proportions represent harmonic proportions of the universe, as was also claimed for the proportions of the division of the musical octave.<sup>9</sup> In any case, it is my impression that architecture was not at the center of the enterprise, and I will have nothing more to say about it.<sup>10</sup> It is the other problematic, music, that, I think, plays the pivotal role, and I will have a good deal to say about that.

§5 Why music? Noel Carroll has argued that what has motivated and driven new “definitions” of art in the twentieth century has been “the theoretical task of coming to terms with virtually continuous revolutions in artistic practice. . . .” The “task has been to provide the theoretical means for establishing

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that the mutations issued from avant-garde practice belong to the family of art." In other words, "one might say that a great deal of modern philosophy of art is an attempt to come to a philosophical understanding of the productions of the avant-garde."<sup>11</sup>

That the twentieth century has, as Carroll puts it, produced "virtually continuous revolutions in artistic practice" makes the motivating force of the avant-garde on the task of defining the work of art palpably obvious during the period. But if Carroll is right, it suggests that we might look more closely at the eighteenth-century attempts to define the fine arts – the first such attempts in the modern era – to see if perhaps the same is true there.

Given that artistic revolutions can be slow as well as rapid, it does not seem inappropriate to interpret the rise of absolute music in the second half of the eighteenth century as an artistic revolution of impressive magnitude and, further, to see the new instrumental idiom as *the* avant-garde art of the age of Enlightenment. I have argued elsewhere that the obvious, *prima facie* difficulties in construing absolute music as a representational art made it the crucial case for any attempt to understand the nature of the fine arts in terms of mimesis, which was, at the time, the only game in town.<sup>12</sup> The *même principe* was representation of nature; and if absolute music could not be perceived as that, either the project must fail or absolute music, which was rapidly becoming at least the equal of vocal music in the eyes of composers, would have to be read out of the "modern system of the arts."

We can now see more clearly, with the help of Carroll's observations concerning the prominent role of the avant-garde in motivating definitions of art, why absolute music was a crux for the Enlightenment theorists. It is not as if pure instrumental music had been invented in eighteenth-century Mannheim and Vienna. Music for instruments alone had been performed at least since the Middle Ages. The point is that during a certain period in the history of art music, namely, the second half of the eighteenth century and the first years of the nineteenth, the writing of music for instruments alone rapidly moved from sideshow to

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center ring, from the relatively peripheral interest of the composer to at least equality with vocal music. Before this time the composer made his living in the service of the church, patron, and opera house. And the overwhelming majority of his works, even in the case of as devoted a composer of absolute music as Bach, were vocal. But in the period from the time of Bach's death to the flowering of Haydn, Mozart, and the early Beethoven, the tide was reversed, to the point that for Haydn the opposite was the case (although Haydn valued his vocal works above his instrumental ones). It is for musicologists to suggest which sociological and economic influences came to bear on this trend. It is for us to scrutinize its effect on the philosophical task of defining the fine arts.

Because there has always been instrumental music in the West, there has always been a potential threat to a mimetic theory of the arts that included music *tout court* in the system. But during the early period of theorizing, from DuBos (say) to Bateux, the relative unimportance of instrumental music made it impotent as a challenge to the representational theory of art. It could simply be ignored as a peripheral case, indeed ignored without mention or explanation.

What could not be ignored was vocal music, which is probably what most philosophers in the period meant by "music" anyway. But vocal music did not present the difficulties to theory that instrumental music was to do when it emerged fully fledged. Indeed, the groundwork for the acceptance of vocal music into the modern system had already been laid by the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>13</sup> How so?

The story is something like this. Vocal polyphony before the Council of Trent (pre-Tridentine polyphony) had evolved into an extremely complex musical fabric that might well be described as a "setting" for the text very much in the jeweler's sense of the word. The text, like a jewel, was placed in a structure so elaborate and alluring in its own right as to overpower it aesthetically: a great compliment to the text, indeed, to consider it a gem worthy of such a luxuriant setting but not a compliment to its *meaning*, which, as the clerics complained, was rendered completely unintelligible by the music. As is

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well known, the abolition of polyphony was actually considered as a way of foregrounding the text. Polyphony prevailed, although in a different form. One might say that in the works of Palestrina it was curtailed. However, that is a needlessly negative and largely uninformative way of putting it. What really happened was that one aesthetic of text setting began giving way to another: the “jeweler’s” way to the way of representation. For what, I suggest, Palestrina was attempting to do in his “curtailed” counterpoint was to represent in music human linguistic expression, on the hypothesis that since human linguistic expression can make a text intelligible, so too can the musical “representation” of it. Whether or not this is the way Palestrina and his contemporaries put it to themselves, it is a viable and rewarding way to read his (and their) works.

In any event, the representational aesthetic of text setting soon emerged in a quite explicit and theory-driven form, in the invention of the *stile rappresentativo* and in the opera, both heralded by theories and admonitions to the effect that the musical representation of passionate human speech is or ought to be at least one of the composer’s major goals. Pietro de’ Bardi described this new aesthetic of composition as “imitating familiar speech by using few sounds. . . .”<sup>14</sup> While Giulio Caccini, one of the first composers of *stile rappresentativo* and opera, said that “. . . I have endeavored in those my late compositions to bring in a kind of music by which men might, as it were, talk in harmony. . . .”<sup>15</sup> If Palestrina had this cat in the bag, it certainly was out now.

Thus more than one hundred years before Batteux et al. enunciated the “modern system” and brought it under the *même principe*, the groundwork for vocal music’s induction into the fine arts club had already been laid. By the end of the sixteenth century, vocal music was consciously and explicitly, as well as intuitively and implicitly, being practiced as a representational project: the representation, broadly speaking, of human expression. It was ripe for the plucking, and at least as early as DuBos it was plucked.

We now understand something about the role of music in the



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formation of the modern system and the mimetic theory that tied its members together in the first half of the eighteenth century. Neither vocal nor instrumental music posed a problem: the former because it was easily seen, and had been since the end of the sixteenth century, as representational of human expression; the latter because, compared with vocal music, it was simply inconsequential, at the center of neither the composer's nor his audience's concerns. Indeed, one gets the idea that in educated circles a "gentleman" who played a musical instrument was, far from being admired for it, considered something of an eccentric. It was his "hobby horse" or his addiction. Thus instrumental music was not one of the "liberal arts," but a kind of curiosity, and it could safely be ignored by the modern system or, if noticed at all, given fairly perfunctory treatment (as in DuBos).

But all of this changed as absolute music started coming to the fore. I want to be careful here about stating my hypothesis. I am certainly not saying that composers before this period were not deeply interested in pure instrumental music, did not lavish the whole arsenal of their compositional skills on it when the occasion arose, or that it did not sometimes form a substantial part of their output. The instrumental music of Bach alone would belie all of those claims (as would the instrumental music, earlier, of Frescobaldi and Giovanni Gabrieli). But even in a case like Bach's, vocal music was the center of professional life, the major source of income, and the spiritual core of the creative life. It was this that changed in the second half of the eighteenth century, when it became possible to make instrumental music one's profession, the spiritual core of one's creative life. For some major composers, instrumental music thus became at the same time the cutting edge, the "experimental" art of the century, the avant-garde among all the other arts. And in becoming all of these things, it became at the same time the major challenge to the representational theory of the modern system, the only apparent and important counterexample, the "Fountain" of its time. We must look at the attempt to meet this challenge now if we are to understand how we got from there to here.

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§6 In the second half of the eighteenth century, two options were open to philosophers for dealing with the growth of absolute music: to reject its bid to become one of the fine arts or to find a way of making it, broadly speaking, a “representational” art. Both options were explored with a fair degree of uncertainty reigning among all concerned, most notoriously Kant, who for profound reasons could never quite make up his mind. The obvious third option, a theory of art other than some form of representationalism, was not yet in the offing, even in Kant’s third *Critique* (at least as I read that ever-problematical text). And when alternatives to mimesis began to appear, again I would suggest it was the avant-garde art of absolute music that provided the major initiative.

To give some brief idea of the struggle with absolute music in the latter half of the eighteenth century, one can do no better than to adduce the example of Kant. The question for Kant was not so simple as whether music was representational. And it might be useful to weigh what he had to say in this regard against his Scottish contemporary, Thomas Reid, with whom he has been compared, in recent years, in more than one respect.

For Reid, there is no hesitation in construing music as one of the fine arts on the basis of melody alone, with mimesis the connecting thread. “To me it seems,” he writes, “that every strain in melody that is agreeable, is an imitation of the human voice in the expression of some sentiment or passion, or an imitation of some other object in nature; and that music, as well as poetry, is an imitative art.”<sup>16</sup> Nor is there any doubt that instrumental as well as vocal music is intended, for at the very outset of the discussion Reid refers to both.<sup>17</sup>

The notion that even melodies played on instruments are representations of human vocal expression was old hat by Reid’s time; Francis Hutcheson, whose work in aesthetics Reid knew well and referred to explicitly, had already expressed such sentiments, not new in 1725.<sup>18</sup> What is perhaps more original is Reid’s attempt to construe “harmony” as a representation of human speech as well. Hutcheson had left harmony to the innate sense of “original” beauty (in his terminology), as opposed to the “relative” beauty of imitation: “Under *original beauty* we