

# Wittgenstein on Musical Experience and Knowledge

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Most commentators grossly underrate Wittgenstein's writing on music and generally tend to dismiss this aspect of his thinking as an oddity. Fortunately, recent years have seen an upsurge of remedial interest in the relevance of Wittgenstein's texts on musical matters to the main body of his philosophical work, in particular to his philosophical psychology.

Wittgenstein sought the connection between music and psychology already quite early in his career. His experiments on music perception, conducted between 1912 and 1913 under the auspices of Charles Myers' cutting-edge laboratory for experimental psychology in Cambridge, were designed, as David Pinsent reports, "to ascertain the extent and importance of rhythm in music" (Nedo and Ranchetti 1983). Thus stated, these experiments seem to be of consequence neither to the musician nor to the philosopher. Yet one should never mistake Wittgenstein for someone who spends quality time on trivialities. Indeed much later, after his return to philosophy in Cambridge, he confessed to G.E. Moore that his experiments on rhythm did not yield answers to questions in aesthetics as he had expected at the time (Nedo and Ranchetti 1983).

What were these questions in aesthetics about, and how did Wittgenstein address them eventually? There is, I submit, a direct answer to the former query: Wittgenstein was ultimately interested in the relation of musical experiences to knowledge; that is, he pondered over the "aboutness" of music. In this paper I shall attempt to mark the path that leads to this answer in the context of Wittgenstein's later writings, thereby answering the latter query as well. The discussion, I hope, would also underscore the scholarly need to read Wittgenstein's remarks on music as part and parcel of his legitimate philosophical work.

The bulk of Wittgenstein's texts on the experience of music belongs to his later work, and it is thematically indigenous to his thinking on philosophical psychology. Wittgenstein's treatment of the topic of musical experience occurs at the intersection of three often-overlapping concerns: (a) the grammatical complexity of language games that pertain to aesthetic phenomena and to musical experience in particular; (b) the pervasive aspectuality of music; and (c) the notion of physiognomy and its implications. I shall now address these issues in this order.

In his 1938 lectures on aesthetics, while countering G.E. Moore's analysis of the beautiful, Wittgenstein stressed the enormously complicated situation in which our aesthetic expressions have a place (*LC* 2). They must be seen against the background of certain activities, and ultimately of certain ways of living (*LC* 8, 11). Our aesthetic use of words is built up on the basis of practices and language games that are logically prior. Elsewhere, Wittgenstein elaborated by saying that our aesthetic use of words presupposes familiarity with numerous other language games – in the case of music, with games that pertain to conclusions, expressions of agreement, replies etc. – and ultimately with "the whole range of our language games" (*CV* 52). Thus Wittgenstein construes our aesthetic use of words as being grammatically complex in a "vertical" sense (see Hark 1990) that is akin to our use of words in a secondary sense (*PI* II xi 216).

When we express our aesthetic experiences, we apply concepts understood as bearers of specific techniques of use on "new surroundings" (*LW* I §797), namely, the language game of expression. The manner in which we reach for the aesthetic expression as the only possible way in which to give expression to our perception, inclinations and feelings underscores the specificity of such vertically complex game moves. Furthermore, such expressions are not metaphors either; they do not refer to comparisons, which can be identified independently of their specific, vertically complex, or secondary use.

In the case of music, the specificity of our aesthetic expressions, the way they are linked to their respective musical experiences, results in the reciprocity of music and language. The musical theme is incorporated into language: "we learn a new gesture" (*CV* 52). Referring to "the way music speaks", Wittgenstein remarks: "Don't forget that even though a poem is composed in the language of information, it is not employed in the language-game of information" (*RPP* I §888). Expression presupposes information, yet it is not reducible to information. Hence the oddity of the converse case – which Wittgenstein brings up in the continuation of the passage just quoted above – of a person who thinks that the playing of a reflective Chopin piece is actually the speaking of a language, whose sense is kept secret from him.

Let us proceed to our next issue: the pervasive aspectuality of music. As a number of scholars have already observed (Hanfling 1990; Hark 1990; Mulhall 1990; Johnston 1993), there is an obvious conceptual kinship in Wittgenstein's thinking between the secondary meaning of words and aspect perception. The dawning of an aspect marks a vertical shift in the language game played. Its expression consists of a vertically complex move in a language game that can only be understood against the backdrop of the correlate move in logically prior games (*RPP* II §541), and it is criterially related to the experiences involved. The expression of aspect dawning is, in Wittgenstein's words, "a cry of recognition" (*PI* II xi 198), which is the only criterion for the existence and nature of the experience involved.

Wittgenstein's remarks on aspect perception are replete with musical instances, which are significantly broader in scope than any of the standard examples of the duck-rabbit and other ambiguous figures. Here is a selection of very instructive examples: hearing a theme as a march or as a dance (*PI* II xi 206); hearing a certain bar as an introduction or in a certain key (*RPP* I §1); experiencing a certain interpretation of a musical passage as inevitable (*RPP* I §22); playing a passage with more intense expression or with less intense expression, with stronger emphasis on rhythm and structure or with less (*RPP* I §507); playing a passage with the correct expression (*LW* I §688); hearing one thing as a variant of another (*RPP* I §508); rephrasing a variation in such a way that it could be conceived as a different variation on the same theme, hearing a theme differently in a repetition (*RPP* I §517); hearing a melody differently after becoming acquainted with the composer's style (*LW* I §774).

The most striking thing about these examples is that they encompass virtually the entire range of what is

fundamental to the perception and performance of music: the experience of musical motion through rhythm and structure, the identification and re-identification of musical materials, the fine nuances of musical expression, and the overarching considerations of performance practice, of genre and style. Thus, according to Wittgenstein, music is fundamentally and pervasively aspectual. An important corollary to this observation is this: music does not teach us about “the external world”. Music is not employed in the language game of information (*RPP I* §888).

Another piece of the puzzle is now called for. It is generally admitted that Wittgenstein’s philosophical engagement with aspect perception is indigenous to his late work, notwithstanding some reference to ambiguous figures in the *Tractatus* (*TLP* 5.5423). Granted, it is ever more striking to acknowledge that his practical engagement with the problem of aspect perception preceded even the *Tractatus*, and that it has had its origins in his thinking on music. Of course, I refer to his 1912-1913 experiments on rhythm. In these experiments, Wittgenstein was concerned with the so-called “subjective rhythm” phenomenon as he aimed at determining the conditions under which subjects heard or read into a sequence of beats a rhythm, which, in a sense, was not there. By 1912 the phenomenon has already been well documented in the annals of psychology. The standard result in experiments like those conducted by Wittgenstein was that the initial beat was perceived to be accented, and time intervals between beats within each group appeared shorter than the time interval between the final beat of one group and the initial beat of the next group (Handel 1989).

The crucial point for our present concern is this: Wittgenstein’s 1912-1913 experiments on rhythm yielded a clear-cut case of musical aspect dawning akin to an ambiguous figure like the duck-rabbit. One may hear the series of clicks as either duple or triple meter, and could switch between these alternative aspects at will. Thus it becomes eminently clear why Wittgenstein came to disavow these early excursions into experimental psychology. His original quest turned out in fact to be not merely “to ascertain the extent and importance of rhythm in music”, as Pinsent had construed it, but rather to ascertain the extent and importance of aspect perception in music. Yet, as Wittgenstein said in his 1938 lectures on aesthetics, the sort of explanation one is looking for when one is puzzled by an aesthetic impression cannot be given by means of psychological experiment (*LC* 21). Empirical data can have no bearing on grammatical inquiry.

In the remainder of this paper I would like to discuss some implications of Wittgenstein’s emphasis on the notion of physiognomy. The notion of physiognomy – the meaningful irregularity of the living body – is central both to his explication of aspect seeing (*PI* II xi 193) and to his various discussions of musical expression (*LC* 4; *PI* §536; *RPP I* §434; *CV* 52). According to Wittgenstein, enormous variability, irregularity, and unpredictability are an essential part of human physiognomy and the concepts for which human physiognomy serve as a basis (*RPP II* §§614-615, 617, 627). Two important claims are intertwined here. First, human physiognomy is fundamentally, essentially non-mechanical. It cannot be recognized or described by means of rules, and it introduces an indefiniteness, a certain insufficiency of evidence, into our physiognomic recognition that is constitutive hence not indicative of any deficiency of knowledge. Second, such indeterminate “fine shades of behavior” constitute some of our concepts, most notably our psychological concepts, which we often use in aesthetic contexts (*Z* §505).

In the case of music, Wittgenstein’s stress on the notion of physiognomy tells us that musical experience admits what he calls “imponderable evidence” (*PI* II xi 227-229). Imponderable evidence includes “subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone” that serve as the basis of our *Menschenkenntnis*, our “knowledge of mankind” – knowledge that can be learned by some, taught by some, yet only through “experience” or “varied observation” and by exchanging “tips”. “What we regard as expression”, says Wittgenstein, “consists of incalculability” (*CV* 73). In language games such as the language game of expression, “sufficient evidence passes over into insufficient without a borderline” (*RPP II* §614), and so the kind of knowledge gained – essentially, an ability – cannot be learned via fixed rules. The concept of musical expression, like the concept of “soul”, is diametrically opposed to the concept of a mechanism (cf. *RPP I* §324) – exact, definite calculation and prediction is conceptually detrimental to what we regard as expression. Wittgenstein suggests that we try to imagine “other beings” that might recognize soulful expression in music by rules (*RPP II* §695; *Z* §157). This thought experiment is designed to show that musical expression is constituted in such a way that an encounter with a mechanical, “soulless” surrogate of expression would have a petrifying effect.

As the countless ways in which we may perform a piece of music with genuine expression invariably attest (*CV* 82), the imponderability of this kind of evidence is significantly reflected in the way we attempt to communicate our knowledge of mankind, and in the measure for the success of our justifications. Success means that we have allowed the musical gesture to insinuate itself into our lives, we have adopted it as our own, we have exerted “a reaction in which people are in touch with one another” (*RPP I* §874). Thinking of music in terms of *Menschenkenntnis* helps to dissipate the air of paralogism in Wittgenstein’s contention that music does and does not correspond to a paradigm that is apart of the music itself (*CV* 51-52). The paradigm, says Wittgenstein, is “the rhythm of our language, of our thinking and feeling”. Yet this much is already given to us; presupposed in our vertically complex games of expression. If music does point beyond itself, if there is any sense in considering its “aboutness”, this cannot be rendered according to the ordinary model of knowledge acquisition, but rather in terms of sensitivity: a kind of attunement and a matching urge to refine it. Hence, in Wittgenstein’s words, “understanding music is an avowal of the life of mankind” (*MS* 137, 20).

In a recently published correspondence between Wittgenstein and Rudolf Koder (Alber 2000), there is a passage of striking candor, written in late 1930, in which Wittgenstein offers a kind of phenomenology of musical understanding. We begin by misunderstanding the music we play, he writes, which only means that we could now listen to voices within us that may prompt us to feel our way toward understanding through practice. Wittgenstein ends this passage in these words: “listen carefully and follow what [these voices] say to you, and you will see, you will then hear more and more distinctly, and you will know more and more about yourself [Dich immer besser in Dir auskennen]”.

This passage is certainly not a polished philosophical text. Yet precisely because it is an intimate letter to a dear friend, written with obvious passion to music, it states the upshot of this paper in a clear voice.

## Endnote

In this paper I use the following abbreviations for Wittgenstein's standard editions in English:

CV	<i>Culture and Value</i>
LC	Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious
LWI	<i>Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology</i> , vol. I
PI	<i>Philosophical Investigations</i>
RPP I	<i>Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology</i> , vol. I
RPP II	<i>Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology</i> , vol. II
TLP	<i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i>
Z	<i>Zettel</i>

## Literature

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