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Source: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Winter, 1993), pp. 23-29

Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of The American Society for Aesthetics

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/431967>

Accessed: 21/09/2009 10:20

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Prolegomena to Any Aesthetics of Rock Music

Can there be an aesthetics of rock music? My question is not: Can traditional ways of interpreting and evaluating music be applied to rock music, for clearly they can, with very mixed results. My question is rather: Does rock music have standards of its own, which uniquely apply to it, or that apply to it in an especially appropriate way? My hunch is that rock music has such standards, that they are implicitly observed by knowledgeable performers and listeners, and that these standards reflect the distinctiveness of rock as a musical genre. Rock music involves a set of practices and a history quite different from those of the European concert hall tradition upon which traditional musical aesthetics have been based. That being so, any attempt to evaluate or understand rock music using traditional aesthetics of music is bound to result in a misunderstanding. It is not that rock music is more modern, since there are many modernist composers in the European tradition, their modernity being precisely a function of their relation to that tradition, which they aim to radicalize and subvert.¹ The difference between rock and "serious" music is that rock belongs to a different tradition, with different concerns and aims. In this paper, I will try to get at the nature of those differences, and in so doing, if only in a negative way, the route that an aesthetics of rock music might take. I will initially make the contrast between rock and European concert music as strong and sharp as possible, which will lead to some one-sided and simplistic distinctions between the two genres. Nevertheless, even when the distinctions are properly qualified and nuanced, I think the difference remains real and substantial.

If I were to indicate this difference in a preliminary way, I would say that traditional musical aesthetics is concerned with form and com-

position, whereas rock is concerned with the *matter* of music. Even this way of putting things is misleading, since the form/matter distinction is itself part of traditional aesthetics. But leaving aside the inappropriateness of the term, by "matter" I mean the way music feels to the listener, or the way that it affects the listener's body.

One important material aspect of rock music is the way an individual tone sounds when played or sung in a certain way. Making a tone sound a certain way is a large part of the art of rock music performance, something rock inherits from the performance-oriented traditions from which it springs, particularly the blues. This is obvious in the case of the voice, which is why in rock, as in blues and most jazz, it is the singer and not the song which is important. But it is also true in the case of the electric guitar, an instrument which takes on the expressive function of the voice in much of rock music. The emphasis on the very sound of a musical note as a vehicle of musical expression was summed up in guitarist Eric Clapton's statement that his ideal is to play a single note with such feeling and intensity that it would cause listeners to weep (and not, cynics please note, because the music is painfully loud, but because it is painfully beautiful.)

The materiality of tone, or more accurately, of the performance of tones, is only one important material element of rock music. Two others are loudness and rhythm. Both of these are also more properly felt by the body than judged by the mind, at least as far as rock music is concerned, and the proper use of both is crucial to the success of a rock music performance, a success which is judged by the feelings the music produces in the listener's body. The fact that rock music aims at arousing and expressing feeling has often been held against it, as if arousing

feeling were somehow “cheap,” or unworthy of true musical beauty. But the alternative is to look at the material properties of rock music, or those properties correlative to the bodily feelings it arouses, as the key to rock’s own criteria of musical excellence. These material or “visceral” properties of rock are registered in the body core, in the gut, and in the muscles and sinews of the arms and legs, rather than in any intellectual faculty of judgment, which is why traditional aesthetics of music either neglects them or derides them as having no musical value.

Classical aesthetics of music explicitly excludes questions concerning how music feels or sounds, and the emotional reactions music provokes, from considerations of musical beauty. This exclusion is argued for in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, and follows from Kant’s definition of “the beautiful” as that which is an object of a judgment claiming universal validity.² What pleases me because of the sensations it produces in me, says Kant, is merely agreeable. I call something beautiful, by contrast, when I claim that anyone should find its form, or the arrangement of its parts, intrinsically pleasing, not because of the sensations the form arouses or because of its usefulness, but because the form is inherently suitable to being perceived, and so leads to a harmonious free play of the imagination and the understanding. Pleasures and pains based on mere sensation (*Empfindung*), which constitute the “material” part of a perception (*Vorstellung*), are interested and purely subjective. The idiosyncratic responses sensory stimuli produce in me because of my particular dispositions and physical constitution cannot be the basis for a judgment that claims to be valid for all perceiving subjects, since “in these matters, each person rightly consults his own feeling alone,” and these feelings will differ from person to person (Kant, p. 132). The elements of a work of art that produce sensations, then, such as tones or colors, may add charm to the work or provoke emotions, but they add nothing to beauty. When someone speaks, improperly, of a beautiful musical note, this is “the matter of delight passed off for the form” (Kant, pp. 65–66).

Kant does allow (in section 14) that certain tones and colors may be intrinsically beautiful when they are “pure”: that is, when they are considered not in their immediacy as mere sensations, but reflectively, as having a determinate

form in virtue of the measurable frequency of vibrations of light or air, or the ratio of one frequency to another in the case of juxtaposed tones or colors. Even here, however, the beauty belongs to the *form* of the tone or color (its frequency or ratio), and not to its merely felt or subjective *matter* (see sections 51–52). In any case, too much attention to the individual notes is a dangerous distraction from the proper object of aesthetic regard, compositional form. “The matter of sensation ... is not essential. Here the aim is merely enjoyment, which ... renders the soul dull” and the mind dissatisfied (Kant, p. 191). This is a moral fault, and not just an aesthetic one. The hearer who seeks pleasurable or exciting sensations in music forms judgments concerning musical worth that are conditioned by his body and his senses (Kant, p. 132), since they are based on passively experienced pleasures and pains (Kant, p. 149). Such judgments of musical beauty are heteronomous: free, active, judging reason is subordinated to the passive body’s involuntary reactions. The beauty of fine art, on the other hand, is not based on sensations, but on the mind’s free and autonomous judgment of the suitability of a form for perception (section 44). Consequently music, since so much of its appeal depends on the actual sensations it produces in the listener rather than on composition alone, “has the lowest place among the fine arts” (Kant, p. 195).

Kant, notoriously, was no music lover. Everyone is familiar with his complaint that music lacks urbanity because “it scatters its influence abroad to an uncalled for extent ... and ... becomes obtrusive,” a remark that contains a grain of truth, especially in an age of powerful stereo systems and “boom boxes,” but which does not indicate much appreciation for music. Yet although Kant himself was insensitive to musical beauty, others more sensitive took up his preoccupation with beauty of form in their aesthetics of music. So Hanslick, who knew music well, made every note of the musical scale “pure” in Kant’s sense of having determinate form, in that each note is “a tone of determinate measurable pitch,”³ inherently related to every other tone in virtue of the ratios between the pitches, which determine their relation on the scale (Hanslick, p. 95). By making notes “pure” in this way, Hanslick partially rescued musical notes from the disreputable position of being merely the

cause of conditioned, subjective sensations and pleasures, which could form the basis only of impure and heteronomous aesthetic judgments. This, though, was only a first step in Hanslick's project of elevating music from the position of lowest of the fine arts to the highest and most formal art of all. "Music is unique among the arts," wrote Hanslick, "because its form is its content and ... its content is its form" (Hanslick, p. 94). In music, unlike painting or literature, there can be no content apart from the form itself, no subject matter independent of the composition or organization of the work. Musical beauty, then, is entirely based on form, that is, on tonal relationships (Hanslick, p. xxiii), and not on any feelings or emotions aroused or expressed by the music (Hanslick, p. 95). By making the matter of music (musical tones) formal, and by making form identical with content, Hanslick made the art Kant regarded as the basest and most material into the highest and most formal.

Of course, the story doesn't stop with Hanslick. The preoccupation with musical form continues on into twentieth century aesthetics, notably in Adorno's philosophy of music, but in a more everyday way, formal concerns predominate in music criticism in general, from journalism to academia.⁴

The obvious rejoinder to this characterization of traditional aesthetics is that it is not *exclusively* formal, but takes into account non-formal or material elements as well. The timbre of a voice or instrument is clearly of great importance to European concert music; if they weren't, top caliber *bel canto* sopranos and Stradivarius violins wouldn't command so much respect and such high prices. Music criticism also takes performance aspects of music into account. But timbre and performance are usually secondary, and are often discussed in terms of the "faithfulness" or "adequacy" of the performance/interpretation to the composition performed or to the composer's "intentions." One justification for playing music on period instruments and in period style is that this better captures what the composition was trying to express, not simply that it sounds better or is more pleasant to listen to. In that case, performance and the notes' sounds are judged in terms of what the composition requires. In classical aesthetics of music, matter is at the service of form, and is always judged in relation to form. Even though tradi-

tional aesthetics is not exclusively formal, formal considerations predominate.

When this preoccupation with form and composition is brought to bear on rock music, the chief result is confusion. Usually, rock music is dismissed as insignificant on account of the simplicity of its forms, a simplicity which is real, and not a misperception by those unfamiliar with the genre. Alternatively, more "liberal" critics will try to find significant form where there is very little form at all, and at the expense of neglecting what is really at stake in rock music. This liberal tolerance is a worse mistake than conservative intolerance. In the first place, it is highly condescending to suppose that rock music has value only when it approximates the compositional forms of baroque or romantic music. The Beatles, in particular, were victims of this patronizing attitude. Is "Penny Lane" a better rock song than "Strawberry Fields" because the former contains flourishes of Baroque trumpet and the latter doesn't?⁵ Does knowing that "She's Leaving Home" ends on an Aeolian cadence add to our appreciation of it *as a rock song*?⁶ I don't think so. Yet for a time, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, critics fawned over complicated works by Yes or Genesis because traditional aesthetics of music could find something to say about their form, never noticing that criteria appropriate to the music of Handel or Boulez might be inappropriate when applied to rock music, and have very little to do with the informal standards of practice and evaluation employed by people who actually perform or listen to rock music on a regular basis.

To the extent that some rock musicians took this sort of criticism seriously, the results were disastrous, producing the embarrassing, pretentious and—in the final analysis—very silly excesses of "art rock." To the extent art rock succeeded, it did so because it was rock, not because it was "art." This was especially noticeable in the case of the mercifully short-lived subgenre, the "rock opera." The Who's *Tommy*⁷ was a good rock opera because it had good rock music and was done tongue-in-cheek (hence its "Underture"), but other attempts were merely bombastic, neither rock nor opera. Rock's borrowings from "classical" music had similar results. Combining a soulful rhythm and blues vocal with a Baroque organ line worked in Procul Harem's "Whiter Shade of Pale,"⁸ but in

other instances the incorporation of “classical music” (usually this meant a string section) led to rather slight pop songs collapsing under the weight of extraneous instrumentation.⁹

So what standards are appropriate to rock music? I think that the basic principles of an aesthetics of rock can be derived from turning Kantian or formalist aesthetics on its head. Where Kant prized the free and autonomous judgment of reason, and so found beauty in form rather than matter, an aesthetics of rock judges the beauty of music by its effects on the body, and so is primarily concerned with the “matter” of music. That makes beauty in rock music to some extent a subjective and personal matter; to the extent that you evaluate a piece on the basis of the way it happens to affect you, you cannot demand that others who are affected differently agree with your assessment. But that does not mean that rock’s standards are purely and simply an individual matter of taste. There are certain properties a piece of rock music must have in order to be good, although knowledgeable listeners may disagree concerning whether a given piece of music actually has those properties. In every case, these properties are material rather than formal, and they are based on performance-based standards of evaluation, rather than compositional ones.

The most *obvious* material property of rock is rhythm. Rock music, from its origins in blues and country and folk traditions, is for dancing. It’s got a back-beat, you can’t lose it. In dance, the connection between the music and the body of the listener is immediate, felt and enacted rather than thought. A bad rock song is one that tries and fails to inspire the body to dance. Good rhythm cannot be achieved through simple formulas; the sign of a bad rock band is that the beat is not quite right, even though the correct time signature and tempo are being observed. A song with beat and rhythm is one that is performed well, not well composed, and this emphasis on performance is one rock shares with other forms of popular music. It is less a matter of tempo than of *timing*, of knowing whether to play on the beat, or slightly ahead of it or behind it, and this is one of those “knacks” that Plato would have refused the status of truly scientific knowledge: it cannot be captured or explained by any stateable principle. It is not accessible to reason.

It might be a bit unfair to claim rhythm and

timing as distinctive elements of rock music, since rhythm, beat and timing are important considerations in traditional aesthetics, and are capable of formalization in musical notation. Some classical music is based on traditional European dance forms; some music is written expressly for dance, such as ballet; some music is structured primarily around rhythm, rather than tonal sequences. All these forms of music, then, have a prominent relation to the body because of their connection to dance.

Yet the relation is not the same as in the case of rock music. In the first place, the forms of dance that found their way into classical music were already highly formalized versions of what were (perhaps) once folk dances. Whatever their origins, the courtly dances to which Beethoven and Mozart provided the accompaniment were appreciated for their formal qualities (precision and intricacy of movement, order and geometry of patterns), not for their somatic or visceral aspects. On the contrary, in courtly dance, matter and the body are subject to form and the intellect. This was never more true than in Romantic ballet, where the chief effect of the dance consists of the illusion that highly strenuous and athletic movements are effortless, and that the bodies of the dancers are weightless. Here the body is used to negate the body: in ballet, the materiality of the body itself becomes pure form. This is less true of modern music, such as Stravinsky’s, but even in this case the music and its performance are regulated by formal structures to which the musicians and dancers must accommodate their motions. In contrast, the effect of the music on the body is of prime importance for rock music and its antecedents (blues, jazz), so that the music is regulated by the dancers: musicians will vary beat, rhythm and tempo until it feels good to dance to. Rock music has no correct tempo, beat or rhythm independent of its effects on the body of the listener or dancer, which is why when non-rock musicians play rock, it often sounds “flat” and feels “dead”: it is not that the musicians are playing the wrong tempo, notes or beat, but only that no standard score captures the subtleties or timing and rhythm that a good rock musician can feel. Feeling is the criterion of correctness here, probably because the dance forms on which rock is based do not deny the body’s physicality, but emphasize it: feet stomp, bodies gyrate, bodily masses are propelled by

masses of sound with insistent and compelling rhythms.

But beat is not the only thing, or the most important. There is a significant body of highly regarded rock music which has no swing, and which you can't dance to because you are not *meant* to dance to it. From the mid-1960s onward, rock music broke out of the rigid confines of verse/chorus/verse in $\frac{4}{4}$ time. But the significance of this change is not that it made rock more interesting formally. The importance of the change lay rather in the way it called into question some of the boundaries rock set for itself, and opened up new possibilities for expression through the matter of music, through elements other than rhythm. Let me briefly summarize the history of how this transition took place.

In rock music, the voice had always been the main vehicle of expression, and the factor that could make or break a song. One need only compare a Fats Domino original with its pallid Pat Boone "cover" to see that the expressivity of the voice itself, rather than the composition, makes a rock song good. As in blues, it is the performance that counts, and standards of evaluation are based on standards of performance. In this sense, rock music reverses the priorities of European concert hall music, and questions of "faithfulness" to the music rarely arise. The only question is whether the performance/interpretation is convincing, not whether it is "faithful" to some (usually non-existent) score. No one got too upset when Joe Cocker performed the Beatles' "With a Little Help From My Friends" in a way that was not in the least suggested by the original recording. In fact, the originality of Cocker's interpretation was counted a virtue by most. Listeners to European concert hall music are not nearly so tolerant in this regard: they will accept some deviation from the original score, but within limits established by the score itself, rather than by the effectiveness of the performance. Few discerning rock listener's liked Deodato's pop version of Richard Strauss' *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, but they disliked it because it was inane, not because it was a misinterpretation and a "sacrilege." Again, it is a matter of degree, but there is a heavier emphasis on performance, rather than composition, in rock music.

These performance elements of rock music are not easily accounted for by traditional aesthetics. The performance standards for rock vo-

calists have little to do with the virtuosity of an opera singer or with an ability to hit the note indicated in the composition at the time indicated. Some of the best rock vocalists, from Muddy Waters to Elvis to Lennon to Joplin, are technically quite bad singers. The standards have to do with the amount of feeling conveyed, and with the nuances of feeling expressed. On the other hand, it is not the vocalist who can sing the longest and loudest who is best, either, heavy-metal notwithstanding. A good rock vocalist can insinuate meaning with a growl or a whisper. This does constitute a virtuosity of sort, but one that connects directly with the body, provoking a visceral response which may be complicated and hard to describe, but easy to recognize for those who have experienced it. Still, what the body recognizes may not lend itself to notation or formalization, and it is unlikely that a more adequate form of notation could capture these "material" qualities.

In the 1960s, the modes of expression that had been uniquely associated with the voice were taken up, with various degrees of success, by the instruments themselves, especially by the guitar. I will mention only two fairly striking examples, Cream's performance of the blues song "Spoonful" at the Fillmore Auditorium in 1968,¹⁰ and Jimi Hendrix's "Machine Gun," recorded in concert on New Year's Day, 1970.¹¹ Neither of these songs, as performed, have much in the way of musical structure, and they do not swing.¹² But they do allow Clapton, with Cream, and Hendrix to explore different ways an electric guitar can sound. Both guitarists have been guilty of virtuosity for its own sake on many occasions, but in these performances, their playing goes beyond mere show-boating. Clapton's playing ranges from droning sitar-like passages to bursts of tightly clustered notes; Hendrix's use of feedback in the central passage *is* the anguish the music conveys, rather than the bald symbolism of his Woodstock performance of "The Star Spangled Banner."¹³ In both cases, the guitarists have dropped their "see what I can do with a guitar" pose in favor of "hear what I can say with a guitar." And in both cases, it is a matter of how the tones are played, not the tones themselves, that makes the music successful.

In instances like these, rock achieves the expressivity through musical instruments more closely associated with jazz or blues, a use of the

guitar far removed from its earlier uses as either a rhythm instrument or a bit of instrumental “filler” between choruses. On the other hand, neither Clapton nor Hendrix, nor any other good rock instrumentalist, takes an intellectualized approach to music. Both play with an intensity that still connects directly with the body, and like good rock singers, both are often not that good technically; they take chances and they make mistakes. Which is why they are unpredictable and exciting in a way that flawless musicians are not. Even when they hit the wrong notes, they do so in interesting and even exciting ways, creating a tension that can add to musical expression. When they hit the right notes, it is not because the notes are right that makes them great guitarists, but the way the notes sound, and the “timing” of the notes.

Part of the intensity of rock performance has to do with an aspect of rock that is often held against it: the sheer volume or loudness of the music. Loudness, in good rock music, is also a vehicle of expression. Obviously, very loud music has an effect on the body, and not just on the ears; you can feel it vibrate in your chest cavity. This can, of course, become simply exhausting and overwhelming, but used properly, it can add to expressivity. The best rock performances, such as the ones discussed here, make extensive use of dynamics, much as a good blues singer does. And just as the blues sometimes must be shouted or hollered to convey the right emotion, so some passages of rock music must be played loud in order to have the proper effect. Bad rock musicians, like any bad musician, take a mechanical or rule-based approach to dynamics and sonority, resulting in derivative and simplistic music. But loudness can be good, if used wisely.¹⁴

Rhythm, the expressivity of the notes themselves, loudness: These are three material, bodily elements of rock music that would, I submit, constitute its essence, and might form the basis for a genuine aesthetics of rock. Adorno called for the emancipation of dissonance; an aesthetics of rock requires an emancipation of the body, an emancipation of heteronomy. Such an emancipation is also required for the many forms of music centered on the voice and on dance, rather than on compositions and the mind’s free judgment of formal beauty. In fact, preoccupation with formal beauty is appropriate to only a very small fragment of the world’s music.

I realize that this brief account of rock music leaves out of consideration the question of what makes a good rock *song*, which raises a whole different set of questions, ones where issues of compositional form are clearly relevant, and which would have to deal with the vexed question of the relation of words to music.¹⁵ But my concern here has been with what the knowledgeable listener finds important in rock music, which is almost always performance rather than composition, and the “matter” of the notes rather than the form of the whole. Whatever form the aesthetics of rock will take, it will not be the Kantian one that underlies conventional musical aesthetics. If these *prolegomena* do nothing more than avert the misunderstandings that arise when formalist aesthetics over-reaches its proper domain in being applied to rock music, they will have done enough.¹⁶

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1. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Continuum, 1985).

2. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); further references given parenthetically in the text.

3. Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, trans. Geoffrey Payzant (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), p. 71; further references given parenthetically in the text.

4. In addition to Adorno’s *Philosophy of Modern Music*, see his *In Search of Wagner*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (London: New Left Books, 1981), which deals at length with the formal qualities of Wagner’s superficially formless music (form as repetition of gestures and *motifs*; harmony, color and sonority as elements in composition, etc.). As did Hanslick, Adorno makes even the apparently *material* aspects of music into formal elements of composition.

5. Released as the “A-side” and “B-side” respectively of a “single” in 1967; later included in *Magical Mystery Tour*, EMI/Capitol, 1967.

6. On the Beatles, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, EMI/Capitol, 1967.

7. Decca, 1969.

8. Released as a single by A&M records in 1968.

9. This was the problem with most of Procul Harem’s music, at least on their first three albums. In the Beatle’s “A Day in the Life” (on *Sgt. Pepper’s*), strings were used in an unorthodox and interesting way. In less capable hands, the same technique had awful results; cf. the Buckingham’s “Susan” (1967), a song that has mercifully faded into obscurity, where the string passages bear no plausible relation to

the song, but are there simply because "A Day in the Life" received critical praise. Rock music does not get any worse than this.

10. On Cream, *Wheels of Fire*, Polydor/Atco, 1968.

11. On Jimi Hendrix, *Band of Gypsies*, Reprise/Capitol, 1970.

12. "Spoonful" is based on a descending progression from G to E; all the rest is variation, the point being that the improvised variations are what count here.

13. On *Woodstock*, Warner-Cotillion, 1970.

14. The clearest illustration of stupid and derivative rock is the movie, *Spinal Tap*. Unfortunately, the heavy-metal

music portrayed there is actually far more laughable than the parody.

15. To my mind, the best essay on this subject remains Robert Christgau's "Rock Lyrics Are Poetry (Maybe)" in *The Age of Rock: Sounds of the American Cultural Revolution*, ed. Jonathan Eisen (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 230–243.

16. I would like to thank a number of people whose thoughts and comments are incorporated in this essay: Adrian Shepherd, James O. Young, an anonymous referee for the *JAAC*, and Jamie Baugh. None of them are to blame for what appears here.