

To Understand Music

Stefan Wolpe

1953

To understand music. This is an expression which all of us, professionals and laymen alike, use constantly, for the most part without considering its precise meaning, without really knowing whether this term “to understand” is applicable to music, whether we can say, “I do not understand Stravinsky,” as we say ordinarily, “I do not understand French,” or, “I do not understand modern physics.” What difference is there between a musical work which we understand and another which we don’t? Is there anything which can be understood in a musical work? *To understand is an intellectual operation.* Does music appeal to the intellect? And if we say that it does, if we suppose that the intellect plays a part in hearing music, must we conclude that it *determines* the pleasure and the emotion which a musical composition affords? These are questions whose complexity and difficulty are increased by a lack of terminology which has for everyone the same meaning. When we speak of music we feel that we can dispense with words sharply defined. For is not music essentially forever in flux? How should we seize it by means of rigid concepts rigidly articulated?

The term “to understand” can only be applied to music if music possesses some meaning. To understand any proposition whatever is to grasp its significance, to apprehend what it *means*, its objective value symbolized by the words which compose this proposition and the relation between these words. Those who hear a speech can react in different, often contradictory ways to the words of the speaker. From this viewpoint there is a complete analogy between a meeting and a concert. Like the playing of a virtuoso, the words of the speaker are the product of certain intellectual and emotional conditions transformed to a series of sonorous vibrations which in turn provoke physiological and psychological reactions in the audience. But in the case of the speaker the *reactions* are evidently conditioned, in part at least, by the content of his speech, by the meaning of his words. They have a certain *objective value* of which the words *are only symbols* and which the audience must understand. If the speaker is urging a raise of prices and the audience understands him pleading for a drop, we say quite simply that they are mistaken, that they have misunderstood the speaker. Language written or spoken possesses a content independent upon the individual reactions it arouses. Is this also true of the musical language? Or does what happens in a concert hall reduce itself finally to the psychological condition of the player, to the sound vibrations, and to the multiple psychological reactions in the audience?

It is certain that a piece of music is stripped of all rational content. We do not put ideas and theories into music. Theories and ideas may give birth to musical works, but between these works and the psychological, emotional, and intellectual soil from which they spring there is absolutely nothing in common. Language is a system of signs which we decipher to get at their meaning, and the whole value of words rests for us in this meaning. But when, on the other hand, we try *to decipher the meaning, of a piece of music*, when we attempt to treat it as a system of signs, to pass *through* it to something else, we cease to listen to music. We have let the sounds escape and have found nothing in their place. *In music the sound system is perceived as such, it possesses for us a certain intrinsic value.* It can indeed produce violent emotions

and initiate multiple *associations*, but nevertheless it is a sonorous system that persists in consciousness and is enjoyed. This drives us to the following alternative: either music means nothing, possesses no objective content and resolves itself entirely into sonorous vibrations that are essentially ephemeral and emotional states, or else the relationship between what we shall briefly call content and form in music is wholly different from any relationship which exists in ordinary language.

What then is the relationship in ordinary language? *It is one of transcendence*. The ideas of discourse, the content, the sense of a sentence transcends its forms, its sonorous body. To understand written or spoken language is precisely to pass beyond it to get at something else. Insofar as words are only signs, what they mean is something other than themselves. That is why one can summarize a speech or a conversation, extract the ideas and the meaning. Now it is absolutely impossible to summarize a musical work, to extract anything whatsoever from it. If we attempt to epitomize a sonata, we simply get another sonata built on the same themes. It would be a grave error to consider the themes of a symphony, for example, as its content, and to establish in this way an analogy between the development through which a writer guides his ideas and the development which a composer imposes upon his themes. The two fundamental themes of a sonata in no sense summarize this sonata, they are not at all ideas in the sense in which we say, for example, that war or peace is the fundamental issue of this or that speaker. If the musical work possesses a certain content, a significance, if it means something, *its meaning is inherent in the work itself and is equally present in the whole*. The content here cannot be external to what we call form; it is immanent in this form. But does this relation of *immanence* belong exclusively to music? Do we find it also in other arts? Thus far I have employed a parallel between music and *common language* which is solely a means of communication and quite without aesthetic value. But if we penetrate the realm of literature and poetry, we find that the relation of transcendence which binds content and form in ordinary language is superseded by a relation of immanence.

The word is no longer merely a sign which we decipher to get at something else that it symbolizes, but now possesses intrinsic value. Although it is easy enough to summarize the average magazine article, summary is not so easy if we have before us a page from some great writer, for his ideas fuse with the words which express them, they are embedded in, or rather embodied in those words. It is impossible to summarize a poem by Yeats or William Carlos Williams, or a sonata by Mozart. Here we are on the borderline of music, which is the *ideal limit* of poetry. Poetry tends toward music insofar as it aspires to immanence and fails to become music, insofar as the words still retain a certain transcendent significance, insofar as we still recognize them as signs. From this point of view all artistic activity tends to transform signs having only transcendent significance. Music is thus the purest of the arts, since it retains nothing whatsoever that is a sign or representation of *some other reality outside itself*. When I read a text, any text whatsoever, I can interpret it and comment on it in any number of ways, but it is impossible for me to extract anything other than its meaning, if it has a precise meaning at all. I read, for example, in the obituary column of a newspaper that Mr. X has just died after a long illness. Unless I read hastily and *inaccurately*, I cannot possibly deduce from this text that Mr. X died suddenly. One conception alone is correct; all other false. Since language possesses a transcendent content, this content can be extracted, analyzed and made to serve as a check upon all other readings. The meaning of a musical phrase is on the contrary immanent in this phrase; it cannot therefore be checked; it cannot be detached and formulated in rational terms.

If I ask a pianist who just played a piece by Chopin what it means, the only thing he can do is to play the same ballade over again. But it would be incorrect to conclude that music means nothing or that its content is vague. Untranslatable though it may be, the musical sense of the work can be extremely precise, as exact as that of a scientific work. And when I say musical sense, I am not thinking only of the emotional repercussions in the audience, repercussions varying to infinity, but of a *certain spiritual*

content which belongs only to this work, which constitutes at once its essence and its form, its concrete reality, its individuality.

Nevertheless, the question posed at the beginning still persists. The term “to understand” can be applied to music only if music possesses a definite spiritual content, and this content, if it exists, *can only be immanent in the work*. But does it exist? It is impossible to offer a direct proof of this existence, since what this or that work signifies cannot be formulated rationally. But I shall try to show if we deny all objective significance to the sonorous work, we are driven finally to subjective concepts *that destroy music*. Either the musical work possesses an objective significance, contains a definite spiritual message like a poem, a novel, or else its text is immaterial only, and there are as many sonatas as there are pianists. But let me still go further. The execution of the sonata at the concert evidently provokes varied and contradictory reactions among the audience. These reactions, whatever they may be, whoever the auditors may be, are all equally valid. By what standard shall we judge them? What then is a musical work if denied objective significance? A system of sonorous vibrations, on the one hand, and, on the other, individual emotions. And therefore, to go one step further, it is a set of black marks on paper traced by the hand of the composer, which the player deciphers with the help of certain conventions and which serve to construct sound waves, the hearing of which evokes multiple physiological and psychological reactions. The composer of some beautiful work is no more. The thoughts, the desires, the images of which the work is the product have vanished. There remain only these marks on paper, a sort of scheme for the player, who is perfectly free to do as he wishes. One will draw out sublimity, another what is merely amusing, a third, the grotesque. The player who happens to make us laugh with a Beethoven Sonata will thus be just as right as the other who moves us to tears. Only the interpreter who bores us will be wrong.

Finally we can no longer restrict the question to the sonata proper. What is true of it is also true of the interpretation by this or that pianist, on this or that day, in this or that concert hall. There remain then only the thousand varied images in the consciousness of thousands of auditors—images sublime, grotesque, dull. This is the logical consequence of the subjectivism in vogue with so many people who do not usually think matters through to the end but content themselves with a moderate and comfortable skepticism.

There is still another aspect of the question which it is impossible to neglect. If we consider only the power which music so eminently has to evoke intense reactions among its auditors and *to create* among them in this way, for a few moments, *a sort of collective soul*, a relation thus emerges between music and various other stimuli which men have always widely employed. Between the influence of music and that of alcohol, of hashish, one does no longer find any qualitative distinction. Thus today we gather people about a piano and act upon them by means of sound waves, and tomorrow perhaps we shall get still better results by means of a electric current acting directly upon the skin. What is important is the result, is it not? All that matters is *what happens* when people are subjected to the influence of these waves, these rays, these emanations. If music is only the art of combining sounds in a manner agreeable to the ear, in a fashion which gives birth in us to a variety of emotions, I really do not see in what way the art of the perfumer or the cook is inferior. A dish, a perfume, are as able to call forth reactions of feelings, images, ideas. And what is one to do about expressions? Has not music a certain power to be found neither in a symphony of odors nor in a dinner?

Music is, of course, eminently expressive. The musical work is always the outcome of certain mental attitudes in the artist, conscious or unconscious. Whether he wishes it or not, it always carries the work of his personality, the burden of his feeling, of his hopes, of his spiritual experience. The need for self-realization, for self-expression, certainly plays a very great role in the desire that imperiously drives a musician to creation. And if the labor of creation holds a certain joy, it arises in part at least from *a very clear feeling of deliverance*. But this expressive character which the composer finds in music depends

precisely upon the fact that the musical work possesses a definite content. If the work had no spiritual reality, if it could be reduced to the numberless mental attitudes which it evokes, it would have (by the same token) no expressive power. If the musical work is not a direct appeal addressed to our intelligence, if it possesses no objective significance, it can find no place in the domain of art and is indistinguishable from the pleasures of a cream puff or a beef steak. This expressive power itself, which we all agree to concede to music, is only the consequence, the secondary effect of the act by which we grasp what it means. We are thus led to the conclusion that the music does possess a spiritual content immanent in the work, which it concerns us to understand.

Still, even those who recognize that a page of music has significance, means something, are apt to regard it not as specific, but as general and vague, and thus they explain the powerful evocative action of this art in which each one ultimately finds what he looks for, what he himself contributed to colored by idiosyncrasies of mind, temperament, and desire. But one should not confuse the repercussions of music in us—our individual and variable reactions when confronted by a melody—with its significance, its spiritual content. I turn again to the example of the obituary notice in the newspaper. It is read by thousands. Their reactions are evidently very different, varying with the degree of acquaintance with the man now dead. The announcement of this death will be differently colored for each, will carry a burden of varying images and associations. And yet the content of this announcement is *one*, and all the emotions which it can arouse are conditioned by an act of intellection. In the case of the musical work, the content cannot be extracted from the form, the very body of the work, for content in music, as we pointed out, is immanent in the form.

Everything that floats about a page of music is vague and indefinite. But if it is impossible for us to define, that is not because its significance is too vague and general. On the contrary, it is because it is too concrete. Describing a piece of music, we meet the same difficulty which confront us when we attempt to define an individual being. *The meaning of a piece of music is its very aspect.* We are dealing with something absolutely unique, and this is the explanation of our impotence in the presence of a musical work, impotence analogous to that which we feel when we seek by formulas, howsoever flexible and subtle, to represent a living being. Only direct content, intuition itself, can unveil the living being. The musical work also must be seized directly.

If the content of music would admit to generalization, a knowledge of it would, by that very reason, be easy, no matter how fluid and indefinite this content might be. In the arts where form can *to some extent* be distinguished from the content, such knowledge is possible, even though it always remains approximate, since the soul of every artistic production is after all fused with its body, as our bodies and souls are fused. The art of sounds alone succeeds in achieving an absolute fusion, and in creating values, ideas which are concrete beings, personalities whose essence is, so to speak, one with their appearance. From this point of view, therefore, music is the least model of all the arts. She offers herself to us altogether, for she has nothing to hide. *Her most cherished secret is precisely her surface.* Thus, it must be admitted that every musical work possesses a certain spiritual content, definite and concrete, immanent, consequently impossible to formulate in rational terms. The emotional influence of the work, its expressive power, depends upon the act by which we grasp its objective content. *To be moved we first must understand what it means.* A reading of a great philosopher's work can arouse profound emotions in us, but they represent only our individual reactions to the great man's work, which we first must understand, and which our emotional reactions are independent of our mental attitudes. The only difference between the work of Spinoza and the sonata by Beethoven is that we can examine the content of the *Ethics* apart from the form, while in the case of Beethoven or of any other musician this operation is forbidden. We are thus led to the conclusion that musical comprehension presents certain peculiarities. Music is not a symbol like written or spoken language, *but it is the very thing itself which it is necessary to understand.*

I should like for a moment to consider the sensuous pleasure which music affords, for a good many people regard this as the primordial element of the art completely independent of intellectual processes. Indeed, to many acute minds it seems possible to enjoy music physically *without at all understanding it*. The question then is whether this pleasure is essential, whether it is inherent in all musical perception, in a word, whether we are dealing here with a primary or secondary element. Even if it should be established that the hearing of a work is unfailingly accompanied by physical pleasure, *it might still be true that this pleasure is caused by something else*. But here we are in the domain of personal taste, of subjective impressions and judgments which allow of no discussion that this or that composer whose sonorities ravish our ears will seem to others dry, hard, and painful. And the very composer who offered us only severe, intellectual joys seems suddenly as sensual enchanter, and vice versa. The sonorous delight which some composers dispense so generously and others seem on principle to avoid is an unstable and capricious thing. In any case, it would be as ridiculous to banish it from music on the pretext that it degrades as it would be to insist that it be always present, denying all aesthetic values to works which are not ingratiating. Musical emotion, then, can develop in the absence of all sensual pleasure, and even when the first hearing is painful. But is even this pleasure an immediate sensation? Is it of the same order as the pleasure a well-prepared dish affords us?

Experience and reason alike show us that the pleasures of mind are but faintly analogous with the pleasures of taste. In order that music afford us a sensuous physical pleasure, we must have first understood it. This pleasure, supposedly simple and direct, is the result of the intellectual grasp of a sequence. To delight in a succession of sounds, a melody, as we delight in a well-cooked dish, we must apprehend the relations between these sounds. If some sonorous combination happens to tickle their ears agreeably, the next chord, for them unrelated to the preceding, will immediately shatter the charm. For the person who understands, the pleasure is born precisely of this passing from one sonority to another, each acquiring its whole value only in relation with those which precede and follow. The pleasure an uncomprehending auditor may happen to find does not differ from the pleasure afforded us sometimes by the vibration of a telegraph wire, the murmur of a brook, etc. It is not a specifically musical pleasure. It is one of those 1000 more or less agreeable sensations which our environment often offers. Sensations that awaken vague images, fugitive motions, and conspire to keep us in a certain state of well-being, but which have nothing at all to do with art.

I dwell so insistently upon the distinction to be made between the complex reactions of those who hear a musical work and the act by which they grasp the meaning immanent in its sonorous body. We must recognize that a large portion of a concert audience does not listen to the music. For them music is merely a stimulant which plunges them into vague reveries to which they abandon themselves more or less unconsciously. It would greatly surprise passive listeners to be told that to listen to a work is to be active, to accomplish a task sometimes actually painful, demanding a certain preparation, and that their exclusive passive attitude towards the sonorous text prevents them not only from grasping its meaning, but also from enjoying the specific pleasures it might have imparted had they followed attentively instead of giving themselves up, daydreaming and half asleep, to the play of their imagination.

It would be false nevertheless to conclude from this that the comprehension of music necessarily demands a knowledge of musical technique and that it is impossible to appreciate a musical work, to grasp its meaning, without possessing the elements of what one might call the musical grammar. There is in ambiguity here, it seems to me, which is absolutely essential to dissipate. To understand a page of music is not the same thing as to be able to make a technical analysis of these pages. One may understand form, harmony and counterpoint and *still remain, deaf to the work* of which every element is perceived and named. The history of music and of musical criticism provides so often examples of the total lack of comprehension often exhibited by the most learned theoreticians when confronted by musical productions which they

were nevertheless perfectly capable of analyzing step by step. It was not the conservatory professors who discovered Wagner, Debussy, Stravinsky, Schoenberg. One may be an excellent grammarian and still be at a loss before a sentence of a writer, even though one can perfectly well point out the subject, the verb, the complement. But in ordinary language the words and their relations have a symbolic character. There is nothing surprising then in the fact that grammatical analysis is sometimes insufficient to give immediately the logical significance of a sentence. If the meaning of but one sign escapes us, the sentence no longer has any sense, no matter how clear it may be syntactically. Now, since it is conceded that a musical work is not a sign, it is then pertinent to ask why its structure does not give us its meaning directly, and why its meaning is often revealed to those incapable of analyzing the work formally. To understand a melody, a phrase, a musical work is to perceive its unity. In other words, we understand a series of sounds when we succeed in making of this series a system, a coherent whole. And it is in this whole alone that each of the moments of the sonorous flow (which we follow so attentively) acquires its full value and its reality.

The difference between the man who *understands* music and the man who *does not* is simply this: the first perceives a system of complex relations, the second perceives only isolated sounds. For him who comprehends an isolated sound is only an *abstraction*. *The reality is the system which integrates these sounds*. An organism is not a mere composite of two arms, two legs, a torso, etc. These very members exist only in an individual whole and as *functions* of this whole. In the same way, the slightest melody is not a mere composite of sounds disposed in a certain order according to a certain rhythm, but is an entity of a particular sort, unique, inimitable, lending its essential character to each of the elements which analysis reveals. This sonorous flood which vanishes as soon as it is born we grasp, insofar as we understand it, *as a certain stable, definite and objective reality*. But this reality does not transcend the sounds; it is what constitutes *their immanent unity*, what gives them a precise significance. We see now why analyzing a musical work is not the same thing as understanding it. Technical analysis gives us at best only the abstract formula of a work and thus reduces it to a certain type, while to understand a piece of music is to recreate its unique personality as it first emerged in the mind of the composer. This recreation does not require a memory capable of retaining the whole of the work from beginning to end. The synthesis proceeds progressively, moving with the flood of sound each moment of which thus bears in a sense the accumulated burden of the preceding moments, not because we remember them, but because we perceive each of them as direct functions of those which have preceded. Having come to the end of the piece, we have perhaps forgotten the beginning and might in any case be unable to reconstruct it, but the work well understood is found again and exists integrally in the concluding chord. *Insofar as one has grasped this unity*, insofar the work as a complex whole has been understood. Whatever may be the second reaction, it reveals the same thing again and only again that it is what it is. In that way there is only one way of understanding a piece of music.

Historical Note by Austin Clarkson

On February 9, 1953, Stefan Wolpe wrote to Josef Marx, his friend and publisher: "I gave a few days ago a lecture which kept me intensely busy for more than a week (about functions of music other than the making of content)." He added characteristically, "I gave a good lecture." Wolpe at that time was teaching at Black Mountain college near Asheville, North Carolina. He had gone there to teach at the summer session the previous year and was invited to stay on as Director of Music. Wolpe had been trying without success to obtain a full-time teaching position, so he accepted the offer. He was enthused by the democratic principles of the College and the focus on the arts. Unfortunately, the College was in an irreversible financial decline and closed its doors for good in 1956. Despite the difficult conditions of the intervening years, they proved to be extraordinarily productive. Wolpe completed *Enactments for Three*

Pianos, revised the quartet for *Trumpet, Tenor Saxophone, Percussion and Piano*, composed the *Symphony* and the *Quartet for Oboe, Cello, Percussion and Piano*, the *Three Pieces for Mixed Chorus* and incidental music for a number of theatre productions. The groundwork for this substantial body of mature works was laid during the forties in the compositional studies that culminated in the *Seven Pieces for Three Pianos*¹ composed for a lecture given at Yale University in February of 1951 for the Fifth Annual Symposium of the International Federation of Music Students. Wolpe's only copy of the text of this lecture was lost in a fire at Black Mountain College, and all that survives is the title—"Spatial Relations, Harmonic Structures and Shapes"—a few musical examples, and the *Seven Pieces*. The first lectures to survive from this period come from the Black Mountain year. During the first summer sessions Wolpe attended in 1952 he gave two lectures, the first on aspects of rhythm, and the second on aspects of pitch. No trace of the first survives. but the second, "Thoughts on pitch", is extant.² It is directed to the general listener. With imaginative concepts, poetic language and vivid examples including several bits of sound poetry. Wolpe evokes the experience of pitch from first considerations of the human voice to the basic repertoire of musical intervals.

The lecture Wolpe gave in early February of 1953, to which he refers in the letter to Josef Marx, is probably a lecture he wrote in pencil on twenty-two leaves of a yellow legal pad (21.5x35.2 cm.). The first five leaves of the pad contain notes on rhythm and pitch written in a mixture of German and English that accord with his concern for those topics in the lectures the previous year. The manuscript is undated, but there is good reason to suppose that this is the lecture which has to do with "functions of music other than the making of content." In contrast to the lectures on rhythm and pitch, this lecture raises questions of musical aesthetics. Furthermore, this is the only one of Wolpe's lectures which does not have to do with the analysis of music, concepts of musical material, or compositional practice. Wolpe was probably inspired by his literary colleagues, who included Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, to set down his aesthetic credo.

"To understand music" proposes a unique blend of formalism, idealism, and intuitionism. Wolpe draws a clear distinction between music and language on the premise that music's meaning is immanent in the music object where the meaning of ordinary language transcends the acoustic experience. And yet, he argues, the meaning of a piece of music has an objective existence which resides in its spiritual content. He rejects the subjective relativism that refuses to acknowledge that the meaning of music has objective significance. He also rejects the dualism that separates *physis* and *psyche*, matter and spirit. Spiritual content and musical material are indissolubly one. Evidence for the existence of music's spiritual content lies in the fact that when a group of people listen to music it creates in them "a, sort of collective soul." Music's meaning is grasped not by an act of intellect, but rather by the faculty of intuition. In the tradition of German idealism he regards music as the most spiritual of the arts, the art in which poetry seeks its limit.

This lecture provides an important frame of reference for Wolpe's lectures on the making of content and for his music itself. His later lecture "Thinking Twice"³ in particular, is more readily understood if we accept his radical fusion of matter and meaning. And in his music we hear the vivid results of his premise that structure must always be expressive and that expression must always be structured.

Austin Clarkson
York University

¹New York: Southern Music. 1981.

²*Perspectives of New Music* (Spring-Summer 1979), pp. 28-55.

³Elliot Schwartz and Barney Childs. eds., *Contemporary composers on Contemporary Music* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 1968).