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The Music between Us: Is music a universal language? by Kathleen Marie Higgins. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012. Pp. xi + 277. H/b \$45.00, P/b \$25.00.

Little has been said in philosophical aesthetics about the way we encounter the music of other cultures. Kathleen Higgins' The Music Between Us takes a big step towards remedying this neglect. Higgins' goal is to explore the extent to which music affords mutual engagement and understanding between individuals separated by linguistic and cultural barriers, a thought traditionally expressed with the adage that 'music is a universal language'. Higgins agrees that there are significant parallels between music and spoken language, but she suggests that the comparison may obscure more than it reveals (p.80). While she still tends to describe the powers of music in communicative terms, her key claim is that music is 'a vehicle for recognizing—and directly experiencing—our common humanity' (p.2). The justifications and various qualifications for this claim are spread out across the book. However, the core argument goes something like this: 1) Humans share a capacity for processing low-level musical features, rooted in our common biological heritage. 2) Music can convey the sense of human activity and attitude, based on these universally-processed features. 3) Humans can also become entrained or attuned to these perceived qualities. Therefore, 4) music affords the recognition and experience of these basic and shared human qualities.

In support of the first point, Higgins marshals an impressive array of empirical evidence indicating common perceptual sensitivities to musical variables such as pitch, tempo and melodic contour. Musical works across cultures also share low-level features, such as the use of scales, centre tones, repetition, and asymmetrical rhythmic patterns. Higgins addresses a significant qualification to this universality. As we grow up within a musical culture, we develop cognitive schemas that dispose us to interpret the sounds we hear with reference to those schemas. For instance, a listener used to the equal-tempered tuning system will hear music employing an alternate tuning system as 'out of tune' rather than in conformity with its own style. Such schema-based interference is potentially ubiquitous, but Higgins is optimistic about our capacity to develop new schemas as we become acquainted with music from other cultures. For instance, she cites a study by Huron, von Hippel and Harnish indicating that American listeners to Balinese music were able to generate predictions for appropriate continuations of a melody that approached the judgement of Balinese listeners by around 10 notes in (p.75, citing David Huron Sweet Anticipation Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006).

Thus we are not hopelessly locked into the schemas we have grown up with, and with some effort and attention, we can quickly develop new patterns of expectation.

In support of the second point, Higgins surveys various theoretical considerations indicating a tendency for humans to link pitch and rhythm to spatial movement. Of course, we hear things moving around in ordinary auditory experience, but the links to movement we make when listening to music go well beyond this. For example, patterns of dissonance and consonance are said to resemble patterns of exertion and relaxation, and higher pitches are associated with greater exertion than lower pitches, based on our experiences of producing these tones (p.50). Higgins also appeals to Charles Nussbaum's theory that, grounded in sensory connections between the auditory and motor systems, listeners automatically associate music with 'virtual layouts' with which we imaginatively interact (The Musical Representation, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007).

Nussbaum's theory is not uncontroversial and I would have liked to see Higgins engage more critically with it. One concern is that while many cultures speak of pitches in spatial terms, some do not, and apparently some cultures even reverse the high-low pitch associations that we find in Anglophone culture (p.199 ft.85). Similarly, Higgins observes that all cultures seem to make synaesthetic associations with music (perhaps encouraged by the restriction of music to the auditory channel p.113) but these associations can differ quite a lot. As such, it may be that we have a universal tendency to make some kind of connection between music and spatial layout or movement, but this is done in heterogeneous ways. If more complex properties of the music rely on us making such associations, I worry that these different associations may be a source of further divisions between musical cultures.

It is with regards to the association of human attitudes with music that Higgins most closely examines the parallel between music and spoken language. Higgins quite convincingly argues that low-level features of speech share a great deal with the low-level features of music, and that these features in either case serve to convey emotional attitudes. Moreover, there is some evidence for cross-cultural agreement on the expressive qualities of music, at least when broad categories are employed. However Higgins seems ultimately to prefer the claim that music conveys 'vitality affects' (p.152-153). These are defined by Daniel Stern as 'dynamic, kinetic qualities of feeling that distinguish animate from inanimate and that correspond to the momentary changes in feeling states involved in the organic process of being alive' (The

Interpersonal World of the Infant, London: Academic Press, 1985, p.56). This notion is more suited to the nuance of musical expressivity and arousal.

This brings us finally to the claim that humans tend to entrain or attune themselves to music. Even as infants, we seem to sensitively adjust to the vitality affects manifested in the prosody (and other behavioural qualities) of our caregivers. We equally tend to rhythmically entrain to music, and we can be contagiously aroused by the emotional qualities expressed. Again, these effects are variable. In the case of emotional arousal in particular, Higgins sensibly claims that we are capable of a plurality of ways of engaging with music, some of which are more analytically distanced than others (p.133).

Overall, Higgins provides some plausible grounds for suggesting that music can give the listener an immediate sense of human presence, and that by communally engaging with music we can come to appreciate our common humanity. More should be said about what it means to experience a musical work as reflective of our common humanity. But a more pressing concern I have is whether music really offers better prospects for cross-cultural understanding than other forms of interaction. In particular, is engaging with each others' music more effective than simply trying to learn each others' language? The fact that Westerners share a musical style while speaking different languages is no help here, since we also have multinational languages such as Mandarin, Spanish, English and Arabic. And of course languages are replete with culturally specific schema, but we saw that this was equally the case in music.

Towards the end of the book, Higgins suggests that music is ideal because it offers a form of participation that is non-coercive, immediate in the conveyance of affect, and pleasurable (p.179). But aren't these features also true of spoken language? For instance, as Higgins observes, the low-level prosodic qualities of speech seem as capable of conveying emotion as music, and Higgins should not suggest that these are musical features of speech; they are features that equally belong to music and speech with no particular priority for either. Thus there's not much reason on these grounds to suppose that music is a distinctively universal language of the emotions.

Maybe Higgins could respond that music, unlike spoken language, affords entrainment or attunement. Moreover, music allows simultaneous participation in a way that talking does not.

However entraining to music relies on our ability to parse its rhythmic qualities, and these rhythmic qualities may not be obvious in very foreign music. Attunement may also be inhibited by the unfavourable appreciative stance that the failure to fit one's pre-conceived schemas could engender. Meanwhile, it seems quite possible to entrain to the speech patterns of languages we do not understand (infants do it), and of course more so to body language and facial expression. Perhaps one can gain a more intense form of mutual entrainment by dancing to music. But dancing to the music of a very foreign culture is potentially an invitation to ridicule. You have to be already fairly comfortable with the situation you are in to attempt it.

These considerations suggest that the advantages of music over language are not emphatically established. It is even hard to determine what kind of empirical evidence would help to settle the issue until we have a clear framework for comparing an individual's relative success in adapting to these different domains. Of course, Higgins can allow that either music or spoken language is a potential route towards mutual understanding. The point is that if that spoken language is comparable to music in its universality and opportunities to experience a shared sense of humanity, then we should be less impressed by music, because we have a clearer idea of just how hard to it is to learn another language, and how distant an initial taste of a culture's language is from comfortable fluency within it.

Yet Higgins and I agree that music does have at least one key advantage over spoken language. When we speak, we expect to convey a specific propositional content, and we may feel frustrated and alienated when these expectations are not satisfied. Because music isn't trying to convey specific propositional content, we don't experience this frustration (Higgins makes similar points p.97 and p.180). We can just enjoy it together. That is, it is the extent to which music *isn't a language* that it offers better prospects for social coordination. Of course we can also enjoy eating food from other cultures, playing sport or games together, or admiring nature together. But the distinctive advantage of music may be that it can deliver some of the benefits of communication while also being a source of common delight.

My remaining worry however is that we may not be very inclined to enjoy the music of other cultures. Indeed, Higgins' strongest claims about musical enjoyment are restricted to music of one's own culture. She devotes a chapter to the ways that the music of one's own culture can give one a sense of comfort and security (this, incidentally, is equally true of hearing people

speak in one's mother tongue). So it seems to me that more needs to be said about what it takes to aesthetically appreciate very foreign music. I suspect that listeners must be disposed to take pleasure in the exotic, as may equally be the case with foreign foods. Some listeners may recoil when confronted with such exotic fare, but Higgins encourages us to be more adventurous, given the potential for intense human contact that sharing music can afford.

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