

Alexander Wilfing, *Re-Reading Hanslick's Aesthetics. Die Rezeption Eduard Hanslicks im englischen Sprachraum und ihre diskursiven Grundlagen*. Wiener Veröffentlichungen zur Musikwissenschaft, vol. 49. Vienna: Hollitzer, 2019. 431pp. £53.71.

Eduard Hanslick counts as one of the few figures whose music-aesthetic thought has been equally important to musicologists and to philosophers of music. Interest in his work and legacy has been sustained if not amplified in recent years across disciplinary divides: Mark Evan Bonds' *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* devotes considerable space to Hanslick, for understandable reasons given his importance in defending Bonds' titular concept;¹ analytical philosophers from Peter Kivy to Nick Zangwill have stressed the necessity of proper conceptual understanding of his thesis followed by either careful divergence or emphatic agreement;² and two musicologists (or historians of music aesthetics), Lee Rothfarb and Christoph Landerer, have recently collaborated on another translation of his seminal treatise, whose title now seems to be more or less fixed in English since Geoffrey Payzant's version in 1986 – *On the Musically Beautiful*, henceforth *OMB*.³ The first introductory essay to Rothfarb and Landerer's translation is co-authored by Alex Wilfing, and includes findings translated or reworked from the book under review – which itself “develops the content” of Wilfing's 2016 doctoral dissertation (*Re-Reading Hanslick's Aesthetics*, 7). (To assist those who want to engage further with Wilfing's research but do not read German with ease, I will point out further thematic overlaps with his publications in English below.)

Wilfing's bilingual title is appropriate to a book that not only illustrates extensively “Eduard Hanslick's reception in the English-speaking world and its discursive foundations”, as the subtitle indicates, but also presents much important information concerning *OMB* itself, its affiliations or contradictions with Hanslick's other writings, and its Austro-German roots, resonances and influences. Indeed some of Wilfing's research in these areas may be of just as much interest to readers of this journal as his fifth and final chapter, “Hanslick and Analytical Philosophy: A Productive Reception”, which engages the most intensively with modern Anglophone philosophical debates on music. There is much to learn from the earlier chapters about the antagonistic relationship between Austrian and German idealist philosophy (foreshadowing the analytic/continental divide of the twentieth century), the dubious genesis of the idea of “formalism”, and the dangers of (mis)translation and selective interpretation in philosophical aesthetics. As a musicologist who has independently trodden some of the same ground as Wilfing, I can testify to his thorough knowledge of the historical literature on Hanslick, and the famed Germanic *Gründlichkeit* or depth of scholarship is evident throughout – most obviously in over 1650 footnotes. These come thick and fast on pp. 164-9, demonstrating the various ways in which translations have failed to capture the elusive essence of Hanslick's famous phrase defining music's content – “sonically moved forms” or *tönend bewegte Formen*.⁴ An appendix to chapter 1 listing 114 German-language sources that misquote Hanslick's phrase does however suggest that it is not only translators who have had trouble with it (75-81).

¹ New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

² Kivy's “Something I've Always Wanted to Know about Hanslick”, in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46:4 (1988) and Zangwill's “Hanslick Was Right about Music”, this journal 44:1 (2004), 29-43.

³ New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

⁴ At the 2019 Music and Philosophy Study Group conference in London Wilfing devoted an entire paper to this, in a virtuoso display of bibliographic persistence combined with sensitivity to linguistic-conceptual distinctions.

Wilfing begins his foreword with a simple observation: “Hanslick’s reception is a cliché” (9) – or perhaps one ought to say, a series of clichés, from his stylistic conservatism to a supposed complete denial that music and emotion should have anything to do with one another. Deconstructing these misapprehensions of Hanslick’s aesthetics is one of the most valuable services the book performs. Chapter 1 reveals that *OMB*’s most “historically significan[t]” arguments were the last to be formulated, with the “tract’s origin” being “the question of music and nature, later chapter 6” (22). That may be because the work’s initial themes were those closest to German Idealism, which, notwithstanding its historical importance for Hanslick’s epoch, was not in any meaningful sense responsible for *OMB*’s polemical thrust (*pace* Dahlhaus, among other older German scholars). Rather, Idealist philosophy was what Hanslick had to leave *behind* in order to reach those aesthetic views now associated with him. The conservative climate of the Austrian university system could not tolerate Kant, associating the “perverse principles” of his “murderous philosophy” rather perversely with “materialism” (26), and had still less time for Hegel: by associating as a student with the Prague *Davidsbündler* and their Left Hegelian views, the young Hanslick was showing his anti-establishment credentials (31). The romantic aesthetic views he expressed up to and during 1848, the “year of revolutions”, are both explicitly Hegelian and, Wilfing notes correctly, “hard to reconcile” with those of *OMB*; Hanslick later referred to them as the “sins of his pre-revolutionary youth” (32-3).

While the lesser-known Idealist Friedrich Theodor Vischer did exert a minor influence on *OMB* (33-5), its real philosophical sources are “Austrian”, belonging to the anti-Idealist “Herbartian” system promoted by the Habsburg regime, which added to the ideas of Hegel’s opponent in Berlin, J. F. Herbart, certain home-grown rationalist ideas drawn from the Austrian mathematician and logician Bernard Bolzano – himself of course, as Michael Dummett and others have demonstrated, an early source for late-nineteenth-century “anti-psychologism” and thence for analytical philosophy in the English-speaking world. Wilfing himself relies here on Austrian research in the history of philosophy, from the theses of Otto Neurath and Rudolf Haller through Kurt Blaukopf to Christoph Landerer.⁵ The Austrian tradition demanded that philosophy have a “scientific character” (*Wissenschaftlichkeit*) – just one of the many elements reflected in *OMB*.

That Hanslick’s ideas were thus based on philosophical principles and not on personal antipathy to musical figures such as Wagner (as Bonds surprisingly still suggests in *Absolute Music*) is one point Wilfing makes effectively (51), though he qualifies it later by pointing out how Hanslick’s allegiance to Herbartianism also reflected “careerist considerations” (106-7). Recent research on Hanslick’s cultural positioning leads him to the interesting additional observation that *OMB*’s “strategic ‘reduction’ of musical composition to aesthetic functions without any social, political or even moral implications should...be read in part politically”, and positively, as an avoidance of Wagnerian attempts to ground music and culture in ethnic (German) allegiances (56).⁶ Wagner’s nationalism jarred with Hanslick’s “liberal world-picture”, fostered in a multi-ethnic Habsburg state. Yet multi-ethnicity was only one relevant trait of the Habsburg empire. During *OMB*’s genesis and Hanslick’s subsequent accession to a professorship of music aesthetics at the University of Vienna, the Austrian

⁵ Much of this is summarized in Landerer and Wilfing’s “Eduard Hanslick’s *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*: Text, Contexts, and their Developmental Dimensions; towards a Dynamic View of Hanslick’s Aesthetics”, *Musicologica Austriaca* (13th March 2018, <http://www.musau.org/parts/neue-article-page/view/51>).

⁶ The point is made again in Wilfing’s “‘Absolute’ Aesthetics in Context: The Sociopolitical Fundamentals of Eduard Hanslick’s Scholarly Activities”, in *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 50/1-2 (2019), 175-190.

polity was also “neo-absolutist”, subject to Franz Joseph I’s whims unmediated by parliamentary democracy or a constitution. The ideology of Herbartianism, by carefully screening off “scientific” scholarship from politics, guarded effectively against any unrest from its intellectuals (an advantage even foreseen by Prince Metternich, who does not exactly have the most “liberal” reputation among nineteenth-century statesmen). Landerer has been commendably explicit that the Austrian “encouragement of such segregated spheres of thought originally had powerful political connotations, and was intended to help drive Idealist demands for critique out of scholarship”;⁷ Wilfing does not echo the point here.

Chapter 2 addresses the contradictions many have seen between *OMB* and Hanslick’s professional music criticism, and does a convincing job of reconciling them. Wilfing musters his defence under three headings, answering the charges that Hanslick’s later writings represent a “historical turn”, an “emotional turn”, and a rescission of *OMB*’s putative support for “pure” instrumental music over all other genres. The three cases all instantiate “the same problem: an erroneous absolutization of the aesthetic treatise [*OMB*], which does not wholly represent Hanslick’s picture of music, but only the theoretical basis of an academic field – the objective aesthetics of music” (105-6). Hanslick never had to “take back” the theses of *OMB* (and indeed never did so down to its tenth edition in 1902) because they never covered everything he considered significant about music. That he defended Brahms as a composer of “pure” symphonies and attacked the synthetic forms of Wagnerian opera does not mean that *OMB* was intended to set “absolute music” in the generic sense “above” opera: Hanslick tells us himself that such crude priorities are “unscientific” and testament to “dilettantish bias” (*OMB*, 24). He also complains in his own foreword to *OMB*’s later editions that he was not launching an “all-out polemic” on feeling but “only protesting against the mistaken intrusion of feelings into the domain of science” – that is, into his “objective aesthetic” approach (*OMB*, lxxxiv). Unlike Peter Kivy, Hanslick never denied that musical listeners felt a range of emotions in response to music’s affective attributes; what he disputed was those emotions’ aesthetic relevance.

The issue of *OMB*’s exclusion of history from aesthetics is the trickiest of the three charges, for in chapter 3 of the treatise Hanslick seems to demand precisely this, only a few pages after remarking that musical beauty is itself vulnerable to the passage of time and that some outstanding compositions “were once beautiful” but are no longer so (*OMB*, 51). Wilfing’s resolution of this interpretive conundrum is lucid: “extra-musical” factors frequently cited by historians, such as the composer’s intentions or the political context of the time, cannot be considered aesthetically relevant; but Hanslick “allows musical qualities *as well as their historical development* to count as genuinely aesthetic” (95, my emphasis). Stylistic originality or overreliance on cliché can thus count in the aesthetic evaluation of music, which consequently cannot be heard as “timeless”; Hanslick forecasts the ideas of T. W. Adorno on the historical contingency of musical “material” (70). This is one productive respect in which Hanslick’s early Idealism may have survived into *OMB*; it certainly resisted influences from his Herbartian colleagues such as Robert Zimmermann (92-3).

I will pass over Wilfing’s chapter 3, which apart from its final section on modern translations has less to say about Hanslick or his modern reception, concentrating instead on Hanslick’s potential English forerunners (Beattie, Smith) and epigones (Gurney). Chapter 4, “What is Aesthetic Formalism? –

⁷ “Eduard Hanslick und die österreichische Geistesgeschichte”, in Theophil Antonicek, Gernot Gruber and Christoph Landerer (eds.), *Eduard Hanslick zum Gedenken: Bericht des Symposiums zum Anlass seines 100. Todestages* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 2010), 55-63 (p. 63).

Definition, History, Representatives”, casts doubt on some widespread assumptions about how “formalism” took shape. The idea that Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* was some kind of formalist ancestor of Hanslick’s aesthetics can be struck down on multiple counts: first of all, as we have seen, Kant was not a significant part of Hanslick’s own intellectual background, and there is no evidence to suggest he read the third Critique (195); secondly, the “objectivist” approach of *OMB* and Kant’s subjective approach to aesthetics are epistemologically contrasting, if not indeed mutually exclusive approaches; and thirdly, Kant was not even a formalist theorist of the arts in any case. As Wilfing points out both here and in a 2018 article, and as I have argued with reference to Gadamer’s interpretation of the third Critique, Kant’s distinction between “free” and “adherent” beauty is crucial to understanding all the higher-order concepts (such as “aesthetic ideas” or the connection of art and morality) in Kant’s theory of art.⁸ Without it we cannot explain why Kant saw poetry as the highest of the arts, and why his placing of instrumental music “without a theme” alongside the ornamental arabesque (or “patterns à la Grecque”) was intended to *denigrate* “pure” music, rather than, as in Hanslick’s later case, to elevate it. Wilfing also casts doubt on the connection forward from Hanslick to Clive Bell, whose *Art* (1914) coined the concept of “significant form” but retained a subjectivist stance on aesthetics (210). And while Hanslick has often been seen as laying the groundwork for modern music analysis, criticised by Joseph Kerman for its reflex “formalism”, it is clear that almost nothing in *OMB* corresponds to Kerman’s description of an approach that deals strictly with “internal musical relations in technical language” (cit. Wilfing, 224). The passage that comes closest, an “analysis” of the opening bars of Beethoven’s Prometheus overture, is intended only as a contrast to show up “false, oversubtle interpretation”, not as a positive model of how to talk about music (*OMB*, 22).

I will return to other elements of chapter 4 in a moment, but moving on for now to the final chapter, Wilfing is able to show here how pervasive Hanslick’s influence has been on debates over musical expression in modern analytic philosophy. The point that emotions require an intentional object (which “pure” music cannot furnish) is one that he made long before “intentionality” was given any extensive theorization by philosophers (284). Other points against the “arousal theory” of musical expression, such as the “our song” phenomenon and the “heresy of the separable experience”, also derive from or mirror Hanslick’s arguments, as Kivy and others have noted (296). Kivy did not, however, notice the anticipation of his “enhanced formalist” use of Tormey’s distinction between “to express” and “to be expressive of” in Hanslick’s example of the rose (*OMB*, lxxxiv), whose scent can be described as “fragrant” but which does not “represent” fragrance. If Kivy’s theory “include[s] emotive properties as perceptual properties of the music” (cit. 308), it is hard to see how this truly “enhances” the position of *OMB*, which already proposes exactly that in chapter 3.

As will be evident, Wilfing’s book is a work of careful as well as comprehensive scholarship, and the care is most welcome in reminding us of the conditions with which Hanslick’s apparent sweeping radicalism is hedged. The central condition, to which Wilfing returns more than once, is the “divergence of music *aesthetics* and the *concept* of music” (12) in Hanslick’s work: “Hanslick’s...treatise does not represent a *reductive ontology* of ‘pure’ music, but rather a *maximally objective* perspective, one which in no way excludes other horizons of academic musical research,

⁸ “Hanslick, Kant, and the Origins of *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*”, *Musicologica Austriaca* (18th June 2018, <http://www.musau.org/parts/neue-article-page/view/47>); Matthew Pritchard, “Music in Balance: The Aesthetics of Music after Kant, 1790-1810”, *Journal of Musicology* 36:1 (2019), 39-67.

but rather grounds these" (241, emphasis original). There is thus no necessary conflict between Hanslick's "objective" aesthetics and a programme of musical hermeneutics such as that pursued by the New Musicology – a point picked up by Wilfing from Nick Zangwill (229). However, it seems hard to deny that a certain methodological priority is being ascribed to "objective aesthetics" within *OMB*. That priority has both had fateful historical consequences and remains weakly substantiated in the treatise itself, whose critical polemics outweigh its positive proposals for a "revis[ed] aesthetics of musical art", to quote its subtitle. From Hanslick's "objectivism" to Guido Adler's positivism was but a step (66-7), and from there, via Adler's emigré pupils and the influence of his programme for an immanent musical "style studies", the notion of an "objective" approach to "the music itself" based on (stylistic or structural) analysis and comparison of scores came to occupy a central position within musicologists' methodology.

That such methodology was narrowly circumscribed before Kerman and the New Musicology came along cannot be seriously doubted. Wilfing may want to pick a bone with McClary over her reading of Hanslick, but to regard her more conservative contemporary opponents as only "supposedly limiting" the available research options is a revealing, and unfortunate, choice of adverb (226, my emphasis). Attempts to declare feminist and other cultural-political varieties of musical hermeneutics "off-limits" need not be "supposed" – they were real, as a consultation of 1990s polemics such as Pieter van den Toorn's *Music, Politics and the Academy* will make obvious. Many of their dismissals of hermeneutic readings as irrelevant to what is "really in" a work by Beethoven (a set of "formal" properties which are simultaneously the only real basis of the work's aesthetic value and by extension, of Beethoven's canonic status) owe a considerable, if indirect, debt to the argumentative strategies of *OMB*. To be sure, there are strong arguments for framing both New Musicological hermeneutics and the Romantic criticism of Hanslick's era as the products of critics' perspectives, rather than delineations of music's true content. One of *OMB*'s most important criticisms of earlier Idealist music aesthetics is its demolition of over-confident assertions about music's (emotional or poetic) "content". But the idea that, once we have excluded such assertions, there will be an aesthetically significant and reliable core of "formal" qualities left over for an "objective" aesthetics to investigate, blessedly free of perspectival bias, is very doubtful. Applied to music of the "common practice" period (1600-1900), the vast majority of which was created, performed, listened to and criticized under the auspices of the "aesthetics of feeling" attacked by Hanslick, such an approach will fail to explain either why this body of music as a whole is culturally valuable, or why certain works within it have commonly been granted a superior aesthetic status to others. (If philosophers wish to theorize a formalist aesthetics of music on that basis nonetheless, they are of course welcome to do so.)

The issue relates to debates over musical "profundity" that have been carried on, in part, in the pages of this journal: if music's aesthetic significance is not affective, then how can we understand it as having the kind of "profound" content or value that has been ascribed to it for so long? Wilfing cites a similar objection to Hanslick made by Paul Moos in 1922, before dismissing it as a "not very plausible argument" (290). But the frequency with which less culturally valuable pursuits are cited in the debate over musical "profundity" should give one pause: is music really profound in no deeper a sense than a great chess game, for instance? Like Stephen Davies, I have an aesthetic appreciation for the games of Fischer, Capablanca, Tal and others.⁹ They offer "intellectual gratification" as one

⁹ "Profundity in Instrumental Music", this journal 42:4 (2002), 343-56.

“follow[s] and anticipat[es] the intentions of the [players]” (*OMB*, 89), and the styles of the various masters can be described in terms of sensuous qualities such as beauty, “disgusting” complication, boldness, quirkiness, or even classified within broader cultural movements such as Romanticism or (hyper-)modernism. Like music in Hanslick’s view, chess must be appreciated autonomously, with a view to the intrinsic validity of moves and strategies, and thus does not “express” or “represent” any cultural content outside itself. The political circumstances of Fischer and Spassky’s 1972 world championship match may have been charged with Cold War tensions, but this has no relevance for an assessment of the games they played. Nevertheless, chess is not completely timeless, and certain gambits or positional approaches can be as quickly “worn out” as Hanslick argued that “modulations and cadences” were in music (*OMB*, 51). I do not want to push the comparison too far, but an alarming proportion of what Hanslick says about the composition or “intellectual” appreciation of music can equally be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to chess – which can be played and analysed in a profound way, as Davies points out. It is just that its profundity, which parallels what Aaron Ridley calls music’s “structural profundity”, matters less than the “expressive profundity” Ridley hears in music.¹⁰ If the game of chess somehow vanished from human civilization tomorrow, fewer people would be disconsolate than if the same catastrophe happened to music.

What is true of music *in toto* also applies to individual works and composers. As Hermann Kretzschmar pointed out more than a century ago, many compositions demonstrating unquestionable structural profundity have failed to stand the test of time: August Klengel’s 48 Canons and Fugues are “as formal achievements in composition...very close to [Bach’s] *Well-Tempered Clavier*”, but nobody would defend them as being of equal aesthetic worth.¹¹ It would not even be quite right to claim that Bach’s canon in fourths from the Goldberg Variations, say, is more “beautiful” or melodically polished than Klengel’s sixth canon in D minor (a three-voiced double canon, stricter than Bach’s, whose only counterpoints are two versions of the main “theme” in augmentation and diminution) – but it *is* more expressively profound, and surely more valuable as such. If a “formalist” or “objectivist” aesthetics forbids the scholar of music from making that judgement, then so much the worse for it. Musicologists have a responsibility to discuss music in ways that are culturally and (in most cases, therefore) affectively sensitive: what seems to some philosophers like a “fear of music” (Zangwill, cit. Wilfing 229) is in actuality a complex endeavour to build that sensitivity, by analyzing the circumstances (only some of them “purely” musical) in which music takes on its multiple layers of aesthetic value and meaning. We could always go back to analyzing the scores of Beethoven symphonies *in abstracto*, as chess commentators analyze the Sicilian Defence. But most of us believe music is too important for that.

¹⁰ *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variations* (Edinburgh, 2004), chap. 5.

¹¹ “Anregungen zur Förderung musikalischer Hermeneutik”, in Edward Lippman, ed., *Musical Aesthetics: A Historical Reader* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1990), III, 24.