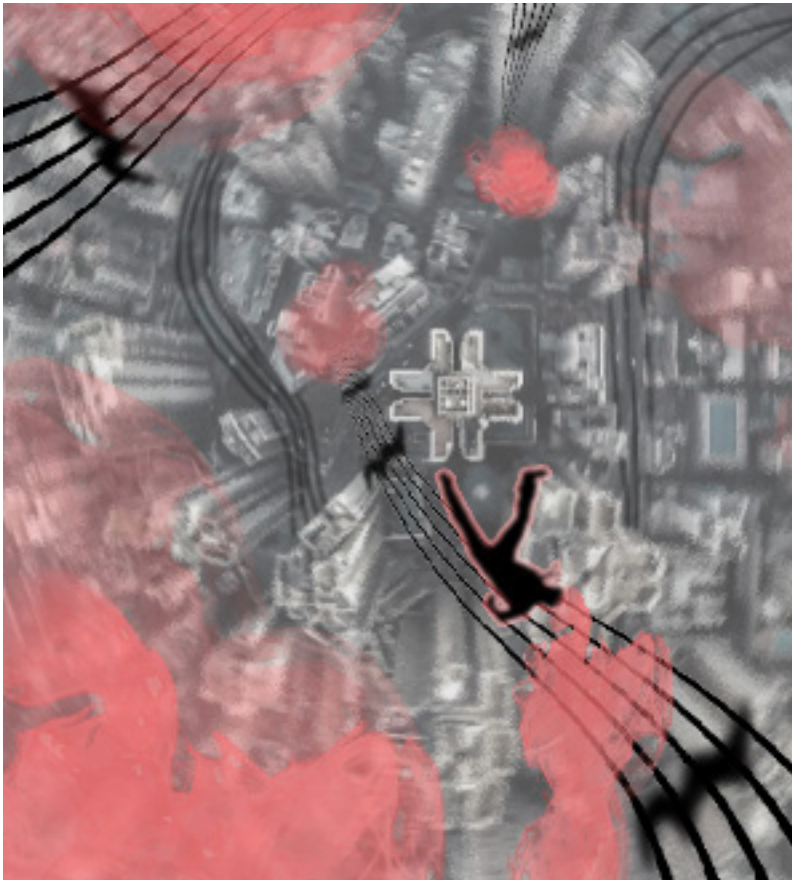


MUSIC, CAGE'S SILENCE, AND ART: An Interview with Stephen Davies, PhD



ABOUT STEPHEN DAVIES, PhD



Stephen Davies taught philosophy at the University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand. His research specialty is the philosophy of art. He is a former President of the American Society for Aesthetics. His books include *Definitions of Art* (Cornell UP, 1991), *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Cornell UP, 1994), *Musical Works and Performances* (Clarendon, 2001), *Themes in the Philosophy of Music* (OUP, 2003), *Philosophical Perspectives on Art* (OUP, 2007), *Musical Understandings and Other Essays on the Philosophy of Music* (OUP, 2011), *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution* (OUP, 2012), *The Philosophy of Art* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016 second ed.), and *Adornment: What Self-decorations Tells Us about Who We Are*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).



STANCE: We want to start by hearing more about your background. How did you get started in philosophy?

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DAVIES: I got into philosophy by accident. I was always going to study music theory, history, and analysis at university. I chose philosophy, expecting to drop it at the end of the first year, but it turned out I enjoyed it so much that I continued. One thing I realized in the end was philosophy would help me answer the questions about music that I wanted to ask. The musicians couldn't, but the philosophers could equip me to deal with those kinds of questions.

STANCE: What type of questions were you trying to answer? Were there any specific ones that really stuck with you?

DAVIES: Well, the first one was about the expression of emotion in music. You've got this non-sentient bit of noise—what sense could be made of the idea that it could express sadness or happiness? That was the first question that came up, and that was pretty much the subject of my Ph.D.

STANCE: To go off that into some more specific questions about your corpus, we were really interested in John Cage's 4'33". We watched a performance of it. In a lot of your work, you talk about thick versus thin performances. We were wondering if you would consider Cage's 4'33" to be a thin performance because there is no specified way to perform it?

DAVIES: I make a distinction between thick and thin musical works. The thick ones have quite a lot of detail that works constitutively, such as music specified by a score. Thin ones tend to leave more up to the performer. However thick the work is, the performer has got quite a lot of interpretation to do. But if it's thin, there's even more scope. If all you get is a tune and some chords, which is a lot of popular music, that's thin. There are many ways you could realize that specification and each of them would be an accurate realization, but they'd be very different. So, is 4'33" thick or thin? It's difficult to accommodate because it doesn't leave the performer to do anything. In that sense, the performer has very little musical freedom, which sounds like it's a thick work, but then it's got no content, except the sounds that happen at the time. In that sense, since all sorts of sounds could be happening at the time, it's thin.

STANCE: If someone's performing a work, is there a point in which it's performed so inauthentically or so off the mark that it becomes a different work rather than a version of the original?

DAVIES: It wouldn't become a different work. It would become a failed performance of a given work. What is inauthenticity in performance? Not everyone agrees with this, but on my account, it's failing to follow the work's determined instructions that you're given. An inauthentic performance of 4'33" might involve the musician picking up an instrument and playing something, anything, on it. Because the instruction for 4'33" is "be silent," any musical noise-making would render a performance of 4'33" inauthentic.

STANCE: Is there a reason to think that Cage intended the ambient sounds to be the music as opposed to a composition including nothing but rests? Why think of the ambient noise as the composed sound? Why isn't it just composed silence?

DAVIES: The fact is, Cage, I think, was confused about the work itself, even though he created it, because there are two possibilities. One is that it really is silent, and ambient sound is ambient; you shouldn't be paying attention to it. The other possibility is the piece takes ambient sound and makes it the noisy content. Cage described it in both terms. He wasn't clear enough about which of the two works it was. He says things like, "There is no such thing as silence." He says that because he went into an anechoic room which absorbs all sound. It turns out that if you put yourself in that situation, you start hearing all your bodily functions as sound. That led him to the conclusion there was no such thing as silence, so I prefer to talk about it as a work that takes noise that otherwise would be ambient as its content. I'd have to say different things about it if I thought it was the purely silent piece.

STANCE: What would those different things be if it was a purely silent piece?

DAVIES: I'm not exactly sure. I find the noisy work more interesting. The conclusion that I draw about this is that it's not music, but I'm not saying that in order to criticize it or to say it's not art. I think instead of being music, it's a piece of theater about the performance of music. I doubt I could say exactly the same in describing the purely silent work. That would be more like a musical work because in attending to it, you'd have to be putting out of your mind the sounds that were actually taking place and disregarding them, so you would approach that more like music than people actually approach 4'33".



STANCE: We do wonder if it is music, or at least some form of art that isn't music. What about silent films, where people created their own dialogue in some way? Do you see a different type of authenticity with that? Some people would look at a silent movie and say that it's not really a true movie, in the sense of what is a movie today.

DAVIES: I think we just adjust to the times with these things. I think black and white movies are still movies, even though they're not color. I think silent movies are still movies, even though there's no speech. Typically, they're not silent because there's usually something performing along with them.

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I'm going to change your question a little bit. A question might be, "Can we understand stuff from the past when people were thinking differently about it at the time?" The quick answer to that is yes, we can. We're actually very good at putting ourselves in other people's shoes or reimagining the past. If we couldn't do that, we couldn't understand a lot of historical literature. This brings up some interesting questions. Consider that today we might be morally sensitive about sexism and racism in ways people weren't in the past. How, then, are you going to read *Huckleberry Finn*? Are you going to be able to understand it? I think we keep our values, but at the same time, we should withhold the judgment of the past and see things as much as possible through their eyes in trying to understand what was happening.

Music is an interesting case of this. We have many kinds of music. We have many different sets of rules and expectations, and these change over time. The music of the eighteenth century doesn't sound like the music of the twenty-first century. What we do is adjust our expectations to what's appropriate so we can listen to eighteenth-century music and still understand and appreciate it. Equally, we can go from jazz to hip hop or any kind of music you want to name, which are stylistically very different kinds of music, and adjust our expectations accordingly. When I go to a folk concert, I don't expect things to go the way they would in a classical performance or in a rock concert, but I can go to all three.

STANCE: We wanted to ask a little bit more about the intentions of a creator. Your work mentions a relationship between the artist and the audience and how this influences a piece's ability to be perceived as art. Does the audience benefit from entering into their experience with some expectation of a relationship with the creator or artist?

DAVIES: If it's art, you are often as the audience trying to work out what's going on and why it's going on. That often means trying to understand what the maker or the artist was trying to do, so you'll be interested in their intentions, for sure.

As to the question of what makes it art—in general, I don't have very high standards. I would separate out popular and mass art from fine art, for example, but I think *The Sopranos* is art. I'm quite happy to talk about folk art, mass art, or popular art and use the term, meaning pretty much the same kind of thing. If all those things were as easy to create as people often seem to think, then maybe it wouldn't be art. In fact, there's a lot that goes into making something popular and accessible, and still having something to say in that medium. I've talked about the definition of art, but mostly I take it that we agree in very broad terms about what we're talking about with these things. Not a lot is going to hang on whether you call it art in the end. It's just that you've got something in front of you, and you're trying to understand it.

The other thing I should mention is sometimes people talk about art not only as a purely Western concept but as something that originated in the eighteenth century. So, if there wasn't art before that, then Shakespeare and Michelangelo wouldn't be art either in that view. People think that because, in earlier terms, the various arts were not always grouped together in the way that we now group them. The Greeks put music with mathematics and astronomy, for example, rather than with drama. In the eighteenth century, they all were put together in the configuration that we think of as the arts, but I think that view is mistaken. I think that Shakespeare did create art, and Michelangelo did create art. Even the cave painters in the Upper Paleolithic in Europe created art. I think art is found in all cultures, so it's not anything confined to the West. It's a very common human activity shared from society to society. This isn't to say we're going to be able to understand the art of other societies, or even recognize it. I'm sure if you came from some societies, you wouldn't be in a position to recognize 4'33" as art. You would just think, "What the hell are these people doing?"



STANCE: Something we noticed about your work is that you are adamant about non-Western definitions of art and how those works should still be considered art. There seem to be a lot of people who say that non-Western “art” shouldn’t even be considered art, but you disagree. Is this still a big debate being held today?

DAVIES: Well, people talk about what they know, and most people don’t know that much about the art of other cultures. It can be difficult to learn about the art of other cultures because their art is as rich as ours, and ours takes a lifetime to learn about, typically. Among philosophers, there’s a much broader view of what art is now than there was maybe forty or fifty years ago. I should add, in terms of my background, I did as much ethnomusicology as musicology. I was exposed to non-Western music in detail and had to analyze it, so it never occurred to me to think that other cultures didn’t have music.

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What got philosophers interested in the definition of art in the twentieth century was all these avant-garde works that started appearing. Marcel Duchamp was presenting the urinal as artwork, Andy Warhol was doing Campbell soup cans, and Cage was doing 4’33”. That really pushed people to say, “Gee, what is art? What makes it art?” They approached it primarily as a question of “should we be counting this avant-garde stuff as art, or shouldn’t we?” Whereas I don’t have any problem with all that stuff being art. Should we be counting the paintings from twenty thousand years ago on the walls of the caves as art? The answer to that for me is yes, we should. One thing’s for sure, if I could do that, I’d be an artist.

STANCE: Do you have any speculations about why people want to exclude what they do? You have a very inclusive sense of what counts as art. We have a suspicion that there’s something nefarious behind the “boundary police” or desire to exclude. Is that a well-founded suspicion? Are there innocent reasons for thinking that something should be excluded? What’s going on there politically?

DAVIES: I’m inclined to agree with you. I think all the way up to the end of the nineteenth century, people were racist and sexist and the rest of it. They dehumanized people of other cultures and women. I’m guessing that this was a matter of, in some cases at least, ignorance. I mean, you can’t justify the mistreatment of women as ignorance because men and women lived together. But certainly when it comes to other cultures, people were more interested in converting others than in understanding them. It’s a good thing that we changed, but along with that, respect for people of other cultures is the need for respect for their culture itself. I’m no anthropologist, but I don’t think there’s a culture in the world with primitive music. However, if you go back not that far, you’ll find descriptions of the arts of other cultures as primitive. What did they mean by that? Is it supposed to be naive like children’s stuff? In fact, when you look into the music of other cultures, they have not just music, but they also have music theory, technical terminologies, and all these kinds of things. I remember being impressed by an ethnomusicologist called Hugo Zemp, who years ago did the musicology of the Are’are, a small tribe of only a few thousand people. It took him three volumes to write this down, so there’s no such thing as primitive art, I think. There are lots of clever people out there, and they do very exciting things.

STANCE: We’d like to follow up on what you were saying about dehumanizing certain cultures and their artworks. Do you think that the change from dehumanizing to humanizing other cultures has gone far enough or that it could still go further?

DAVIES: I think it’s a long struggle. It’s long just because people are so complicated. Cultures can be so far from yours that it’s hard to get into them at all, to work out what’s going on with them. I tend to be impressed by the universals rather than the things that separate us. People in all cultures talk about birth, family, death, war, competition, trade, and more because there are certain aspects of human life that we think we share across the species. What gets built on gets more and more complicated, arcane, and exotic, and so it becomes harder and harder to understand. I’ve tried to do this; I’ve written about Balinese music and dance, for example, where what I’m doing is more ethnography than philosophy. But think about what you’ve got to do to try to understand another culture. You’ve got to start by trying to learn the language. Then you’ve got to talk to a lot of people, and it just takes a long time. Suppose you do all that. Well, now you’ve got two cultures you can move in. How many more are left? So, it becomes very difficult to get anything but the tiniest understanding of what’s going on in other cultures.



STANCE: Since you've been talking about similarities between different cultures, are there certain pan-cultural qualities of music that you found in your research?

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DAVIES: Well, I don't think there's a culture without music, and I don't think there's one without storytelling and forms of drama. Depiction, pictures of some kind, I think, is also universal. Those forms tend to be common across cultures, but then others are specific to cultures. Asia has a very spectacular history of shadow puppet plays that aren't part of our culture at all. In some cultures, flower decorating is an art, while in others it is not.

STANCE: Let's talk a bit deeper about the recognition of music as music, even across cultures. We wondered about improvised music and where that stands with you. We are curious if it contains more emotion, even if it isn't true to the original recording of a song. For example, I go to a lot of Ben Folds concerts, and it means more to me when he plays different riffs on the piano or adds to a piece using different vocal techniques. Does this go against what you suggest in your work because the performance loses a lot of the tokens from the original studio recordings?

DAVIES: There's a lot in that question. To start, you're running together two things that I would keep apart. One is what's expressed by the music, and the other is what's felt by the listener. The discussion about tokens gets into different questions of ontology such as: "What is the work?" "How does the performance stand in relation to the work?" Or even, "How does the recording stand in relation to the work?" I think there are a bunch of different correct answers to these questions, depending on the kind of music being talked about.

We often think about music as performance, and sometimes that music gets recorded, but when they make a recording, they make a recording as if it were a live performance. If you play a Beethoven sonata in the recording studio, even if you do it with more than one take, it's generally assumed you could play it live in real-time. In popular music, that's often not the case. I often describe this as music for studio performance, where they deliberately use the technology of the studio to do things that you can't do live, or at least you couldn't until there were things like Auto-Tune, and the studio got so compact that you could take it with you along to the concert. These musicians exploited the resources of the studio to produce sounds that you couldn't really do live. They issued these as vinyl records, tapes, CDs, or eventually, in digital forms. Those are not works for performance,

in my view, they're for playback. They're more like films than like what you normally get with music, which is a set of instructions telling people how to make the music live.

People can mix up the ontological types, so there's the question, "What is the primary work?" Some people think that in rock, it's the track or the record, rather than the live performance. They think because there's all this effort put in to create something special in the studio, so what the hell is going on when all these musicians do their live gigs? Some of the time they're just trying to emulate the recording as well as they can, but other times they say, "Oh, it's a live gig, the rules are different now," and they do something different. I don't have any prescriptions about this as long as we've got a way of describing the differences that are going on. If someone records and they present their recorded works as their songs, and then at the live gig they do something different than actually try to emulate the recordings, there's nothing wrong with that. I wouldn't be talking about tokens here, I'd just be saying that in the context of live performance, rather than trying to emulate the recording, they're doing something more free. It'll be a version of the song that's on the recording.

STANCE: Do you think that certain types of recordings are more authentic to what was produced in the studio? From a frequency standpoint, vinyl records get the full extent of a wavelength, whereas digital compresses sounds into smaller and smaller files. Is there a hierarchy of sorts to the way that music can be recorded and then played back?

DAVIES: If you talk about music that can be played live, we can hear a full range of pitches and volumes from 120 decibels to 20; it's a logarithmic scale. Because of limitations in the studio or limitations in transmission, studio productions often can't capture all of that. If the work was written for live performance, then there will be a hierarchy. The best equipment that can capture the widest span will be better than limited equipment that chops it down because the work is written for the full expanse. On the other hand, once you've got conventions of studio recording, and things are issued on disc, then the compression might not matter, though it's very striking to people who listen to it.

The volume on pop recordings hardly varies, whereas the volume in the performance "The Rite of Spring" goes from 120 decibels to 20. If

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you can't hear that in the recording, you're losing something. You don't lose anything in the Beach Boys, where there is absolutely no variation in volume, for instance. There, the compression isn't going to hurt it, so there is a hierarchy. Some equipment will be better than other equipment in what it captures, and some playback devices will be better than others. However good the recording is, if you play it on a little tin can, it's not going to reproduce all that's available. For some music, it matters, for some it doesn't.

STANCE: Is there a distinction between musical genres at a higher level?

DAVIES: I think there's a distinction between musical genres at a very small level, especially between closely related genres. Are country and western two kinds of music or one kind of music? That's a genre question. It might be that country and western should be treated as one slightly complicated genre. If it turned out you should treat them as two, it would be because you find differences between country and western that matter.

I think in music, the small differences matter a lot. I would be interested not only in genres but in subgenres. I mean, techno-dance music is listed within some encyclopedias as having twenty subgenres. It could be that they're just listing stuff from different musicians or provinces, but actually I think they're listing things with significant musical differences as well. To put this in a different way, I'm not good at lots of music because I'm not familiar with it nor immersed in it, but then you meet someone who is an expert, who can tell you all of the differences between bands that matter, and why that one is good and this other one isn't. There are musical experts who will be able to tell you what the differences are and what counts.

STANCE: Do you think that those small differences, as discussed within music and subgenres, can be applied to other forms of art such as literature or pictorial art?

DAVIES: Yes, all the arts are extremely rich and subtle. I do talk about all of them in my work, but I certainly specialize in music because I know more about it.

STANCE: Going back to philosophy of music, you tend to talk about profundity in terms of instrumental music. How does profundity translate to music with words, such as Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall?" Would music with words have to consider an important topic? Or is this type of music able to be profound because of its insight into a brilliant human mind, much like how instrumental music's profundity is measured?

DAVIES: There's a background to this topic. The first philosopher to write on musical profundity in recent decades was Peter Kivy. He argued that in order to be profound, you need a profound subject, and because instrumental music didn't have a subject at all, instrumental music couldn't be profound. Then various people who disagreed tried to produce arguments about how music could be profound without being about anything. I argued that it could be profound by displaying the cleverness of people, that they could make this stuff up. I write about instrumental music because that's where Kivy started. The moment you add words, since we all know that poetry and literature can be about profound subjects, you're halfway there. But if you wanted to find out what music was doing, you'd leave the words out. They would just be a complication.

So, is music with words profound? Here's the worry—maybe $E=MC^2$ is a profound observation in physics, and I set it to music. Have I done anything to make it more profound by setting it to music? The quick answer is, "Gee, it's very unlikely." It's hard to see how the music could contribute to the profundity. Maybe if I'm Beethoven or Mozart I could be adding to its profundity, but it looks like the words are doing most of the work.

STANCE: Is there a type or amount of cleverness that has to be displayed? I'm thinking of twelve-tone composition techniques or Grateful Dead drum solos, as opposed to just one more Haydn string quartet imitator. What's the content of the cleverness?

DAVIES: That's not going to be an easy question to answer. Twelve-tone technique is not clever in itself. You can program a computer to produce that in no time at all, and computers aren't necessarily clever; they're good at doing algorithms. Twelve-tone technique is just like an algorithm, so it's what you do with it when you use it that would make the music profound.

I don't think all music is profound or that it has to be; that's not necessarily what makes it great. There are some pieces of music that make you feel awe, and you think, "How is it possible to do that?" Or, "What an amazing thing that someone could think that up." That's the kind of cleverness that I've got in mind.

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I compare music to chess because chess isn't about anything important. I mean, you could treat it as a metaphor for war, but it's a game. Yet the people who play it at a certain level reveal minds that are extraordinary in their calculative abilities and intuitions. The same thing happens in music. People bring ideas together that you just couldn't have imagined would work, or they produce something that is so difficult to play and yet they can play it. There are all sorts of ways in which people can display their cleverness, but it's meant to have a certain awe-inspiring depth when it leads to profundity.

STANCE: I'm hung up on the twelve-tone idea. I love that you were quick to say that it's not profound. However, what are we going to do with poor Anton Webern who did it pre-algorithm, and possibly did it beautifully?

DAVIES: Yes, Webern is a great composer. He was a miniaturist, so nothing he wrote is longer than twelve minutes, and most of it is less than about four. He was shot by an American soldier when he went out for a smoke in 1945. There was a curfew, and he went out for a smoke and didn't come back, so that's what happened to him.

I don't know how much technical detail to get into. Webern doesn't just write twelve-tone. He designs a row in which the last six notes are the same intervals, but backwards and inverted to the first six, so it's like a mirror of itself. He does this kind of thing all the time. He uses very special rows, and the result is that most of his rows can be thought of as four notes instead of twelve, or six notes instead of twelve. Then he does some very clever stuff with instrumentation.

To understand what Webern is doing, consider that the letters of Bach's name in German are equivalent to B-flat, A, C, and B-natural. Bach wrote fugues based on those four notes, based on his name, so there's a tradition of doing this kind of thing, and Webern is working in exactly that same tradition. It's a way of producing very complicated structures from very small elements where everything is very tightly related, so that's why Webern might be profound.

When talking about Webern, we're talking about the 1930s and 1940s. This came from Arnold Schoenberg, who in 1923 used all twelve semitones in the scale in a certain order. The idea was to prevent privileging one note as the tonic above any other notes, and there were musical precedents for this that he could point to. At a certain point in the 1970s and 1980s, people were saying, "Well, if we serialized pitch, why don't we serialize everything else?" They just put it into a computer and pushed a button and let it run. You set up the parameters, and then everything that happens next is determined by the algorithm that you've set up. Other composers

of the time were saying, "Oh, we don't like this kind of determinism. What we want is freedom," so they used chance procedures to generate their music. All of these were various forms of avant-garde music of the day. The interesting thing was that people couldn't tell the difference between the sounds of the music that was composed entirely by chance and the music that was entirely determined. The composers thought they were doing completely different things, but the audiences could not discriminate between them. Draw your own moral of this story.

STANCE: You mentioned very briefly the difference between making something by chance and having something be determined. Can you go into more detail about that?

DAVIES: If you're doing it by chance, you might use a computer or a number generator, or you might roll dice. Cage was keen on taking the ego of the composer out of the composition process. He used the I Ching, which is a "throw things in the air and see what sticks," random method to remove himself from his own music. That's what I mean by chance. By determinism, I mean, you pick a series of notes and rhythms and volumes and whatever—and these don't have to coincide, they can overlap in different ways—then you just push a button, and each series runs through and then it repeats, and you've got all these layers. You might specify that the repeats are not exact. Maybe you repeat upside down the first time and backwards the next time, and once you've specified the series, then it determines all the notes that come out.

Sorry, this has turned into a music lesson. One of the interesting things is in the fourteenth century, composers made these isorhythmic motets where they were doing exactly this technique. They would have a series of pitches, a different series of rhythms, a different series of volumes, and they would let it run out until at some point way down the track, everything would end at the same point, and that would be the end of the piece. These are so complicated that you can't hear the sequences within them, but the idea was that God could hear them. So you wrote those things for God, who would admire their perfection, even though human listeners couldn't deal with the parts. I think the composers of the 1980s thought they might have been doing something similar because no one could follow the movement of the algorithms as they listened and it just ended up sounding like it was made up at random.



STANCE: So, is there more—not profundity—but substance to someone in the fourteenth century doing this all by hand, than a computer-generated algorithm doing it?

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DAVIES: Maybe, but if there's praise that goes with this, it goes to the composer rather than the piece. If we replace profundity with simplicity, it's not necessarily that there's a loss of value. You might think that "Greensleeves," an old English folk song, is a beautiful tune and perfectly good, even though it's not long or complicated enough to be profound. Folk songs are trying to do something simple, so you're not going to get many profound folk songs, unless it's in the lyrics, but that's not to say anything bad about folk songs.

STANCE: To return to authenticity, can the same idea of instances of a musical performance be applied to movies that are made from classical literature? In class, we were talking about *Gnomeo and Juliet*, and whether it would be considered an authentic instance of a Shakespeare play.

DAVIES: My view is that these are adaptations of the work, they're not instances, because they have to be changed in ways that would normally be work-identifying in order to accommodate them to the new medium. I say the same about musical transcriptions. For instance, there might be a symphony written for an orchestra, and it is transcribed so it can be played on a piano. In my view, the transcription is a different work from the original, but it clearly derives from the symphonic work that it is based on. It becomes a different work because it has to be filtered through a new medium. The same applies when you turn a novel into a play or into a movie. The screen adaptations are distinct but derivative works.

STANCE: Keeping on the same idea, in your article, "The Hypothetical Intentionalist's Dilemma," are we correct in understanding that you object to the argument that what the author intended does not give the work the most artistic interpretation?

DAVIES: I wouldn't put what I say into those terms. Put the question this way: do the artist's intentions determine the content of the work so that when we understand the work, we're always understanding what the artist intended? My answer to that question is no. There's also a different question: is there any value in consulting artists' intentions? My answer to that is yes, of course. They're

doing something extremely difficult, they're usually good at what they do, and they know what they're trying to do. The place you might start is by asking the artist their intentions if you have access to that. A lot of the time, we don't, but not because intentions and mental life are inscrutable; that's not what I think. It's just they're dead and didn't leave a record. If you have their intentions, then you should consult them.

Now, do the intentions determine the best interpretation or the proper interpretation? It seems to me not always. In talking about literature, for example, there can be things that happened that the author certainly didn't have in mind consciously, and I wouldn't immediately leap to saying that they had them in mind unconsciously. Things that were beyond their control happened that are worth taking into account in the interpretation. I'm not anti-intentionalist in the sense that I think you should leave the intentions alone, but I don't think the quest to understand and interpret the artwork is always solely an attempt to understand what the artist was trying to do. Intentionalists think the meaning of the work is determined by intentions. There are actual intentionalists, and there are modest actual intentionalists. This comes in various philosophical flavors.

The hypothetical intentionalist is someone who thinks intentions matter, but we're talking about the intentions of a hypothesized author. I'm inclined to think if the author is hypothesized, then they don't have intent. Hypothesized intentions aren't intentions in my view. Hypothetical intentionalists come in two varieties at least. One of them says you can make up any author. You imagine that a text you're reading was authored by a person you make up, and this person doesn't have to be at all like the actual author. If you do that, and if different people make up different imagined authors, then they're going to get different interpretations. The most important version of hypothetical intentionalism says that the author you hypothesize has the public persona of the actual author. They're like the actual author, apart from all the private things that audiences aren't expected to know about the actual author.

Hypothetical intentionalism comes apart from actual intentionalism and in very specific circumstances; namely, the circumstance in which we know that what was intended by the actual author is inferior to what we get when we hypothesize about the actual author. For example, there's a book called *Watership Down*, which is about these rabbits that are forced to move out of their warren and go and find somewhere else to live. People read this as a sort of allegory about human life, or uncertainty, or something like that.



When the author was asked if that was what it was about, he said, “No, it’s a rabbit story.” There we’ve got a rich interpretation of it as an allegory, and we might hypothesize that it’s the most reasonable thing to think the author wanted, so there’s your hypothetical intentionalism. It turns out if you’re an actual intentionalist and the author says, “No, I didn’t mean that,” then that’s just the end of it, whereas if you’re a hypothetical intentionalist, you say, “Oh, well, I don’t care about the actual intention here; it’s reasonable to think that this was an allegory.”

STANCE: So, then, what is the distinction between an intention by an author and a truth to a work? Is there a known truth that we can get to within a work? Or is it all interpretation?

DAVIES: Interpretation can have different goals, so it might be that I interpret the work in order to bring out the sexism of the time. That won’t have anything to do with what the author intended, it’s simply that the author was sexist in line with the times. They weren’t trying to illustrate their sexism in the work. That’s a perfectly legitimate goal of interpretation, but it’s not uncovering a truth that the author intended the work to possess.

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If the goal is to understand the work while respecting its identity as the work that was produced by that artist, then what you produce can be assessed for truth. There can be multiple interpretations, but that doesn’t mean that there are multiple truths. What you have is one very big, complicated truth with lots of disjunctions in it. Often, talking about the truth won’t be helpful because each interpretation will be a partial account of some much bigger truth, which is what you get when you put all the valid interpretations together.

One intention authors can have is that their works be ambiguous and multilayered, so uncovering what was intended might not give you a straightforward story—which might be quite deliberate on the part of the artist. There are also artists who specifically refuse to answer questions about their intentions, implying that the audience shouldn’t be asking or shouldn’t need those things.

Here’s a nice story about this. Harold Pinter, the playwright, produced a play, *The Birthday Party*, in which it’s very hard to work out what’s going on, but basically two guys bully and mess up a third guy, named

Stanley. A woman wrote to Pinter saying, “I can’t understand your play without knowing the answers to three questions: ‘Who are the two men? Where did Stanley come from? Were they all supposed to be normal?’” Pinter wrote back saying, “Madam, I’m sorry, I can’t understand your letter without knowing the answer to these three questions: ‘Who are you? Where did you come from? Are you supposed to be normal?’” He just turned the questions that she’d asked of him back onto her.

STANCE: Should the artist get credit for creating a piece with multiple meaningful interpretations? Or does the existence of these several distinct interpretations create confusion and detract from the piece?

DAVIES: They should get credit if they intended to do it, and if they succeeded. Could they overcomplicate the piece? That’s certainly possible. Sometimes the complications will produce richness and subtlety, and sometimes they’ll produce confusion. The same work performed for different audiences could be like that. Then what you would do is try and work out which audience was better qualified to understand what was going on.

STANCE: Changing the subject again, we noticed what looked like a discrepancy to us, and we want to get a little clarification. In “Music, Fire, and Evolution”, you have a discussion on how music is not a technology but is instead a product of human evolution. On the other hand, in “Art and Science: A Philosophical Sketch of their Historical Complexity and Codependency,” there’s a discussion on how art and science are codependent on one another, with scientific innovation referring to the technological advancements such as cellos and cameras, which are then used to create art. Can you explain a little bit more about both of those ideas and how they correlate or don’t correlate?

DAVIES: Aniruddh Patel argued that music is a transformative technology. If you’re looking at things from an evolutionary perspective, they could either be adaptations, in which case they help things reproduce and survive, or they can be spandrels, which are accidental byproducts of adaptations. An example of a spandrel is an armpit, a navel, or male nipples. They are useless because they are not good for feeding babies. If that carves up the whole space, then the question becomes: is music an adaptation in which it helps us survive, or is it a spandrel, which means it’s useless? There’s a third option: that it’s purely cultural. On the one hand, when we’re talking about technology, this is all we’re talking about. By “technology” we just mean a product of human culture that can’t be tied directly to evolution. That was what Patel was trying to argue. The important point here is that the thing we’re talking about, transformative technology, is a product of culture, not biology, but it’s one that can



change us completely. It can be that important. It's a change brought on by culture, not by biology; that was what he was arguing. I've got nothing against having the third category.

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What I did was challenge Patel's argument that music is best described as a transformative technology, that music is purely a cultural matter with no biological basis. I didn't try to settle the question of whether music is an adaptation or spandrel because both are connected to biology. What I was arguing against in "Music, Fire, and Evolution" is that music is best considered a transformative technology similar to fire. There's no gene for making fire. Nevertheless, once you've got fire in your culture, life changes for everybody. There are so many good things you can do with fire once you control it. Indeed, it has probably shortened our guts and increased the size of our brain as a species. This is a case in which culture actually changed biology, rather than the other way around.

In "Art and Science: A Philosophical Sketch of their Historical Complexity and Codependency," I can excuse myself by saying I was only one of the three authors in that case, so it was probably someone else who wrote the passage you're drawing attention to. Rather than doing that, what I would say is in that article, the talk about technology is about the sense of technology that you mean—actual bits of apparatus that you can do things with. The word "technology" is being used in slightly different senses in each of these papers. In the first, I'm just following Patel's usage. In the second, we are using the term more in the way that you're proposing. His term fits that very general description, but we tend to think of technology in terms of machines, and that's not what Patel had in mind.

STANCE: We find ourselves agreeing with you over and over again, and we're suspicious of feeling so convinced, so help us see a view where we might disagree with you? Is there a debate in which you are in the minority? Could you describe the nature of whatever that debate might be?

DAVIES: I'm definitely in the minority in my interpretation of literature. I argue for a position I call "value maximizing," where the purpose of interpreting literature is to get the interpretation that makes the work as good as it can be. Now there might be more than one interpretation that will be equally maximizing. It still allows for multiple interpretations. In the case of literature, conventions of language are sufficient to fix the meaning of the word. You don't need to appeal to the intentions, though they can be a good guide. Most people who talk about literature are intentionalists, so I'm definitely in the minority there.

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I should add that there are certain things in literature that seem to require intentions: metaphor, allusion, reference, and quotation. I'm an intentionalist with some things. In particular, I think artists' intentions determine the genres of their works. If an artist tells you they're writing a tragedy, and you think it's a comedy, then you just have to take their word for it.

A few people are anti-intentionalists and think you shouldn't ever consult artist intentions. Most are intentionalists. I'm a value maximizer. Further, I think that hypothetical intentionalists are value maximizers who are pretending to be intentionalists. According to Jerrold Levinson, if you can hypothesize two interpretations, both consistent with the author that you proposed, how do you settle between them? You go for the one that makes the work better. What breaks the tie for the hypothetical intentionalist is value, which is something like the value maximizer. That is a place where I'm out of kilter with most other people.

I'm also not convinced that my theory of musical expressiveness is right. People have convinced me that it's wrong, or at least they've certainly argued against it.

I'm not even sure that I'm doing philosophy anymore. My last book I don't think is philosophy, though it was good fun to write; it's on human adornment. I became interested in it by thinking about



human evolution. Having written a book about whether art-making is a biological behavior, *The Artful Species*, it struck me that if you were really looking for a thing that we are all obsessed with, something true for all cultures and all times, it turns out to be bodily adornment. So, I wrote a book about beads, tattoos, make-up, and all that kind of stuff. I'm sure it would have been different if I hadn't been a philosopher, but I don't know how much philosophy there is in it.

STANCE: What are some of the biggest issues or conversations currently within the world of aesthetics that you think undergraduate students should know about?

I THINK THAT THE BIGGEST DEVELOPMENTS OF THE LAST TWENTY YEARS ARE IN "EVERYDAY AESTHETICS," SUCH AS DRINKING A CUP OF COFFEE OR SCRATCHING AN ITCH.

DAVIES: I think that the biggest developments of the last twenty years are in "everyday aesthetics," such as drinking a cup of coffee or scratching an itch. Environmentalist aesthetics has become a big area. I think the stuff about the connection between aesthetic and ethical value is also a growth area. I don't work in these areas myself particularly, but they have all become important. I think work on art and evolution has a bit of a following. As I said, the problem for philosophers with the avant-garde twentieth-century art, not with the origins of art, has also come up a fair bit. There is also work about negative experiences. There didn't use to be books on disgust, and now people are writing them. There's also more on aesthetics of senses beyond those of sight and hearing, on touch and smell, for example.

STANCE: When I think of disgust, I think of it as a moral reaction, not an aesthetic reaction.

DAVIES: There's a set of paradoxes. Why do we feel sorry for Anna Karenina when she is a fictional character that we know doesn't exist? Why do we go along to see tragedies when we know they're going to be about dreadful events befalling important people? The paradox of disgust is the question of why we are attracted to artworks that are disgusting when we know in advance what we're going to get. Much of art, instead of being about beauty, is pretty disgusting. Francis Bacon's paintings, for example, would be offered here. Why are people interested in such artworks and why do they value

them? The paradox of disgust follows the same connection. There is art that normally would be negative, but nevertheless, we're still interested in it and even attracted to it.

STANCE: This might take us too much into details, but I'm trying to go through my conceptual categories. I think of "grotesque" as an aesthetic response, but I don't think of any art as disgust-engendering.

DAVIES: If we take the cheap view of that, look at *American Psycho* and all those slasher, horror movies. The paradox of horror is in the same camp here. It's a horror movie and you know there is going to be blood and guts and frightening, yet still, you go along? What's wrong with you? "What can there be to enjoy about that?" is the question.

STANCE: I'm thinking of Ivan Albright's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. When I look at it and experience disgust, I think it's because of the moral component that the picture is supposed to embody, but I could potentially see the work as grotesque independent of the moral experience. Therefore, I'm not really thinking about the paradoxes. I'm thinking about my experiences with a piece of art.

DAVIES: I don't know what I think about the category of the grotesque. The books I've got in mind all have "disgust" in their titles. One way to think about what's going on in these books is that people are expanding the notion of the aesthetic and going beyond the boundaries of art itself. Aesthetics and art overlap. Traditionally a lot of art has been about beauty, but they're not the same. There's an aesthetic of nature, of animals, and of people that's not the same as the aesthetics of art. There are also forms of art appreciation that don't involve the aesthetic at all. They are much more technical or formal. I see these as separate categories.

When I teach, I teach the philosophy of art. I don't actually teach aesthetics because my course doesn't have anything about environmental aesthetics. If you ask me about philosophy of art in general, it tends to be neglected in contemporary Anglo-American analytic philosophy. This is unfairly so, in my opinion, because philosophy of art is just an applied area of philosophy, and an extremely interesting one that deals with questions that have to do with

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meaning, interpretation, the nature of emotion, questions of ontology, questions in metaphysics, and questions of value. Philosophy of art ranges over almost all main topics in philosophy, but they come up in a very special form when you ask them about art. The value of the philosophy of art is that it's a great way to get into all sorts of areas and questions of philosophy. At least some philosophers thought that. The major philosophers in history who talked about art were Hume, Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Hegel, and Heidegger, but when you go back to Aristotle, he wrote about tragedy, the sublime, and comedy, which is not a subject that gets tacked on to aesthetics. Unfortunately, we've lost Aristotle's work on comedy.

STANCE: Thank you for talking with us. This was very interesting, especially for someone who has never really thought about the philosophy of aesthetics before.

DAVIES: Of course. As I pointed out at the beginning, musicians weren't the people who could answer my questions about this, it was the philosophers. Thank you very much.

