

Introduction

In 1949, two years before his untimely death, Ludwig Wittgenstein said to his friend Maurice O'Connor Drury regarding his current work on aspect-seeing: "It is impossible for me to say in my book one word about all that music has meant in my life. How then can I hope to be understood?" (Drury 2017, 136). This Element is an attempt to make philosophical sense of what Wittgenstein undeniably thought was the deepest connection between the experience and the life of music, and his philosophical progression.

As a research topic, Wittgenstein's remarks on music suffered prolonged neglect by both Wittgenstein scholars and philosophers of music. The former for a long time opted to consider them as subpar, insignificant, or otherwise irrelevant to the main body of Wittgenstein's philosophy and its evolution. The latter often sideline them, at least in the stronghold of contemporary analytic philosophy of music. For instance, Scruton (1999, viii) pointed out that Wittgenstein's writings "have little to say about the problems which I believe to be central to the discipline: the relationship between sound and tone, the analysis of musical meaning, and the nature of the purely musical experience." Similarly, Davies (2011, 298) observed that Wittgenstein "did not develop an account of music as such, or any systematic theory of aesthetics."

The last two decades have seen a steadily growing renewed interest in Wittgenstein's remarks on music and acknowledgment of their philosophical relevance and importance. The contribution of this Element is in its twofold purpose: not only to show how the musical examples, topics, and images he explored and investigated were used to test, refine, and develop his own philosophical views, but also to use the ensuing understanding of Wittgenstein's view on music as a foil to better appreciating his otherness as a philosopher of music, as he set himself to undo some gravitational forces that still pull together and shape current debates in analytically inclined philosophy of music. Hence, I would like to set myself apart from some distinct tendencies in the extant literature.

First, I avoid biographizing Wittgenstein's remarks on music. I see this as an exegetical pitfall, which may yield to a variety of causal fallacies in one's reading of the remarks.¹ Focusing primarily on Wittgenstein's preferred musical repertoire, his fondness of certain composers and dislike of others, his cultural upbringing as a child, or his personal habits does not guarantee in any way solid insight into, or justification of his philosophical thinking and its progression.

¹ Take for example Szabados's (2014, 41) claim that Hanslick's musical formalism influenced Wittgenstein's view on music in the *Tractatus* via "early nursery training" at the Wittgenstein Palais in Vienna. Such an argument runs the risk of begging the question.

In some cases, as it happens, it is even quite the contrary. For instance, Brahms, whose music Wittgenstein's adored, yet contrarily opted to associate his own movement of thought with the compositional free-spirit of Bruckner (Guter 2019a); or Mahler, whose music Wittgenstein despised, yet attributed philosophical importance to it (Guter 2015). Biographical details matter, but only as pointers for the inflection of a given remark, for the appropriate register for taking it in, not as a causal determinant for its justification, rigor, or upshot.

Second, I avoid starting from some broader programmatic commitment to one exegetical orthodoxy or another.² The merits of this kind of reading notwithstanding, it inevitably has the effect of a powerful filtering lens. It brings to the fore certain elements, while downplaying or sidelining others. Such a reading requires philosophical justification, which may be external to the corpus being interpreted, and full disclosure concerning the demarcation of the scope of the reading and its built-in limitations. I maintain that this kind of project shifts the focus away from the fine-grained textual embeddedness of the remarks on music, rendering them as serviceable means for a greater cause.

Third, for similar reasons, I avoid starting from standard gear analytic philosophy of music (concerning specialized topics such as ontology, expression, representation, etc.) and then trying to cast Wittgenstein's remarks on music in accordance with a philosophical tradition, whose most basic concepts, as Scruton (2004, 1) pointed out, "became articulated, during the twentieth century, in ways that were inimical to Wittgenstein's vision." If my goal in this Element is also to flesh out Wittgenstein's otherness as a philosopher of music, then his remarks on music must speak for themselves in their original philosophical occasion or context.

Finally, I am also not interested in the didactic exercise of starting from some interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophical ideas or concepts (early or late) and then utilizing his remarks on music for the sake of generating a theoretical angle in musicology or music theory, that is, approximating Wittgenstein's remarks on music to a body of knowledge pertaining somehow to a conceptual determination of the object "music." Such a tendency (mostly among musicologists who read Wittgenstein) once again shifts the focus away from the fine-grained textual embeddedness of Wittgenstein's remarks on music. I also find this sort of interpretation to be counter-intuitive. Despite his wealth of remarks on music and musicians in the *Nachlass*, Wittgenstein does not seem to hold a theory of music. Indeed, one would not expect him to devise such a theory, and it would be wrong to assume that what he says about music should be taken simply as the foundation of a systematic account of music.

² An excellent example is Appelqvist's (2023) reading of Wittgenstein as a thoroughbred Kantian.

Thus, I opt to start from a close reading of Wittgenstein’s writing on music, as embedded in their respective context, seeing how they play out in his philosophy. Most of his remarks on music cannot be regarded as self-sufficient, and must be read in their original context, and more often than not, also against the appropriate texts and background ideas. The question of context becomes even more pressing from the perspective of musicology, music theory, and performance practice. While an attempt to glean from Wittgenstein’s remarks on music a genuine insight into this or that musical piece might result in disappointment, it is nonetheless imperative to approach them from a musically informed standpoint. Some of his historically or technically confused remarks on music do have a point, which often proves to be philosophically important regardless of the status of their musicological soundness. In such cases, a musically informed context must be brought into the discussion in order to appreciate the point being made. Hence, when confronted with nonstandard use of technical terms or with what appears to be a musical prejudice, my interpretative method will be to see Wittgenstein’s point in bringing up the issue in the given context rather than to accept it as is, hook, line, and sinker, or to dismiss it as being musically unsound.³

My discussion has both a systematic facet and a historical facet. In the first section I offer a systematic overview of underlying themes, which account for the importance of music for Wittgenstein’s philosophizing. I start with the very idea of making music together, which also orients my ensuing discussion toward Wittgenstein’s remarks on music, which fully engage his philosophical progression, and away from those which are mostly an occasion for him to merely voice his cultured taste, hence are secondary for my purpose here. I then set up the “stereoscopic” focal point of my argument by contrasting what I call the “music reproduction mechanisms axis” (concerning such devices as the gramophone, the pianola, and the music box) with the “language-as-music axis.” The following three sections are historical, following the standard division between the early, the middle, and the late periods in Wittgenstein’s philosophy, and there I aim to show how these underlying themes play out in the shapeshifting landscapes of Wittgenstein’s philosophical progression. I offer a deflationary account of music in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, based on historical and textual evidence concerning his empirical research of the nature and importance of rhythm in music at the time before he began his work on the *Tractatus*. I then portray Wittgenstein’s overarching reorientation of the concept of depth pertaining to music in the aftermath of his anthropological turn, and

³ For concrete examples for my interpretative method, see the analysis of Wittgenstein’s musical fragments in Guter and Guter (2023).

against the backdrop of the outlook of German Romanticism. Wittgenstein’s complex, philosophically forward-looking response culminates in his own unique view of musical profundity in terms of what he calls “Menschenkenntnis” (knowing human beings). In the final, fifth section I offer my twofold answer to the double-edged question, which I posed in this introduction, concerning the importance of music to Wittgenstein’s philosophical progression and the otherness of this sort of philosophical importance vis-à-vis convictions and debates that typify current analytically inclined philosophy of music.

1 Language as Music

1.1 Making Music Together

In a singular passage from a letter, which Wittgenstein wrote to his friend Rudolf Koder in 1930 (LK, 37–38), we encounter a candid disclosure of his primary attitude to music:

The only possibility for getting to know a piece of music is indeed this: you play it and thereby notice distinctly that you play it and the passages still without understanding. You can then either not listen any further to these voices (inside you) and play the piece with no understanding as before, or listen to the voices, and then you will be prompted to play the appropriate passages again and again and, as it were, investigate. The less lazy you are, the further this will go, that is to say, the more passages will emerge for you as still not really felt. For the inner voices will be encouraged to speak by listening to them once, and more or less brought to silence by ignoring them. The more you listen the more you will hear, and voices that would have been hardly audible at first will then speak more and more distinctly and new ones will turn up. Before that, the laziness of every man shies one away and one has the feeling: as soon as I let in for these voices, who knows where they could eventually bring me. And yet one can only say: listen carefully and follow what it says to you, and you will see, you will then hear more and more distinctly, and you will know more and more about yourself.⁴

This passage broaches topics and themes that will repeatedly show up in the following sections under various interconnected guises and contexts. First and foremost, the primacy of playing, that “dance of human fingers” on the piano keyboard (CV, 42 [36]), and the actual phrasing and rephrasing of a passage in order to characterize it. Yet also the realization that a certain phrasing and characterization of a certain passage may elude me; the investigative nature of making such comparisons; the daring choice to take on a specific phrasing as an

⁴ My translation.

invitation to traverse a whole field of possibilities, enabling meaningful distinctions between right and wrong, in hope of reaching one that would necessitate itself, to see in the score something I had not seen before; the richness of character which ensues from such traversing and the sense of deepening as an articulation of possibilities that serves and instances further possibilities for characterization of what may be heard. And, finally, most importantly, what such deepening can teach me about myself, how phrasing and characterizing change me in return – there is always a choice to be made, an effort is required, indeed, even courage is called for.

As Hagberg (2017, 73) points out, Wittgenstein recovers in his writing on music “a full-blooded sense of practice-focused embodiment against the abstractions of a disembodied idealism (of a kind that, given the inducements of certain linguistic forms, remain ever-present in aesthetics).” Importantly, one such abstraction is the entrenched idea of “the musical work” as has been traditionally set against the idea of “the musical event.” Wittgenstein’s (CV, 60 [52]) notion of an interaction (*Wechselwirkung*) between music and language⁵ is geared toward a conception of music (and language) as a deed, as something that people do, as an ever-open invitation to learn, listen and play.⁶ It recovers the sense in which playing music is not merely subservient to the musical work. Rather, musical works are there for us to play, for ourselves, for others, and, most importantly, with others.

Apart from certain well-demarkated remarks, in which Wittgenstein primarily gives voice to his cultured taste in composers and musical repertoire, the philosophical focal point in many of his more textually integrated passages on music is the kind of mindful human encounter that is captured by that inviting German verb *musizieren* – “Mindless speaking and speaking which is not mindless,” says Wittgenstein (MS 129, 115), “are to be compared to mindless music making (*musizieren*) and music making which is not mindless.”⁷ The passage from the letter to Koder exemplifies the latter, sought-after case. Here the idea of musical understanding displaces that of musical meaning.⁸ For Wittgenstein, we can have no idea what musical meaning might be unless we have some grasp of what distinguishes the one who hears with understanding from the one who merely hears. This is the crux of the notion of musicality,⁹ which, I will argue in the next section, has established itself as a philosophical

⁵ I discuss this further in Section 4. ⁶ Cf. BB, 166.

⁷ Wittgenstein alternates between “playing a musical piece” and “making music.” All references to Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass* are to *Wittgenstein Source* (WS). All translations from the *Nachlass* are mine, unless indicated otherwise. All other quotations from Wittgenstein conform to the print editions, as specified in the list of references at the end of this Element. Modifications of these quotations are flagged by a footnote.

⁸ See Scruton (2004). ⁹ See LC, I:17.

driving force for Wittgenstein from the very beginning of his career, strikingly even before the time of the *Tractatus*.

This brings to the fore an idea, which is best captured in Schütz's (1951) phrase "mutual tuning-in relationships."¹⁰ According to Schütz (1951, 96–97), this relationship, which is exemplified in making music together,

is established by the reciprocal sharing of the other's flux of experiences in inner time, by living through a vivid present together, by experiencing this togetherness as a "We". Only within this experience does the other's conduct become meaningful to the partner tuned in on him – that is, the other's body and its movements can be and are interpreted as a field of expression of events within his inner life.

Such reciprocity "is bound to an occurrence in the outer world, which has the structure of a series of events [which are embodied in facial expressions, gait, posture, ways of handling instruments etc.] polythetically built up in outer time" (Schütz 1951, 97).

The importance of mutual tuning-in relationships for Wittgenstein is best captured in his occasional explicit probing into the idea of musical simultaneity, searching for the "musical now," without which there can be no making music together, and as a matter of fact, there can be no music as we normally understand the term.¹¹ I argued elsewhere (Guter 2019b) that Wittgenstein's emphasis on mutual tuning-in relationships shows clearly in his middle-period reversal of Augustine's prioritizing of memory-time in his account of the specious present (famously couched in musical terms in Augustine's *Confessions*). Wittgenstein subsumed memory-time under what he called "information time" – the order of events, involving the specification of time-references by means of public, observable chronology, which is implemented not only by means of chronometers and calendars, but also, and more importantly, by means of consulting other people, as well as documents, diaries, manuscripts, and other modes of making records and structuring narratives. In order not to fall prey to the image of musical experience as a kind of, say, seashell that everyone carries with him close to his ear, and to the corresponding specter of a metaphysical owner for each such seashell, we must acknowledge that our utterances about our musical experiences, if they are to be used meaningfully, must rely on the framework of our ordinary language.

Relying on the order of "information time" in music involves the innumerable, multiform specific ways of characterizing all that is there is to behold when

¹⁰ The title of this section is a nod to Schütz's seminal essay.

¹¹ See e.g., CV 85 [75], 92 [80 – the transcription here is wrong; hence the English translation is misleading].

we make music together, rendering our musicality manifest, including the experience of musical motion through rhythm and structure, the identification and re-identification of musical materials, the fine nuances of musical expression, and the overarching considerations of performance practice, of genre and style. Wittgenstein's own examples broach this broad scope of musicality: hearing a theme as a march or as a dance;¹² hearing a certain bar as an introduction or in a certain key;¹³ experiencing a certain interpretation of a musical passage as inevitable;¹⁴ playing a passage with more intense or with less intense expressiveness, with either stronger or lesser emphasis on rhythm and structure;¹⁵ playing a passage with the correct sort of expression;¹⁶ hearing one thing as a variant of another;¹⁷ rephrasing a variation in such a way that it could be conceived as a different variation on the same theme, hearing a theme differently in a repetition;¹⁸ hearing a melody differently after becoming acquainted with the composer's style.¹⁹

For Wittgenstein, these are all examples of aspect perception.²⁰ They all pertain unequivocally to ways in which "character" in music is drawn: timbre, dynamics, balance, articulation, tempo, beat division, and rhythmic flexibility. All of them prominently exhibit not only the primacy of playing in giving rise to the said experience, but also its ineliminably open-ended investigative character in one's attempt to find the right balance of elements, as Wittgenstein underscored in his letter to Koder. According to Floyd (2018a, 368), characterizing involves "the 'coming into view' of a scheme of possibilities available for characterization given a particular mode of characterization." We patently need to seek the right level and arrangement of elements in order to reveal something, to discover ways in which possibilities are revealed and may necessitate themselves. The tentative phrase "inner voices" in Wittgenstein's letter can be replaced by the logical notion of possibility. For Wittgenstein, aspects are precisely spaces of possibilities that are there to be perceived. In this sense, where Wittgenstein says in the letter that the more one listens to these

¹² PPF §209 [PI, xi, 206]. I use the 2009 edition of the *Philosophical Investigations* throughout this Element. References to "Philosophy of Psychology: A Fragment" (PPF), which used to be known as Part II of *Philosophical Investigations*, are cited from both the 2009 and 1958 editions. References to the latter are given in square brackets.

¹³ RPPI §; Z §208. ¹⁴ RPPI §22. ¹⁵ RPPI §507. ¹⁶ LWI §688.

¹⁷ RPPI § 508; RPPII §494. ¹⁸ RPPI §517. ¹⁹ LWI §774.

²⁰ These, and many other of Wittgenstein's musical examples for aspect perception, far exceed the import of his onetime duck-rabbit example (PPF §128 [PI, xi, 194]), which is commonly referred to in the literature as a paradigmatic case. I agree with Baz (2000, 100) that focusing on the duck-rabbit example is philosophically misleading, since it is simply not typical of aspects that they "will come in pairs, and that most people will be able to see the two, and to flip back and forth between them at will. It is also not typical of aspects that they will be elicited from us as part of a psychological experiment or a philosophical illustration." See also Cavell (1979, 354ff).

“inner voices” the more one hears, and “voices” that would have been hardly audible at first will then speak more and more distinctly and new ones will turn up, he was actually making a general point about aspects. In Floyd’s (2018a, 366) words, “with success, the ‘face’ of what is characterized shines through in a comprehensible and communicable way, affording us ways to see likenesses and differences, and ways to go on discussing and drawing out from the articulation further aspects of what is characterized that are there to be seen in and by means of it.” Wittgenstein’s point to Koder in the letter is that success requires a choice to enter a mutual tuning-in relationship – that is, to play and listen, even for oneself²¹ – and that this task is patently open-ended.

This sort of seeking out intimacy brings up another important point about aspects in contradistinction to cases in which we describe objects of perception in order to inform others of something, which for whatever reasons they cannot perceive by themselves, and whose perceived features are supposed to be independent of one’s experience of it. Such language games of informing do not necessitate any form of intimacy. By contrast, when attempting to share an aspect, the other person needs to be there so she can trace my characterization. Perceiving the object for what it is (a visual configuration or a progression of tones) is not the issue, but rather characterizing what possibilities are there (a smile, or an answer to a previous passage, which we would characterize as a question). In such cases, whatever we do to give voice to the perceiving of the aspect, to enable the other person to share the aspect with us, says Wittgenstein (RPPI §874), is not offered “to inform the other person,” but rather to “find one another” (*sich finden*).²² As Baz (2020, 6) says, appreciating aspects “makes for a particular type of opportunity for seeking intimacy with others, or putting it to the test.” Availing myself of Schütz’s (1951) words, I may say that, for Wittgenstein, as we open up to further characterizations in music, we experience this togetherness intimately as a “We.”

Wittgenstein’s final striking remark in the passage from his letter to Koder connects the idea of investigative characterization with our ability to know human beings (ourselves and others), to see the face of the human. This places Wittgenstein’s remarks on music also in the context of the history of ideas as pertaining to conceptualizing the profundity of the art of music. This is his take on a venerable Romantic theme, which is encapsulated in Wackenroder’s (1971, 191) words, “the human heart becomes acquainted with itself in the mirror of

²¹ Schütz (1951) argues that mutual tuning-in relationships obtain also when we listen to a recording of music or even when one attends to music in one’s mind.

²² In the print edition, *sich finden* is translated as “being in touch with one another.” I find this unnecessarily cumbersome, certainly when used in the first person.

musical sounds.” Wittgenstein reworked and gradually interweaved this conception of musical profundity into his forward thinking about the philosophic entanglements of language and the mind.²³

1.2 Gramophones, Pianolas, and Music Boxes

Allusions to mechanical means of musical reproduction appear regularly in Wittgenstein’s writings from the *Tractatus* to his late-vintage, post-*Philosophical Investigations* texts. They comprise an important distinct axis in Wittgenstein’s philosophical progression for the seemingly improbable reason that they are all unmusical. Yet, that is their point, and therein lies their philosophical purpose. I find it useful to bracket them here as a foil to Wittgenstein’s notion of musicality, which is at the center of this Element.

We first encounter the gramophone at the very heart of the *Tractatus* (TLP 4.014–4.0141) as part of an analogy, which Wittgenstein employs to introduce his picture theory. The analogy is supposed to elucidate Wittgenstein’s idea that language stands in an internal relation of depicting to the world. The odd fact that the gramophone epitomizes Wittgenstein’s treatment of music at the time of the *Tractatus* introduces an anomaly into the trajectory of his thinking about music, which I will tackle head-on in the next section. For now, it will be instructive to point out that Wittgenstein himself acknowledged that the gramophone is not musical precisely in the sense that I explored in the previous section. Drury (2017, 44–45) reports an occasion on which listening together with Wittgenstein to a recording of Pablo Casals playing the cello led to a discussion on how recording technology had improved from their days together in Cambridge with the arrival of long-play records. Wittgenstein’s comment was that “it is so characteristic that, just when the mechanics of reproduction are so vastly improved, there are fewer and fewer people who know how the music should be played.”

Many of Wittgenstein’s allusions to the gramophone have nothing to do with music, but rather with the reproduction of speech, where the evocation of technology is supposed to underscore the mechanical uncanniness of speaking without thinking. The parrot often joins the gramophone in these remarks.²⁴ Perhaps the most appropriate image of the gramophone as Wittgenstein came to realize it in his later writings – “Imagine that instead of a stone you were transformed into a gramophone” (MS 165, 7) – is found in a hilarious passage from James Joyce’s (2000, 141) *Ulysses*:

²³ This will be the subject matter of my discussion in Sections 3 and 4.

²⁴ See, e.g., PI §344; RPPI §496; Z §396; MS165, 209f; TS 242a, 180f; MS 136, 51a; MS 136, 78a f.

Besides how could you remember everybody? Eyes, walk, voice. Well, the voice, yes: gramophone. Have a gramophone in every grave or keep it in the house. After dinner on a Sunday. Put on poor old greatgrandfather. Kraahraark! Hellohellohello amawfullyglad kraark awfullygladaseeagain hellohello amawf krpthsth. Remind you of the voice like the photograph reminds you of the face.

This caricature, complete with an irrepressible allure of later-Wittgensteinian ridicule as directed at his onetime picture theory, nonetheless captures a thought which is evinced in the few other remarks where the allusion to the gramophone touches upon music.

On one occasion (BB, 40), Wittgenstein evokes the allusion to the gramophone in the context of discussing cases of sudden understanding, for instance, when we know how to continue whistling a tune that we know very well, after it was interrupted in the middle. “It might appear as though the whole continuation of the tune had to be present while I knew how to go on,” Wittgenstein says (BB, 40). A series of questions arises: What sort of process is this *knowing how to go on*? How long does it take to know how to go on? Is it an instantaneous process? Wittgenstein is concerned with the tendency to mystify the word “thought” by assuming that there must be some extremely accelerated inner process that runs in the background of our mind, as if the whole thought and its future development must be contained in an instant.²⁵ The justification for this conviction, when we suddenly understand how to continue the tune, is closely related to Wittgenstein’s discussion of following a rule. When we are prompted to discuss the speed of thought (e.g., when a thought flashes through our head or a solution to a problem becomes clear), there is a tendency to uphold a separation between the thought qua inner process and its overt expression.

Wittgenstein uses the allusion to the gramophone to jam this tendency. His point is that we would be making the mistake of mixing up the existence of a gramophone record of a tune with the existence of the tune, if we assume that whenever a tune passes through existence there must be some sort of a gramophone record of it from which it is played. Here, as in related remarks, Wittgenstein’s upshot was that we recognize that the circumstances justifying the conviction that one knows how to continue with the tune have nothing to do with something peculiar occurring in one’s mind; instead, one’s conviction is justified by one’s past training and performance – by what one is capable of doing.²⁶ Yet there is a further point about the distinction between the existence of a gramophone record of a tune (a matter of storage) and the existence of the tune (a matter of playing it through correctly). The tune as archived in the

²⁵ Cf. PI §§318–20. ²⁶ See the analysis of Figure 1 in Guter and Guter (2023).