

# Radiohead and the Philosophy of Music

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There's an old joke about a stranger who, upon failing to get any useful directions from a local resident, complains that the local "doesn't know much." The local replies, "yeah, but I ain't lost". Philosophers of music are kind of like that stranger. Music is an important part of most people's lives, but they often don't know much about it—even less about the philosophy that underlies music. Most people *do* know what music they like, however. They have no trouble picking and choosing their favorite bands or DJs (they aren't lost). But they couldn't begin to explain the musical forms and theory involved in that music, or, more importantly, why it is that music is so important to them (they can't give directions). Exploring the evolution of Radiohead's musical style and its unique character is a good place to start.

## Radiohead and Rock Music

In trying to understand the nature of music, it might seem that focusing on rock music, as a category of popular music, is not a good choice. Specifically, rock music complicates matters because it brings into play lyrics, that is, a non-musical written text. This aspect of rock may draw people's attention away from the music itself. (In fact, I bet you know many people who like a particular band or song based mainly on the lyrics—maybe these people should take up poetry instead!) That's why most introductions to the philosophy of music deal exclusively with classical music, since classical music is often both more complex structurally and contains no lyrics, allowing the student to focus upon the purely musical structural components. Radiohead is not your average rock band, needless to say, and their musical compositions have attracted the interest of many music lovers from the classical and jazz communities. As the composer Paul Lansky (whose electronic music directly inspired the song "Idioteque") puts it: "There is nobody else like Radiohead, and the band's work is interesting to many who are not among the cohort of rock fans, although these form its largest audience."<sup>1</sup> What is it about

1 Paul Lansky, "My Radiohead Adventure", in *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, ed. by J. Tate, Aldershot: Ashgate, p. 175. Also instructive on Radiohead's musical style is, Dai Griffiths, "Public

Radiohead's music that draws such interest from outside popular music?

Overall, I think it is safe to say that Radiohead's first two albums, *Pablo Honey* and *The Bends*, have limited cross-over appeal to other styles since these albums fit more closely the traditional mold of rock or pop music. The songs have straightforward lyrics, and employ the standard rock instrumentation of lead and rhythm guitars, bass, drums, with the possible addition of keyboards or extra guitars. More importantly, the melodies, rhythms, harmonies, and other components of popular song structure also seem comparable to much popular music of the time, despite many strong hints to their later style. Beginning with *OK Computer*, the structure and "sound world" of Radiohead's output grows increasingly more complex and experimental. Rather than employing the basic melodic format of most pop songs (verse, chorus, and connecting bridge passage), many songs have a much more elaborate structure that defies expectations. "Paranoid Android", from *OK Computer* has so many different parts, and transitions to new material, you might think that it is three separate songs rolled into one.<sup>2</sup>

In looking back, however, *OK Computer* may seem to be more of a transitional album for the group, since the album largely features the standard rock instrumentation that one doesn't always find in their later output. In fact, many of the songs from the second half of the album seem like they could have been on *The Bends*. It is with the next two albums, *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, that Radiohead reveal the most severe and startling changes. These two albums are really the two halves of an amazing double-album, since most of the tracks were recorded in the same sessions. Besides a much greater use of keyboards and other electronic sounds, there is the addition of orchestral instrumentation, as well as the incorporation of jazz, techno, and many other musical influences. What is really striking about the music, however, is the "more abstract harmonic and formal language" (Lansky, *ibid.*, 174). In short, the music just sounds different from rock music, even in those songs that mainly use traditional rock instruments.

*Hail to the Thief* and *In Rainbows* both contain a number of songs that aim for a more traditional rock music sound, but much in these albums also follows the precedents set in *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*. Part of the explanation for the difference in the overall sound, starting with *Kid A*, lies in the more

Schoolboy Music: Debating Radiohead", *ibid.*, pp. 159-167.

<sup>2</sup> A brief but useful examination of the musical concepts mentioned above can be found on the website Wikipedia, under, "Pop Music", "Song Structure (Popular Music)", and "Music Theory".

complex harmonic textures employed by the band, a process that is also common throughout most of *OK Computer* (such as in "Airbag"), together with the increasingly experimental sonorities and instrumentation. In your average pop song, there is a single melodic line, often sung or played by the lead guitar, which is accompanied by the other instruments. In numerous songs on *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, on the other hand, there are several lines in the music, such that each instrument seems to have its own distinct melodic and rhythmic content. A nice example of this is "In Limbo" from *Kid A*, where the different rhythmic and thematic lines played by each instrument stand out fairly clearly. "One of Radiohead's great secrets", Lansky rightly says, "is the inventive use of rhythmic levels, simultaneous projections of different metric layers" (ibid., 174). This method of composition is common in classical music, too. Lansky likewise notes that "Radiohead's relation to harmony in general is sophisticated and unusual" (170), and he compliments "the expansive and rich contours of [their] tunes" (175). Interestingly, lead guitarist Jonny Greenwood, who is classically trained, has cited the twentieth century composers Oliver Messiaen (1908-1992) and Krzysztof Penderecki (b. 1933), as some of his musical influences.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, there are numerous precedents throughout rock history for much of what Radiohead has accomplished, starting with the post-1965 music of the Beatles, and continuing through the classic art rock bands like Pink Floyd and beyond. In fact, one could argue that Radiohead continues the tradition of many of these "progressive" or "art rock" bands, but that they just do it better (excluding the Beatles, who started it all). The members of Radiohead have constantly denied these labels, probably because they fear that their music will be stereotyped or pigeonholed as some branch of avant-garde rock music with limited mass appeal. At the very least, one thing that Radiohead has in common with all great composers or song writers is their dedication to constantly breaking new barriers and creating new musical works, and not simply repackaging the ideas that were successful in the past. Much, if not most, pop music is dedicated to that very purpose, namely, cashing in on the latest trend. Like any great artist, Radiohead has paid for its explorations into new musical realms, as the many negative initial responses to *Kid A* made quite clear. In the end, however, many critics and fans began to see

3 This section of the essay relies on, Tim Footman, *Welcome to the Machine: Radiohead and the Death of the Classic Album*, London: Chrome Dreams, 2007, for an analysis of history of the band and the reception of their music. See, also, Martin Clarke, *Radiohead: Hysterical and Useless*, London: Plexus, 2006.

that their new musical creations were, in fact, a logical progression and extension of their past artistic successes. However logical, though, they may not be imitable. When asked about the many Radiohead-lite bands, like Coldplay, that continue to spin out watered down copies of their earlier music (up to 1997), Thom Yorke, putting his hands to his mouth, mockingly yelled out, "Good luck with *Kid A!*" (Footman, *ibid.*, 238)

Finally, does Radiohead's musical output consist of songs? Some have wondered: "Where *OK Computer* featured 12 highly inventive and original takes on the concept of a rock song, *Kid A* saw Radiohead producing tracks that not only defied categorization as rock music but that, on occasion, also challenged perceived notions of 'song'".<sup>4</sup> First, if a song requires lyrics, then many tracks on their various albums are not songs; for instance, "Treefingers" and "Hunting Bears", would not be songs since they have no lyrics. But, many of Radiohead's greatest "songs" also have important sections that likewise do not present any words, such as, to take but one example, the "Pyramid Song", whose powerful, and wordless, last section brings together and develops much of the musical material in the song. This outro section is hardly a cute coda of the kind you sometimes find in the purely instrumental conclusions of classical songs. In "Pyramid song," it's perhaps the song's most important moment.

### What is Music?

A good way to think about philosophy is that it is an attempt to answer the deepest and most fundamental questions about any given subject. Therefore, probably the deepest question you can ask about music is "What is it?"<sup>5</sup> One response often given is that music is organized or structured sound. Yet, a lawnmower makes organized sound: so, is the sound of a lawnmower music? Many modern classical composers and music fans would say "yes", since the revolution in modern art has greatly expanded the category of art across the board. For example, many people have seen paintings in art galleries or museums that look like just a blotch of different colors splashed across a canvas with no

4 Allan F. Moore and Anwar Ibrahim, "'Sounds Like Teen Spirit': Identifying Radiohead's Idiolect" in *The Music and Art of Radiohead*, *ibid.*, p. 145.

5 This section of the paper draws upon several helpful introductory, but thorough, texts: Andrew Kania, "The Philosophy of Music", Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy; Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Art*, London: Routledge, 1999.

discernable shape or intention. In other words, it seems as though the colors don't represent anything. And, of course, those creations are paintings, or so the art gallery owners would tell you!

The twentieth century practically admitted everything into the ranks of art, and that includes music, of course, although many philosophers and music-lovers might complain. John Cage, the famous twentieth century American composer, created a work entitled, *4'33"*, which comprises, essentially, a pianist sitting at a piano and doing *nothing* for four minutes and thirty-three seconds—it's strange to say that he "composed" the work, but I guess he did. Cage didn't intend the silence to be the music, but he wanted to draw people's attention to the sounds that were occurring during the "performance" (and it's also strange to say that it was a performance, but I guess it is as well). A performance of *4'33"* thereby challenges our definition that music is structured sound, since most of the sounds occurring during the performance are probably random and unorganized (such as people coughing, people squirming in their seats, and all the other things that you would hear when a lot of people are uncomfortably having to sit together in silence). Some of Radiohead's songs also sound like unorganized sounds, like "Treefingers". After many listens, however, it is clear that there actually are themes and musical structure in this work.

Music may be the most puzzling of all the arts, philosophically speaking, because it is difficult to point out—more so than painting or sculpture. We know what a painting or sculpture is: a painting is that rectangular thing hanging on the wall with colors on it. But what object is music? Where do we point to? This is a problem in the ontology—the being or existence—of music. Is it a sequence of vibrations in the air? Or is it a series of written markings on a musical staff, or an electronic code on a CD? In traditional classical music, which is written down to be performed by many musicians, this may seem a bigger problem than for recorded pop music. A rock song, such as "Like Spinning Plates" from *Amnesiac*, is a studio recording of individual performances by the band's members, and thus it would seem that there is only one thing (or a combined collection of things) to which we can point to when trying to locate that piece of music in the world, although that performance has been reproduced on countless CDs. But what about the live performances of "Spinning Plates", like the beautiful piano-based version on *I Might be Wrong: Live Recordings*? Clearly that's an instance of the song, likewise for any cover versions performed by other musicians.

There have been many attempts to answer the problem of the ontology of music. One approach,

called *nominalism*, holds that a musical piece exists as, or is instantiated by, particular performances of that piece, or written scores or recordings of the music. There are many problems with this theory, though, such as those songs, symphonies, or other musical pieces, that are conceived by a composer but are never written down. Does a song, thought up by a song writer, fail to be a song if never actually performed or written down? That seems unintuitive, since most people would likely judge that it is still music, indeed, it is still a song, despite the lack of a performance or a written score. Another theory, *idealism*, holds that music is indeed a mental entity, that is, something that only exists in the mind (like an idea). But, if a Radiohead song, say, "All I need ", only exists as an idea in Thom Yorke's mind, then how do we know if the band's recording of that song successfully communicated that idea to us? Since we can't get into Thom's head to check, we can't be sure, and how do the other members of the band know if they've got the right idea (song) from Thom, too! Obviously, this is a bigger problem for those composers who are no longer alive, since we can't ask them (but even living composers might forget what idea they had earlier held). In addition, for an idealist, it almost seems as if the performance of the song is just a cumbersome method of transmitting ideas—but that demeans or underplays the sound or auditory experience of the music, which is an odd view of music, to say the least.

On the whole, the most common theory on the ontology of music is *realism*, which regards music as an abstract object similar to mathematics or concepts, but without requiring that they only exist in the mind (as does the idealist). Mathematical objects, such as numbers, are not physical objects: you won't bump into the number "9" while out taking a walk. But, most philosophers also reject the view that numbers are only mental entities: that is, if no people existed in our world, such that there were no minds, it still seems that numbers would exist (for instance, there would still be a particular *number* of trees, or oceans, and other objects in existence, although we're not there to count them). What is nice about the realist theory is that it avoids many of the problems of both the nominalist, since music isn't confined to only existing things, as well as the idealist, since music isn't only a mental thing. Yet, is the song "Optimistic" really like a number? And do we really know what a number is, anyway? The difficulty with stating that music is an abstract object, as the realist believes, is that we really don't understand abstract objects. So, while realism may have some advantages over the other two theories outlined above, it still possesses many deep philosophical puzzles of its own.

### Music: Emotion or Form?

In trying to answer the question, "What is music?", one of the important related issues involves how music, to put it bluntly, works or functions. When a person listens to "15 Step," or enjoys any type of art form, what is happening? How do artistic experiences, called "aesthetic" experiences, differ from other kinds of experiences, like a sports or work experiences? What is the purpose or role of music in our lives?

When reflecting upon the experience of art, it is likely that most people would find our emotional responses to art to be the most significant or obvious factor. Music, in particular, can bring about powerful emotions. The "emotion (or expression)" theory of music is based on this insight, since most people find music to be happy, sad, or any number of other emotions. Turning to the music of Radiohead, many music critics and fans have linked their songs with a host of dark or anguished emotions, such as the despair in the lyrics of "Like Spinning Plates." Consequently, the emotion theory *defines* music as an expression of emotion by the composer. But a song is not a living being that can possess emotions, so how can it be claimed to have or express emotions? Put another way, how can something which doesn't have emotions, like a song, nevertheless raise emotions in us?

This problem has long been the major concern of the emotion theory. An obvious reply to this difficulty is to claim that the music *in itself* doesn't express emotion, since only humans, or psychological agents, can do that. Rather than actually embodying emotion, music is the means or method by which the composer expresses his or her emotions. That sounds reasonable, but how does music accomplish this neat trick of expressing the composer's emotion? Furthermore, if the audience does not feel or experience the emotion that the composer intended to transmit through the song, does that mean it is not a song? If the emotion theory is correct, then a bad song writer cannot make art, since they've failed to express the emotions that they wanted to express (and, as you'll recall, art is defined as an expression of emotion). But that's absurd, for a botched song is still a song!

Likewise, can we really know the emotions that Thom, Jonny, and the rest of the group intended to express through their music? Take "Like Spinning Plates": while the lyrics seem to express anguish, and the music has a complex, regular rhythm, along with quirky harmonies and sound effects, it does not have the really harsh or dissonant tones and rhythms that one might expect if anguish were the sole intention. Indeed, the otherworldly or abstract character of the music in this song makes pinpointing

the exact emotion very difficult. As some have commented, the lyrics of *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* are, in general, also fairly abstract. And since abstraction does not convey a straightforward or clear-cut emotional message, it's often difficult to know exactly what specific emotion was intended by the lyrics as well. Furthermore, even if we think we have a pretty clear idea on what type of emotion is being expressed in the music, such as anguish in "Like Spinning Plates", it's also true that these types of dark emotions can come in many different forms, and with many different nuances. So, which emotion was intended? Besides, what does anguish, or joy, anger, and so on, sound like when translated into music? If there are many disagreements among composers, as there is bound to be, then music is probably a pretty poor method of expressing emotion; therefore, music must have another purpose.

Another problem for the emotion theory is that many philosophers hold that the composer must have actually had the experience in their own life in order to transmit that emotion through their music. Yet, why should that be the case? Even if Thom's life had been really easy-going, and he had never experienced deeply sad or dark feelings, it seems perfectly reasonable to assume that he could still possess the musical skills required to write a sad song. Many novelists write convincingly about murderers or politicians, or other types of people that they've never been or maybe ever met. So, why can't song writers create songs about emotions that they haven't had?

Finally, one can raise a number of problems for the emotion theory that shows that this definition of music is too broad, that is, it allows things to count as music that aren't music. For instance, if music is a created and structured sound that expresses emotion, then it would seem that angry drivers who blast their car horns are also making music! An advocate of the emotion theory might reply by claiming that there must be an audience, and that the main intention of the created sound must be to express emotion (and not for another reason, like for the driver in front of you to wake up and start moving since the light has turned green). So, since blasting a car horn doesn't meet those last conditions, it can't be music. But, in response, not only do people honk their horns precisely because they have an audience, but often, especially when in a long traffic jam, some (unhinged) drivers must know that honking their horns won't accomplish anything. Their intention must be to express emotion, and thereby they are making music, at least according to the definition of emotion theory, which seems absurd since it's certainly not music (or is it?).

Another way of looking at how emotion factors into our experience of music is to claim that the



structure of music—the combination of its rhythms, harmonies, melodies, and the rest—somehow brings about emotions in us. That is to say, we respond emotionally to the form of music. This view, that music is really all about the structure of its musical elements (tones, pitch, rhythm, and so on) is called *formalism*. As noted earlier, what sets Radiohead apart from other contemporary bands, and most past bands, is the way that they put together the elements of traditional rock music, along with other musical elements from outside rock music, to achieve truly unique results. Often, the emotions that people detect or feel in a Radiohead song will vary from person to person, but the structure of the music remains the same of course: people simply react to that structure, or form, differently. Therefore, a theory of music must base the definition of music on its formal structure to some degree. Just as painting is the structural arrangement of colors and shapes on a flat surface, and sculpture is the structural arrangement of shapes and figure in three dimensions, music is the structural arrangement of the elements of sound.

Formalism in music is clearly a powerful and intuitive theory, but we've already seen one of its problems: a lawnmower presents an arrangement of structured elements of sound, if somewhat simplistic and monotonous, as does the car horn of the road-raged driver, so the sound of a lawnmower and car horn are music according to the formalism. However, if we return to the issues of audience and intention, then the formalist theory of music seems to fair better than the emotion theory. The main intention of both a lawnmower and a car horn is *not merely* the presentation of a structured sound but to, respectively, cut the lawn and alert other drivers or pedestrians. The intention of music, on the other hand, is the presentation of structured sound for its own sake, and not for any other purpose. But what about birdsongs? Many people may enjoy the distinctive sound that a bird makes for its own sake, but the bird didn't create those sounds to be enjoyed for its own sake—it serves as the bird's method of communicating with other birds. Therefore, birdsongs are not music according to the formalist theory that we're considering. This outcome may strike people as somewhat too limiting, needless to say, because many people do experience the sounds of birds, or even car horns, aesthetically in the same way that they enjoy human songs: so why can't birdsongs be art, too? (In response, can it be claimed that they're art but not music?)

A more obvious problem concerns music with lyrics. Most Radiohead songs have a written text, which presents a complication for the formalist theory since lyrics are not merely structured sounds:

they also communicate a non-musical message. The formalist theory thus seems to work best for music that has no written or non-musical text, such as symphonies and other classical pieces for instruments alone. Some of Radiohead's songs are also wordless, like "Treefingers" and "Hunting Bears", as was mentioned earlier, but most are not. Therefore, the formalist definition of music is too narrow in that it leaves out many things that are music, like the lyrical component of songs (and maybe birdsongs, too).

### Are Musical Experiences Universal?

It has been the hope of many philosophers that investigations into the psychological or social experience of music might find that human beings tend to react to music in the same way, probably at a deep unconscious level, such that the same types of musical structures are associated with the same types of emotions. For example, a slow downtrodden beat may evoke sadness for most people and in most societies, while a light fast beat is linked to happy feelings. If this is correct, it may show that human beings have certain types of psychological reactions and emotions hard-wired into us given the same musical experiences, thereby demonstrating the strong connection between our experience of musical structures and our emotions. One of the reasons, among many, for the importance of these findings is that it would show that our musical experiences are universal (that is, the same for all people), even if only to a very minimal degree. Other philosophers and musicologists, on the other hand, have argued that different people and cultures could have totally different psychological responses to the same music. This debate remains an open question.

But, if we all do have similar experiences given the same music, then music may be a more fixed, and possibly central, aspect of human experience than many have thought. One of the fascinating implications of these findings, if true, is the extent to which music criticism could gain a certain degree of validity or objectivity. If all people naturally react to music in similar ways, can we then claim that our judgments of music are also built into us? David Hume, the famous eighteenth century Scottish philosopher, argued in his essay "Of the Standard of Taste" that the test of time is the only way to judge which art is truly great. If the vast majority of critics and music lovers, over a long stretch of time, praise and value the music of, say, a particular rock band, does that show that the band is really, objectively better than the competition? It is too early to tell whether or not the investigations into the philosophy and psychology of music will confirm Hume's theory, since there are

many problems with this view. Yet, it does show that the consequences of the study of music could be very far-reaching indeed—it might even suggest that, when you and your friends argue about whether *OK Computer* or *In Rainbows* is a better disc, one of you might be actually right!