

# MUSICAL MEANING IN BETWEEN

## INEFFABILITY, ATMOSPHERE AND ASUBJECTIVITY IN MUSICAL EXPERIENCE

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**ABSTRACT** Ineffability of musical meaning is a frequent theme in music philosophy. However, talk about musical meaning persists and seems to be not only inherently enjoyable and socially acceptable, but also functionally useful. Relying on a phenomenological account of musical meaning combined with a naturalist explanatory attitude, we argue for a novel explanation of how ineffability is a feature of musical meaning and experience and we show why it cannot be remedied by perfecting language or musico-philosophical study.

Musical meaning is seen as an experiential phenomenon that consists of layers, some recent, others archaic. As such, musical meaning is strongly characterized by asubjectivity. It is in-between, in a state where the division of subject and object is not yet valid or valid anymore. A naturalistic interplay of experiential layers in music brings about a non-reified dynamics driving for expressions, interpretations, engenderings of (musical) subjects and objects or even for political action. Generally speaking, the in-betweenness of musical meaning can never be universally reified or symbolic nor can it ever be “subjective,” “mine” or present “at the origin.”

In this view, ineffability has two primary reasons. First, the criteria offered for defining musical meaning are often too strict, resulting in untenable pretensions of universality. Second, the processual and relational nature of the in-between keeps meaning in flux; any snapshot creates a new situation and new meanings.

**Keywords:** musical meaning, ineffability, experience, asubjectivity, atmosphere

## INTRODUCTION

Let us start with a tension. Music in general, and pieces of music in particular, obviously mean a lot to humans as individuals and groups. Music is not only important, touching or moving, but it also has specific meanings; not only does it arouse emotions or make our feet tap but it also symbolizes, indicates, shows, guides our cultural practices and so on. Music clearly exceeds its own boundaries by reaching out to something that is other than itself. At the same time, it is hard to say in any unambiguous way what exactly this reaching out is or how it happens. A strong “feel” of meaningfulness in music does not necessarily come hand in hand with any specific messages or symbolic forms. The modes of musical signification are elusive and shifting, and their linguistic description is unavoidably metaphorical and vague.

This tension between the obvious meaningfulness of music and our apparent failure in stabilizing it is sometimes characterized by saying that musical meaning is ineffable; something inexpressible in natural language and also something entailing different registers of experience. Philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch has claimed that music’s “broad shoulders” carry any meaning we choose to give to it, since “[i]n the hermeneutics of music, everything is possible” and one can make “notes say what one will, grant them any power of analogy: they do not protest.”<sup>1</sup> By recognizing the affective power of musical experience, what he called music’s *charm*, Jankélévitch is implying a level of musical meaning and experience prior to our contingent, historical and culturally conditioned interpretations, and beyond words *an sich*. Yet the need for talking about music and its meanings persists. Such talk may be not only functionally useful but also inherently enjoyable, socially acceptable and, in some circumstances, even expected: musicologist and literary critic Lawrence Kramer expressed the point by saying that the meaning of music is precisely in that we search for its meaning.<sup>2</sup>

There are various ways of explaining what the ineffability of musical meaning is all about. Here we want to propose yet another account, one that stems from seeing (parts of) musical meaning as a subjective experience, in which the separation between the subject and the object is not (yet or anymore) effective.<sup>3</sup> In this account, the ineffability of musical meaning is a genuine phenomenon that cannot be remedied by, for instance, perfecting language or language use or by perfecting musico-philosophical study. Both the interminable search for musical meaning motivated by the obviousness of music’s meaningfulness as well as the inescapable slippage of musical symbols (or, perhaps better, music *as* symbols) are here seen as unavoidable features of musical experience. At the same time, the ineffability is not considered a “deep” feature of some semi-mystical quality in music, but rather a consequence of the general nature of human experience.

We rely here mostly on a phenomenological account of musical meaning as a form of experience. Our approach starts from post-Husserlian criticisms of the

view according to which experiences are always already subjective, organized by the subject-object distinction. Following Heidegger's insight that this division is secondary, we draw inspiration from the ideas by Gernot Böhme, Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly. Accordingly, our view of musical meaning is compatible with a broadly naturalistic<sup>4</sup> outlook where later and more "complex" human experience is seen as evolutionarily arising from (and, therefore, its explanation dependent on) more "primitive" animal experience. The highly structured areas of human experience are considered continuous with less structured and more archaic areas of experience.

Furthermore, we emphasize musical meaning as being a true in-between phenomenon in two related ways. First, musical meaning always emerges at some point in a continuum that has two (only theoretically achievable) endpoints: music as a collection of highly structured, reified and unequivocal symbols, and music as pure pre-individual and pre-conceptual experience. Second, it always hovers between strictly subjective and objective experience. This twofold "in-betweenness" is, we believe, something that can be seen as characterizing all musical meaning and experience.<sup>5</sup>

## FORMS OF MUSICAL MEANING

There have been many efforts towards fixing the meaning of music and musical structures or motifs. Various examples include theory of musical topics in musical semiotics,<sup>6</sup> the cultural musicological and ethnomusicological idea of music as a culturally constructed signification including feminist, psychoanalytic and audiovisual studies,<sup>7</sup> analytic philosophical accounts,<sup>8</sup> historical studies focusing on commonplace musical figures and affections<sup>9</sup> and empirical psychological investigations.<sup>10</sup> Such attempts have resulted in theories that show how musical meaning can be stabilized through tradition, shared culture and learning. In suitable social circumstances, such learning may be deeply ingrained and sophisticated, so that people agree about the meaning of precise musical elements, and experience them accordingly. Furthermore, much of these common meanings of music are experienced un- or pre-consciously, a fact well known by advertisement and film music industry.

However, such agreement quickly dissolves when relevant sociocultural or aesthetic circumstances are not present. Similarly, fixed principles of musical signification seem to be the more intersubjective and shared the more restricted the musical (sub)culture or genre is. Depending on the situation, acoustically similar musical gestures may even latch onto opposing meanings. For instance, the old music rhetoric figures of *katabasis* and *passus duriusculus*, a descending diatonic and chromatic line, have been common symbols for death, sorrow and torment from the Renaissance era to our day (e.g. from Henry Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* (not later than 1689) to Kaija Saariaho's opera *L'amour de loin*

(2000)<sup>11</sup>). However, there is no death or sorrow, but rather sun, warmth and love in Lovin' Spoonful's song *Summer in the City* (1966) despite its characteristic descending bass line.

Musical meaning and its signifiers do not easily cross borders of culture, era or genre. On the other hand, forms of musical meaning that have stayed relatively stable despite sociocultural changes usually bear strong material and bodily associations and contents. For example, the dactyl-like rhythm that is commonly used to portray riding on a horse (and, consequently, battle, traveling, etc.) in classical music,<sup>12</sup> can still be found in today's popular culture. However, as a contemporary Westerner has mostly lost his or her contact to horses and riding, it is plausible that despite its inherent gallop rhythm, we would lose our shared understanding of the specific meaning of this musical gesture if it was not constantly emphasized in a backward-looking manner in, e.g. the film music of Westerns, historical-mythological topics of heavy rock (e.g. Iron Maiden's *Run to the Hills* (1982)), or the continuing afterlife of Classical and Romantic music.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, musical structures and elements, however defined, eventually fail as universal symbols referring to something definite outside themselves. Different contexts and instrumentations of musical figures have remarkably different effects, depending also on the listener and the form of musical culture.<sup>14</sup>

The forms of meaning discussed above mostly emphasize meaning either as a semiotic matter related to a particular form of symbolic structure (like music), or as a particular form of use where musical phenomena gain their specific meanings through shared practices. Yet, in addition to these two forms of meaning, there is at least one additional type of meaning: a phenomenological, less structured form of meaning and experience, whose ontological importance lies in its capacity to reveal the sheer possibility for symbolic meanings as such. This form of meaning is about the world and its beings "making sense" on a pre-conceptual and pre-symbolic level of experience. French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy is referring to something like this in his analysis of listening (listening in general, not only listening to music). For Nancy, symbolic meaning and sound are similar in one particular sense: they share the same space of referral. Thus, listening (to sounds) becomes re-sounding (resonance) and straining towards possible or even inaccessible meaning, while "to hear" always means understanding the sense that is already present (we hear a siren, a bird, a car, etc.). Similarly, as Nancy writes, "the point of occurrence of a *subject* in the substantial sense would have never taken place except in the referral, thus in spacing and resonance, at the very most as the dimensionless point of the *re-* of this resonance."<sup>15</sup>

While many forms of music's meanings are momentary and socioculturally fixed, music is "meaningful" in more general terms precisely because it hovers—in Nancy's words: resonates, re-sounds—between the states of structural (symbolic) meaning and unstructured (ineffable) experience without collapsing

into either of them. Fixed musical meanings as well as fixed subjectivity are, in this regard, like snapshots of this phenomenologically more fundamental level of experience. Existing between private inner experience and fixed intersubjective symbolic structure, musical meaning encompasses the categories of subjective and objective.

The same dilemma of in-betweenness can be put in terms of music's obvious capacity to make people experience strong emotions and spur them into action. First, if music is seen as a symbolic structure full of meanings that relate music outside itself, making it a form of symbolic representation, where would music find the strong experiential purchase, power and dynamism it clearly has to move people into action? Second, if music is seen as a sheer pre-individual and pre-conceptual experience, a related question emerges: how could music move us into action if there were no hint on where to move?<sup>16</sup> Therefore, we have to have an explanation of musical ineffability that does not reduce it to one of the extremes, to universal symbols or to idiosyncratic and private experience.

## MEANING IN BETWEEN AND THE PHENOMENON OF ATMOSPHERE

This indeterminate state of in-betweenness can be illustrated with the concept of atmosphere. The notion of atmosphere arises from everyday experiences, and its philosophical roots are in the "new phenomenology" of German philosopher Hermann Schmitz. German philosopher Gernot Böhme introduced its use as a philosophical-aesthetic concept.<sup>17</sup> Böhme understands atmosphere as a shared reality of the subject and the object, experienced as an affective consternation (*Betroffenheit*) that appeals to or impresses us in its own characteristic way. It is sensed as a synesthetic and undifferentiated disposition. As experienced, atmosphere evades the subject-object division by constantly dwelling between these two poles.

Atmosphere is pre-objective in that it precedes the observation of separate objects. For example, the buzz of an insect or a dissonant interval or a jarring tone first creates an uneasy atmosphere, even before the source (an insect, a violin out of tune, a jammed printer) is identified. In a phenomenological way, one can claim that what is first and foremost encountered is atmosphere. Subsequently, the atmospheric undifferentiated whole is broken and stabilized into separate objects.

Atmosphere is simultaneously quasi-objective and quasi-subjective.<sup>18</sup> It is almost objective in that it is partially intersubjective and not willed, but it is subjective in that it is experienced and cannot be objectively measured, like radiation or temperature. Atmosphere is experienced as a shared affective space, but there is still a difference between the atmosphere and the emotional state of a person entering the space. For example, one may sense a jolly atmosphere at a

party while experiencing that one's own state of mind is something different, for instance gloomy. Böhme's notion of atmosphere comes close to Heideggerian *Stimmung* ("mood," "attunement"), an existential and affective state, referring to Dasein's finding itself in a world always already in a determinate pre-conceptual way. Accordingly, an atmosphere has a clear encompassing and immediate affective character without being somebody's emotion or feeling about or towards something.<sup>19</sup>

Böhme<sup>20</sup> suggest two main approaches for studying atmospheres: contrastive and ingressive experiences. One senses the specific nature of an atmosphere most clearly when different atmospheres are set apart from each other. As mentioned, the atmosphere of a space may contrast with one's own mood. But the atmospheric differences can be experienced also by moving from inside a single atmosphere to another atmosphere; atmospheres are suggestive in that they are experienced as a tendency toward a particular mood. Furthermore, atmospheres can be approached as *ek-stasies*: instead of measurable properties of an object the focus is on the quality via which the object projects itself into space and modifies its surroundings.

Atmosphere appears somewhere in between subjectivity and objectivity. In a sense, an atmosphere actually *is* the "inbetween" between objective environmental qualities and subjective human sensibilities.<sup>21</sup> Such in-betweenness is difficult for conceptualizations that rely on exclusive categories. Consequently, the in-between tends to be relegated to one side or the other. For example, the wateriness of water is difficult to grasp without having recourse to objective physical categories or subjective impressions.<sup>22</sup> An atmosphere is not something relational; rather it is the relation itself.<sup>23</sup>

The notion of atmosphere has interesting consequences for the study of musical meaning. Böhme maintains that music is "the fundamental atmospheric art" which as such is "a modification of space as it is experienced by the body."<sup>24</sup> Musical space, in turn, is "expanded corporeal space, i.e. a physical reaching out into the domain which the music concurrently molds and articulates."<sup>25</sup> This means that the atmospheric nature of music makes it a more spatial phenomenon than it is usually thought to be. The boundary between the subject and the object of listening disappears in Böhme's account: "music occurs when the subject of an acoustic event is the acoustic atmosphere as such, that is, when listening as such, not listening to something, is the issue."<sup>26</sup> This idea, which comes close to Nancy's conception of listening discussed above, means that first and foremost one is not listening to properties of music (themes, motives, structures, topics, sounds, rhythms and so on) nor is one listening to any fixed meanings in music. One is not making a violent interjection to a symbolic universe, as philosopher Slavoj Žižek might put it,<sup>27</sup> in order to form subjectivity, in order to form oneself as a subject. Instead, one is listening to the ways in which the properties of music appear as *ek-stasies*.<sup>28</sup>

Böhme continues that “human beings who listen in this way are dangerously open; they release themselves into the world and can therefore be struck by acoustic events [...] Listening is being-beside-yourself (*Ausser-sich-sein*).”<sup>29</sup> Listening that dwells in atmospheric experience is a form of listening that precedes subjectivity. It is thus more archaic and less structured than forms of symbolic signification that require the subject-object distinction. Atmospheric “in-betweenness” describes listening (not to speak of playing) as an ek-stasis, where the subject is “drawn out” of itself into an undifferentiated space. Listening itself becomes a way of Being. However, such listening is not necessarily common or easy to maintain. Psychological needs, sociocultural conditions and ideological conceptions almost automatically and unquestionably posit music as something symbolic (in any sense of the word). If subjectivity is formed by interaction within the symbolic universe, the obvious meaningfulness of music calls for interpretation through which we define ourselves as subjects. This becomes a political question as well: power manipulates the acceptable ways in which the move from music as atmospheric experience to music as symbolic structure takes place in individual sociocultural circumstances.

To recap, musical meaning has (at least potentially) roots in an experience of atmospheric “in-between” of subjectivity and objectivity. Consequently, it is no accident that the Heideggerian notion of *Stimmung*, which strongly resembles the notion of atmosphere, has many musical connotations: the term itself means both “tuning” and “mood,” and its translations often maintain the resonating hub of music, sound and affectivity, e.g. “*tonalité affectif*” (French), “attunement” (English). The notion of in-betweenness emphasizes the indeterminate nature of the experience regarding the fixed boundaries of the subject and object. This is crucial, since the subject-object distinction is essential for conceptual language and effability. The notion of atmosphere, in turn, is used in order to highlight how meaningful experience dissolves boundaries of (musical) space, place and affect. The undifferentiation concerns also the conventionally separated senses: the ek-static experience is synesthetic, involving sensory modalities in a way that does not allow their clear-cut separation.

Before discussing how atmospheric in-betweenness relates to effability, let us present two examples of how atmosphere could be described, in general, as well as in musical contexts, in particular. The first example concerns the non-individuality of moods. The second focuses on musical treatises of the ecological interconnectedness of all beings including the temporality of musical meaning and experience.

## DREYFUS AND KELLY ON ATMOSPHERE AND THE DIVINE

In their book *All Things Shining* (2011) philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly forge a connection between atmospheric moods and polytheism. The

overall goal for Dreyfus and Kelly is to seek ways in which gods could be lured back into the world so that modern nihilism in which human individuals and their conscious choices are the only source of meaning could be overcome. As a historic counterpoint, they present the Homeric view of human being and action, in which it was seen normal—indeed praiseworthy—to be swept away by the mood instilled by a “shining” god. As an example they discuss the way Helen of Troy explains her escape with Paris. Helen simply relates that Aphrodite attuned her to the moment, and in *Ilias* it seems that Helen’s interlocutors, including her husband Menelaos, and Homer as the narrator, find this explanation satisfactory. Dreyfus and Kelly insist that not only was Aphrodite’s influence on Helen seen as understandable, it was emblematic of the way in which Homeric Greeks experienced themselves. The close connection to Aphrodite was what made Helen herself a semi-divine being. Helen was especially tuned to the possibilities and salient features of a situation as revealed by Aphrodite’s erotic reign. Similarly, the war-god Ares could show the world in all its warlike aspects to a well-attuned warrior like Achilles, or the many-talented Athena could sweep the adventurous Ulysses to the possibilities of ingeniously traversing between different worlds and situations.

Dreyfus and Kelly emphasize the polytheistic nature of the mood-instilling Homeric gods. Each situation presents many possibilities, and the gods personify an interrelated set of such possibilities and actions. However, the moods are transitory, taking hold and eventually ebbing away. The praiseworthy human characteristic is to be alert to the shining moments in which a god is present and to act in a way that brings about the most of that situation, thus also opening a collective way of being cared for by a god. From the modern individualistic perspective that means a kind of “letting-go” (or *ek-stasis*) of the egoistic and conscious pursuits and acting in an intertwinement with the god-revealed world. Dreyfus and Kelly indicate how Homer uses the grammatical device of the middle voice, middle between the active and the passive, in describing many of these situations. They are neither the active doing of individuals nor the passive “being acted upon,” but somewhere in between.

God-inspired moods were, in Dreyfus and Kelly’s interpretation, plural and transitory. Moreover, they claim that the moods were collective, not individual in the modern sense. The presence of a god could be “objectively” or “intersubjectively” felt (both terms are, symptomatically, anachronistic). Indeed, Dreyfus and Kelly maintain that it is wrong to think of Homeric Greeks possessing a modern inner conscious life in the first place. According to them, the Homeric Greek experience was characterized by its connections to the outside environment and by its collective availability. The mood instilled by the god was a mood of the situation, accessible to all, not the mood inside an individual consciousness. Again, the participation in a collective mood was a praiseworthy thing, something that characterizes human excellence. Homeric collective life—



including art, war, family life and so on—is at its best when a god is present and shines. The task of the collective is to be receptive to the presence of a god, to be grateful and through rituals prepare for their appearance.<sup>30</sup>

The Homeric understanding of shining gods and the moods they invoke can be applied to the phenomenon of atmosphere. Like the mood brought about by a shining god, an atmosphere is collectively available, and thus semi-objective. However, it requires human participation and preparation in some sense, even though it cannot be autonomously created by humans. The atmosphere shows the world in a particular light or through a particular mood, it opens one understanding of the world, presenting some salient features of a situation as worthy of attention and available for action. The atmospheric mood tells its participants what is important, what makes sense, what is human excellence and even what is divine. It thus gives a measure for human life—a measure that is neither autonomously human nor forced upon them.

As mentioned above, Dreyfus and Kelly are searching for the appearance of sacred moments in our secular age. While their prime example is sports, we would like to include music. This is not to say that we think music is somehow essentially holy, although it surely is, both historically and today, an important source of sacred experiences. Instead, we want to emphasize how musical experience shares key characteristics with sacred moments. First, like sacred moments in sport for Dreyfus and Kelly, also musical experience can be something overwhelming. It carries one along like a powerful wave that comes and goes, giving strong support as long as it lasts.<sup>31</sup> Second, the characteristics of both the sacred and music come close to the Homeric conception of the real. The name for “what there is” in Homer’s age was *physis*, which is not a name for the constituent parts of the universe but the name for the *way* in which reality presents itself. In a more colloquial expression Dreyfus and Kelly talk about the “whooshing” that happens when a mood takes over. When something whooshes up, it focuses and organizes everything around it. Shining Achilles in the battle, performances of the tennis player Roger Federer, Martin Luther King Jr speaking—these are Dreyfus’s and Kelly’s examples of moments when something draws all attention to itself and opens up a world and one measure for human life. Such events are secular modes of sacred experience.

Something similar happens in musical experience. A powerful, immediate, atmosphere-like experience of music can really appear as whooshing up, welling up. A mood that overtakes us through music presents, in an atmospheric mode, a possible existential-ontological situation and its salient features as worthy of attention and available for action. Listening itself becomes the core that draws all attention to itself. While the prevalence of words like “attunement” already indicates the sonic dimension of moods and atmosphere, “whooshing” brings forth yet another sonic association: something happening with a hissing or rushing sound. It seems that besides music being “the fundamental atmospheric art” also

the opposite holds: as dispositions atmospheres and moods engage a musical/sonic dimension. The ineffability of musical meaning is peculiarly reciprocated by a kind of a reverse strategy: it is common to give linguistic descriptions that have sonic or musical connotations for phenomena (like moods and atmospheres) that are otherwise difficult to put in words.<sup>32</sup>

Dreyfus and Kelly are aware that whooshing up is not without risks; there is “a vanishingly small distance between rising as one with the crowd at a baseball game and rising as one with a crowd at a Hitler rally.”<sup>33</sup> When a mood overtakes me, I am not necessarily acting voluntarily, as a conscious and responsible individual. I may end up cheering and clapping my hands in a concert without any conscious intention to do so. However, it is precisely the in-betweenness of atmospheric mood that allows us to see the difference between a baseball match and a Hitler rally. Being middle voice phenomena, moods are neither totally non-individual (objective) nor totally individual (subjective). Similarly, although they may whoosh up, we are still able to tell the difference between experiences of, say, single musical compositions and performances. The in-betweenness requires receptiveness and affords discernibility and skillful action.

## ATMOSPHERE, ECOLOGY AND TEMPORALITY IN MUSICAL EXPERIENCE

Both Dreyfus and Kelly’s discussion on Homeric moods and Böhme’s discussion on atmospheres denote an experiential whole where everything is connected to everything else up to a degree where distinctions and borderlines between separate entities disappear. While such holistic affective experience can be considered typical for music in general, in some forms of Western music of the latter half of the twentieth century it has been more and more consciously aspired to. Pursuit for atmospheric form of musical experience has never been uncommon either in the Western classical tradition (one can think of Wagner, for example<sup>34</sup>) or in various musics outside the Western classical music canon. However in Western classical music, forms of subjectivity have been strongly dictated by sociocultural and ideological factors and, consequently, there were strict limits for acceptable symbolic musical meanings. In contrast to this, composing music that highlights the dissolving of the subject-object distinction became common after the First World War; one can even say that in-betweenness itself has become a focus of musical activity. Examples of this trend include minimalist music of Philip Glass and Steve Reich, proto-ambient music of German *Krautrock* band Tangerine Dream, ambient music of Brian Eno, music based on tone clusters and sound masses such as György Ligeti’s aptly titled *Atmosphères* (1961) and many more. Music that avoids perceivable centers, hierarchies and musical subjects, and aims at atmospheric experiences has become a peculiar “music about music”; not in a Modernist art for art’s sake manner that denies other than inherently musical

content, expression and meaning (i.e. stating that music has nothing to do with the world outside of its own realm) but, rather, in a manner that opens up an understanding of the world as an all-encompassing atmosphere and mood, as Heideggerian *Stimmung*, attunement. One could even say that this kind of music is, ultimately, “music about musical form of experience.”

Atmospheric experience is ecological since it highlights the mutual interconnectedness of all being. One good example is the music (and thought) of Alaskan composer John Luther Adams. Due to its characteristic strive for atmospheric effects and its singular compositional techniques, Adams’ music manifests the ways in which in-betweenness of musical meaning can be upheld and the collapse into the extremes of subjectivity and objectivity avoided. The connection of this form of musical experience and ecological questions in Adams’ music is intentional.<sup>35</sup> For Adams, an ecosystem is:

a complex multiplicity of elements that function together as a whole. I conceive music in a similar way. For me the essence of music is [...] the totality of the sound, the larger *wholeness* of the music. [...] As a composer, I believe that music can contribute to the awakening of our ecological understanding. By deepening our awareness of our connections to the earth, music can provide a sounding model for the renewal of human consciousness and culture.<sup>36</sup>

Adams’ music, for example, the works *The Farthest Place* (2001) or *Light That Fills the World* (1999–2000), keeps subjectivity (of music) undisclosed and aims at never fulfilling expectations. Experiential time comes close to a standstill, not as emptiness but as something full of tension that can be experienced as the “in-between” of shared space of music, listener, performer, composer and environment. It depends on something that just went by but is not possessed anymore, and something that is anticipated but not achieved. The music produces an atmosphere and experience of not *quite* making it, of not *quite* being a subject, of not *quite* representing anything.<sup>37</sup>

The music in these works is comprehensive and holistic, and no single feature (theme, texture, phrase, motif or anything like that) comes dominant. It avoids excessive individuation and (musical) subjectivity, focusing instead on flowing atmospheres that contrast and ingress one another. It is not built on fixed musical meanings or structures but dwells in the in-between of our subjective responses and objective points of reference. Drawing on Böhme one could say that in such music it is not only the listener but also the place itself that is characterized by “being-beside-oneself.” These two, the listener (performer, composer) and the “place” meet experientially at the ek-static midpoint of atmosphere where everything is blurred into an asubjective mood.

To what extent such music or such form of musical experience is emblematic for our time is a question that cannot be resolved here. However, many parallel, even homologous developments in recent music, culture and environmental

awareness direct our attention to the fact that in the current age of environmental concerns the idea of ecological interconnectedness has become a critical question *par excellence*. Environmental crises are not (any longer) a topic restricted to the natural sciences nor is “nature” (any longer) a term constructed only within a cultural discourse.<sup>38</sup> Environmental crises are fundamentally also cultural, representational and phenomenological crises. Their existence and future is dependent on how we negotiate and represent them in, for example, arts and other cultural products, including ecologically oriented philosophies, and ecocritical musicology (ecomusicology).<sup>39</sup> While it has become almost impossible today to listen to any environment-related music without some consciousness of environmental crises, atmosphere-oriented music, like Adams’, affords a vehicle for our phenomenological and cultural negotiation of environmental crises. Given this ecological nature of atmospheric experience, contemporary environmental crises can be seen as major drivers behind the increasing amount of music that intentionally aims at evoking an experience of “in-betweenness.”

Environmental philosopher and literary scholar Timothy Morton has argued in *Ecology without Nature* (2007) that in the context of ecological crises such immersive forms of experience as ambience and atmosphere, pursued often in environmental art, can be deceiving. By highlighting the fundamental interconnectedness of all being the tradition of “nature writing” tries to achieve “ecology without a subject.” But without the reflective position of a subject any judgments about the environment could not be made, says Morton. However, it is one thing to say that subjectivity is (temporarily) lost and another thing to say that our experiential whole includes layers that are devoid of subjectivity. One of Morton’s own solutions to this dilemma is to include temporality in the notion of atmosphere. Interestingly, he goes so far as to suggest that atmosphere is a function of *rhythm* created by the succession of relevant sonic, visual, conceptual or graphic elements. This rhythm creates a particular *vibe* that shows how atmosphere is a material product rather than a mystical spirit.<sup>40</sup> In the context of music, therefore, it is not rhythm as a music theoretical parameter but rhythm created by the (fast, slow, multilayered) temporal chain of phenomenological events of music that ultimately creates the in-between vibration of subject and object.

## ASUBJECTIVITY, INEFFABILITY AND MUSICAL MEANING

How does the description of experience as “atmospheric in-betweenness” relate to notions of meaning and language, and thus to ineffability? Let us schematically and for the sake of the argument separate between three areas of human experience. First, the highly structured and relatively stable area of symbolic, conceptual language and thought; the area where conscious subjects can engage in reliable and predictable communication of propositional content expressed in

maximally unambiguous symbols and concepts (for example, logic, mathematics, formalized areas of natural science and so on). Second, the more fluid area of everyday experience and speech where, as Wittgenstein puts it, meaning is based on use,<sup>41</sup> where the context and background determine effective communication, and the meaning of symbolic expression is, at least potentially, contested and in flux. Third, there is the area of asubjective and anobjective experience and language, where rational conscious control is impossible, and separate objects carrying or transmitting content (or subjects expressing and interpreting content) cannot be separated and individuated.<sup>42</sup>

Anyone who takes even a very rudimentary form of naturalism seriously has to take into account the fact that more recent and structured phenomena have to be explained in terms of older and less structured ones. Symbolic language, if anything, is a prime example of a relatively recent and structured phenomenon. Consequently, it has to be explained in terms of older and less structured non-symbolic language. In the triad above, the asubjective is the most basic, the most rudimentary level, something connecting human and animal experience,<sup>43</sup> and the ever more structured symbols and concepts of uniquely human communication have to be formed out of it, stabilized through various social and cognitive means.

Like language, musical meaning can be seen as consisting of layers, some recent, others archaic. From this perspective, the ineffability of musical meaning appears as a matter of the different layers and their requirements. Musical meaning as “atmospheric in-betweenness” is (conceptually, symbolically) ineffable, because it contains no structures that would be permanent enough for language to refer to. Simply put, musical meaning is too non-conceptual to be captured in the precisely defined concepts of the first, top-most layer of language and linguistic experience. The ineffability of musical meaning ensues, because on the first layer criteria for meaning are too strict (conceptual rigor), resulting in ultimately untenable pretensions of universality and structural permanence.

However, from the viewpoint of conceptual and symbolic language (both on the first, more theoretical, and the second, more colloquial level), effability can always be refined and reconstructed. This is what happens in cultural and historical discourses of or on music in stabilized circumstances, such as academia, subcultural discourses on music or particular artistic practices. Likewise, practical criteria for what certain musical elements or figures mean can be established by humans sharing practical circumstances and life forms, simply by talking about the elements long enough in a musical context on the basis of common values and beliefs. While theoretical, conceptual language often aims at ahistorical universality, control and strict criteria for meaning (like the school of musicologists that believed in universal aesthetic values in music), in everyday discussions on music people acknowledge the historical and cultural influences. Here practical effability is achieved, and forms of musical meaning are stable but

only relatively so. They are stable enough to be discussed here and now but they are not universal or permanent. The parts of musical meaning that are ineffable, are relegated to the area of individual experience or they are given a religious, ritual, magical or ideological interpretation that make them self-explanatory and invisible. Both options result in the (ultimately mistaken) belief that ineffability of musical meaning does not need to be discussed; it is either too individual or too axiomatic.

Concerning individual experience, Wittgenstein would have been stricter. In his argument against private language he concludes that there is no private language since all linguistic meaning is by definition effable and public. If there is something private, in this sense, it is necessarily ineffable and non-linguistic. Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of a beetle (the private experience) in a box (inside an individual or her language). If everyone has their own beetle, different from the others, and has access only to it, then the word “beetle” cannot name any one thing, or, alternatively, the content of the box is irrelevant to public language use. Wittgenstein’s point is that in so far as the experience is meaningful (i.e. linguistic), it is already publicly effable.

However, seen from the perspective of asubjective experience, the situation is quite different. There is no “beetle in the box” because there is no box. There is not a single beetle either; rather there is an endless swarm of non-individual beetles. Asubjective meaning is distributed in ways that disregard the boundaries of subjects. The units of meaning, so to speak, are not distributed along the lines of separable individuals. Consequently, from the asubjective perspective, ineffability does not arise because an individual or a subjective experience cannot be brought without residue into a public or an intersubjective language. Rather, ineffability happens because experience is always in flux. This means that there is no fixed or permanent meaning to a musical experience, no fixed or originary meaning that could be effectively retrieved and expressed. There is no control typical of highly structured symbolic experience, no ahistorical and objective language, nor is there the utilitarian adaptive stance of everyday practical communication. In musicological terms, there is neither the colonialist arrogance of Western music nor cultural musicological relativism of meanings and values. The very fact of talking about asubjective musical meaning, the attempt to put it in language, always already changes that meaning, creating a bow-wave of new experience that runs (logically, temporally, experientially) ahead of linguistic expression. A ship cannot reach its bow-wave because, by moving, it creates it. Likewise, understanding or conceptual language cannot reach musical meaning, *in toto*, because it (at least partially) recreates the experience every time it tries to reach it.

Thus we cannot define asubjective musical meaning on the basis of history or cultural practices alone. Asubjective meaning is ahistorical but in a totally opposite way to what ahistorical means in terms of conceptual language:

in asubjective experience different meanings are present simultaneously offering endless possibilities and evolving in unpredictable ways. Meaning is ineffable because it is always processual, “atmospheric,” in the process in the “in-between” of the subject and the object, between the subject-at-time-n and the subject-at-time-n+1.

In addition, the processual nature also causes ineffability through different experiential modalities. There is no abstract meaning that could be both linguistically and musically (or in any other way) expressed. Asubjective meaning as content is inseparable from the vehicle of meaning.<sup>44</sup> Unlike in conceptual communication of propositional content, the same content (symbolic meaning) cannot reliably be expressed by different vehicles (different expressive modalities), and, conversely, no vehicle is able to definitely stabilize its meaning. For example, what is considered a consonant interval has changed a lot during history. It was not until the late Middle Ages that an interval of third, the basic constituent of our tonal system, became commonly accepted as a non-dissonant interval. In many of today’s musical genres a third sounds, again, as something that is out of place. Likewise, an interval and musical gesture of a tritone, once a *diabolus in musica* for Westerners, is in no way forbidden in musics of many non-Western cultures and is widely used, often ironically, in contemporary popular culture. There is no absolute dissonance or consonance. There are only endless combinations between musical signifiers and signifieds that become fixed momentarily in practical communication or theoretical discussion, and what is common to both is the underlying or preexisting asubjectivity, which can be never fully removed.

## CONCLUSION

We have argued that asubjectivity and ineffability are essential features of musical meaning and experience regardless of musical genre, style or tradition. Because the ostensibly effable and stabilized meanings originate in older, more archaic, and less structured experiential phenomena, we can never get absolutely rid of ineffability. Furthermore, we have offered three examples on how to approach this phenomenon philosophically: Gernot Böhme’s ideas of the atmosphere as an in-between phenomenon with its ingressive, contrastive and ecstatic dimensions; Dreyfus’ and Kelly’s analysis of the non-individuality of moods in the Homeric world; and ecological interconnectedness of all being as embodied in the music of John Luther Adams.

What strikes us (whooshes up) in music experientially and affectively as atmospheres, moods or, more generally, as something ineffable is an asubjective form of experience that hovers in between the subject and the object. By stating that meaning is something that is in-between, we mean that, first, meaning does not ever really stop or become reified or symbolic, second, that it is not ever really “subjective,” “mine,” present “at the origin” and, third, that it is

never idiosyncratic (if it were, it would not mean anything to the experiencing subject). While such a layer of meaning is naturalistically archaic and always present in our experience, it forms a non-reified potentiality (Greek *dynamis*) that drives for expression, seduces to interpretations, engenders the formation of definite subjects and objects. As a limiting case the asubjective experience may be structured as pure symbolism that is constantly under the threat of being dissolved, misunderstood, garbled and so on. Without such potentiality and dynamism there would be no (need for) communication, since all meanings would be (considered) intersubjectively fixed without any possibility (or need) for alternative understandings and interpretations.

In this view, the ineffability of musical meaning has two primary reasons. First, criteria offered for defining musical meaning are often too strict (aiming at conceptual rigor), resulting in untenable pretensions of universality. Second, the processual and relational nature of the in-between keeps meaning in flux; any snapshot of the in-between creates a new situation and thus new meanings. Musical meaning is conceptually ineffable but still (up to a point) intersubjectively common. It is intersubjectively common not because of shared symbolic rules but because of asubjectivity: the dynamism of musical experience itself becomes a common factor for musical experience in the form of sheer potentiality. The unreachability of the bow-wave is a simple physical fact with no deep metaphysical consequences; the ineffability of asubjective experience is a simple phenomenological fact, likewise without deep mystical roots.

So far such forms of meaning and experience have not been extensively discussed in music philosophy. However, an obvious heightened interest in ineffability of musical meaning has occurred during recent years.<sup>45</sup> This increase has, we think, two main reasons: first, recent music itself has more and more explored, intentionally or not, different forms of asubjective expression and, second, our general cultural-experiential field has—as a counter-movement to the praised egoism and individualism of modern societies—given new emphasis on the more archaic and pre-conceptual forms of experience. The latter has much to do with environmental crises, which have shown in a concrete way that symbolic meanings are not exclusively culturally constructed. Thus, the ineffable aspects of musical meaning can be approached as a fruitful starting point for a wider naturalist understanding of the roots of symbolic forms of meaning. “Meaning of music as a search for its meaning” means, in the final analysis, that while looking to stabilize musical meaning for practical purposes and theoretical discussions, we keep our windows and gates open for the influences of the wider asubjective field.

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## Notes

1. V. Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*. Trans. C. Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003[1961]), p. 11.
2. L. Kramer, *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, and London: University of California Press, 2002), p. 2.
3. The term “asubjective” means here something, such as a form of experience, expression or language, in which the separation between subject and object is not effective. In this respect it is synonymous with the term “anobjective,” but we prefer “asubjective” because of its traditional use in phenomenological philosophy.
4. We take naturalism to mean an explanatory attitude according to which no supernatural entities are needed in accounting for phenomena, even though there is no reason to believe that everything can be reduced, e.g. to the laws of physics. This kind of naturalism also implies the possibility of fruitful engagement between different fields of science, and the possibility that their results mutually constrain each other.
5. For further discussions, see T. Vadén, “Between Žižek and Wagner: Retrieving the Revolutionary Potential of Music.” *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 6(3) (2012): <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/issue/view/28> (accessed April 19, 2013); J. Torvinen, “The Ecology of the Northern Tone: A Phenomenological Approach with Examples from Erik Bergman and John Luther Adams.” In R. Cowgill, D. Russell and D.B. Scott (eds) *Music and the Idea of the North*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, (forthcoming); G. Böhme, “Acoustic Atmospheres: A Contribution to the Study of Ecological Aesthetics.” *Soundscape*, 1(1) (2000): 14–18.
6. E. Tarasti, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994); R. Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006); P. Tagg, *Music's Meanings: Modern Musicology for Non-musos* (New York and Huddersfield: Mass Media Music Scholar's Press, 2012).
7. S. McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Kramer, *Musical Meaning*; S. Välimäki, *Subject*

- Strategies in Music: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Musical Signification*. Helsinki: Semiotic Society of Finland, 2005); J. Richardson, *An Eye for Music: Popular Music and the Audiovisual Surreal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
8. S. Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).
  9. D. Cooke, *The Language of Music* (London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).
  10. E.F. Clarke, *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Needless to say, this list of studies on musical meaning is far from inclusive. The topic itself is one of the largest music analytic and music philosophical topics there is, and all the mentioned branches of music research (semiotics, cultural musicology, ethnomusicology, music philosophy, music psychology etc.) divide further in various schools. For comparing different approaches, see e.g. J. Robinson (ed.) *Musical Meaning* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).
  11. L. Hautsalo, *Kaukainen rakkaus: saavuttamattomuuden semantiikka Kaija Saariahon oopperassa* (Helsinki: Finnish Musicological Society, 2008).
  12. R. Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).
  13. S. Žižek and M. Dolar, *Opera's Second Death* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
  14. The difficulty of fixing musical meaning can also be given a naturalistic motivation, e.g. through the observations of the controversial Japanese researcher Tadanobu Tsunoda ("The Difference in the Cerebral Processing Mechanism for Musical Sounds between Japanese and non-Japanese and Its Relation to Mother Tongue." *Contemporary Music Review*, 1(2) (1987): 95–117) who has concluded that speakers of Japanese and speakers of various Indo-European languages process certain types of sounds not only in different locations of their brains but in different brain halves. For criticisms of Tsunoda's claims see S. Nuss, "Hearing 'Japanese', Hearing Takemitsu." *Contemporary Music Review*, 21(4) (2002): 35–71; G. Groemer, "The Rise of 'Japanese Music.'" In M.P. Baumann (ed.) *The World of Music: Readings in Ethnomusicology* (Berlin: VWB, 2011); for related studies of lateralization in sound processing, see, e.g. M.J. Sjerps, H. Mitterer and J.M. McQueen, "Hemispheric Differences in the Effects of Context on Vowel Perception." *Brain and Language*, 120(3) (2012): 401–5.
  15. J.-L. Nancy, *Listening*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), pp. 6–9; original emphasis.
  16. Vadén, "Between Žižek and Wagner," p. 1.
  17. G. Böhme, *Anmutungen: über das Atmosphärische* (Ostfildern vor Stuttgart: Edition Tertium, 1998); "Acoustic Atmospheres"; G. Böhme, *Asthetik: Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2001); see also K. Rigby, "Gernot Böhme's Ecological Aesthetics of Atmosphere." In A. Goodbody and K. Rigby (eds) *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches* (Charlottesville, VA, and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), pp. 143–4.
  18. Böhme, *Anmutungen: über das Atmosphärische*, pp. 8–9; *Asthetik: Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre*, pp. 48–9.

19. Böhme, *Anmutungen: über das Atmosphärische*, p. 78; *Asthetik: Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre*, pp. 46–7; M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1993[1927]).
20. Böhme, “Acoustic Atmospheres,” p. 15; *Asthetik: Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre*, pp. 46–7.
21. Böhme, “Acoustic Atmospheres,” p. 14.
22. T. Morton, *Ecology without Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 41, Böhme, *Anmutungen: über das Atmosphärische*, p. 54.
23. Böhme, *Anmutungen: über das Atmosphärische*, p. 54.
24. Böhme, “Acoustic Atmospheres,” p. 16.
25. Böhme, “Acoustic Atmospheres,” p. 16.
26. Böhme, “Acoustic Atmospheres,” p. 17.
27. Vadén, “Between Žižek and Wagner: Retrieving the Revolutionary Potential of Music,” p. 2.
28. Ek-stasis in the Heideggerian-Aristotelian sense of drawing the subject (or the object) out of its stationary place (*stasis*), see, e.g. W.A. Brogan, *Heidegger and Aristotle: The Twofoldness of Being* (New York: SUNY Press, 2006), p. 55.
29. Böhme, “Acoustic Atmospheres,” p. 18.
30. In line with Dreyfus’ and Kelly’s view, also Hermann Schmitz, whose notion of atmosphere influenced Böhme, has written about the non-individuality of moods in Ancient Greece; see Böhme, *Anmutungen: über das Atmosphärische*, p. 48, and Rigby, “Gernot Böhme’s Ecological Aesthetics of Atmosphere.”
31. H. Dreyfus, and S.D. Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011), p. 236.
32. Various examples range from the ancient theory of the harmony of spheres to Shopenhauerian *Wille*, from Mikhail Bakhtin’s use of the term “polyphony” in literary studies to neuroscientist Antonio Damasio’s recurring musical metaphors in describing the functioning of human mind in his book *The Feeling of What Happens* and so on.
33. Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, p. 241.
34. Vadén, “Between Žižek and Wagner: Retrieving the Revolutionary Potential of Music.”
35. John Luther Adams is naturally not the only contemporary composer highlighting environmental issues. Other present-day composers, who see natural environments important for their work, include, e.g. Australian Peter Sculthorpe, Icelandic Anna Thorvaldsdottir, Finnish Kalevi Aho and Canadians Barry Truax and R. Murray Schafer.
36. J. L. Adams, *The Place Where You Go to Listen: In Search of an Ecology of Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), p. 1; original emphasis.
37. Similar features can be seen as characterizing north-related music also in a wider sense. On a general appraisal of the “northern tone” in music, see Torvinen, “The Ecology of the Northern Tone: A Phenomenological Approach with Examples from Erik Bergman and John Luther Adams.”

38. For example, G. Garrard, *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2012).
39. On ecomusicology see, e.g. J. Torvinen, "Johdatus ekomusikologiaan: musiikin-tutkimuksen vastuu ympäristökriisien aikakaudella." In *Etnomusikologian vuosikirja 2012* (Helsinki: Finnish Society for Ethnomusicology, 2012), p. 29; M. Pedelty, *Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk, and the Environment* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012).
40. Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, pp. 160–9, 182–3.
41. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (London: Blackwell, 1953).
42. A classic example is Heidegger's account, in *Being and Time*, of anxiety that, unlike fear, has no definite object and no definite subject. One can also think of the description of non-conceptual content in analytic philosophy of language and mind, see, e.g. Crane, "The nonconceptual content of experience."
43. However, it should be emphasized that the asubjective is not only "primitive" in the sense of connecting human and animal experience, but also something characteristic of fully human achievement, such as the cases mentioned above in the discussion on Dreyfus and Kelly's views: art, warfare, sports, politics and so on.
44. See T. Crane, "The Nonconceptual Content of Experience." In T. Crane (ed.) *The Content of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and G. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).
45. For example, the Music Philosophy Study Group of the Royal Musical Association arranged a conference on music and ineffability in London in 2012; <http://www.musicandphilosophy.ac.uk/newsandevents/past/call-for-papers/> (accessed August 1, 2014).

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