

# Wittgenstein and Musical Formalism

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Was Wittgenstein a musical formalist? If so, was he a musical formalist throughout his life and in what sense? What role, if any, did such formalism play in the development of his philosophy of language? These are a few of the provocative questions that Hanne Ahonen raises, albeit *en passant* or in asides, in a recent contribution to this journal.<sup>1</sup> Her answers are: 1. 'Wittgenstein's conception of music was formalist.'<sup>2</sup> 2. He was a musical formalist 'throughout his life.'<sup>3</sup> 3. He was a formalist 'in the sense that the content of music is like what Eduard Hanslick called 'tonally moving forms'.<sup>4</sup> And 4. Musical formalism 'actually played a role in the development of his philosophy of language.'<sup>5</sup>

I shall argue that Ahonen is both right and wrong in saying that Wittgenstein was a musical formalist: right, if she means the early Wittgenstein, wrong, if she means the later. I also contend that the attribution of lifelong musical formalism obscures, while a break with musical formalism I propose explains, the role that music played in the development of his philosophy of language. What is more, I sketch a perspective on the later Wittgenstein's remarks on music and musical understanding which coheres with and supports my claims. Finally, throughout my discussion, rather than

<sup>1</sup> Hanne Ahonen, 'Wittgenstein and the Conditions of Musical Communication', *Philosophy* **80**, No. 31 (October 2005), 513–529. In my discussion of these issues, I do not take up directly the central bone of contention between Hanne Ahonen and Roger Scruton: what does musical understanding consist in according to Wittgenstein? In my view, this question is radically misconceived, since according to the later Wittgenstein, there is no one thing that musical understanding consists in. It is not necessarily grasping a state of mind, nor is it necessarily an ability to follow technical rules of music, even though these may number among the various ways that indicate musical understanding. However, it should be evident that the perspective I sketch is closer to Scruton's since he suggests that the later Wittgenstein was no musical formalist.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit. 515.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit. 515.

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit. 520.

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit. 515.

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assimilating Hanslick's and Wittgenstein's views on music, I point to similarities and differences between them. I suggest that taking snapshots and putting them side by side sheds more light on the relationship between the two.

The claim that Wittgenstein was a formalist throughout his life is immediately suspect, since it neglects important differences in philosophical orientation between the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*. The author of the former work was a full blooded theorist, while the author of the latter regarded theorizing as one of the deep sources of philosophical error. Since musical formalism is a philosophical theory, holding such a theory is compatible only with the philosophical orientation of the early, but not with that of the later Wittgenstein.

On the Tractarian view, language, whether in everyday speech, dictionary entries or musical notation, veils the logical form required for understanding, but once the form is uncovered, the way is open to understanding. The view of language presented is essentialist and reductionist. The general form of a proposition is identified as 'This is how things stand'.<sup>6</sup> Questions of meaning are approached within the framework of the picture theory: 'A proposition is a picture of reality.'<sup>7</sup> Now since tones and themes in absolute music do not picture or represent things in the world, they do not have meaning in the way factual propositions do. However, 'a tune is not a mere jumble of notes ... just like a proposition is not a mere jumble of words',<sup>8</sup> since both propositions and tunes are articulated and followed. Therefore, musical meaning needs to be understood differently.

'Musical themes', Wittgenstein says, 'are in a certain sense propositions. Knowledge of the nature of logic will for this reason lead to knowledge of the nature of music.'<sup>9</sup> In what sense are musical themes propositions then? Since they are unlike factual propositions, the analogy has to be with propositions of logic which in turn are 'tautologies'<sup>10</sup> and are empty of content: they *say* nothing.<sup>11</sup> 'A tune is a kind of tautology, it is complete in itself; it

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, translated by D.F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 4.5.

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit. note 6, 4.01

<sup>8</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), 41.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. note 8, 40e.

<sup>10</sup> Op.cit. note 6, 6.1.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit. 5.142.

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satisfies itself.’<sup>12</sup> Thus, music, like logic, does not *say* anything. Rather, tunes and themes *show* the structure of music, like logic *shows* the structure of the world. The early Wittgenstein was indeed a musical formalist: he saw music as a world itself, or better still, heard music, as a formal system only with no possibility of interpretation or translation. In this respect he followed his Viennese elder Hanslick, who held that ‘music’s realm is truly not of this world’, and that ‘... we cannot grasp [it] in words and subsume [it] under concepts. Music has sense and logic—but musical sense and logic. It is a kind of language which we speak and understand, yet cannot translate.’<sup>13</sup>

So, Ahonen is right about the early Wittgenstein being a musical formalist, and while her suggestion of a kinship with Hanslick is noteworthy, we must not let it obscure an important family difference. Hanslick was (or at least has been read as) a narrow or traditional formalist: he not only asserted that the essence of music lies exclusively in its formal structure, but also denied that music can be properly described in terms of feelings and emotions.<sup>14</sup> For him the ‘passions’ are largely distractions from, or at any rate irrelevant to, musical understanding.<sup>15</sup> While the early Wittgenstein agreed with Hanslick about the importance of musical structure, however, unlike Hanslick, he also insisted on the importance of music’s expressive features. ‘Art is a kind of expression. Good art is complete expression.’<sup>16</sup> Later on, commenting on structure and feeling in music, he remarked: ‘Feelings accompany our grasp of a piece of music as they accompany events of our lives.’<sup>17</sup> We might say then that he was a broad or enhanced formalist. These sorts of

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit. note 8, 40e.

<sup>13</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, translated by Geoffrey Payzant (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), 30.

<sup>14</sup> For a further elaboration of the distinction between traditional and enhanced musical formalism, see Peter Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), especially 88–109. The expression ‘enhanced formalism’ is Philip Alperson’s. The received view that Kivy endorses is that Hanslick is a traditional formalist (88). However, a more nuanced view is that of R.A. Sharpe, according to whom ‘Hanslick allows for expressive properties, although he thinks that these descriptions are figurative.’ See his *Philosophy of Music* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Op.cit. note 13, see especially 8–27.

<sup>16</sup> Op. cit. note 8, 83e.

<sup>17</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, edited by Georg Henrik von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 20.

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observations suggest that the relation between Wittgenstein and Hanslick is better explored by putting their views side by side and pointing out similarities and differences between them, rather than by claiming some uniform identity of outlook.

However, the attribution to Wittgenstein of lifelong musical formalism, be it narrow or broad, is off key, partly because both are theories. In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein explicitly says that he is not interested in putting forth any sort of philosophical theory about music or anything else: 'And we may not advance any kind of theory ... We must do away with all explanation and description alone must take its place.'<sup>18</sup> The very idea of theory, in particular of philosophical theories of music, already came under attack during the transition period. If someone were to ask: 'What is valuable in a Beethoven sonata? The sequence of notes? No, for it is, after all, one sequence among many.' 'The feelings Beethoven had when he was composing it? 'Indeed I would even go so far as to say that the feelings Beethoven had when composing this sonata were no more valuable than any other feelings.' 'The state of mind produced when listening to it? 'I would reply, that whatever I was told, I would reject, and that not because the explanation was false but because it was an explanation. If someone gives me a *theory* ... it would not interest me—for *that* would never be the object of my search.'<sup>19</sup>

We are left then with the problem of how to read those of Wittgenstein's later remarks which *seem* to support musical formalism. In particular, can we disarm passages like the following of the impression of formalism? It has sometimes been said that what music conveys to us are feelings of joyfulness, melancholy, triumph, etc., etc. and what repels us in this account is that it seems to say that music is an instrument for producing in us sequences of feelings. And from this one might gather that any other means of producing such feelings would do for us instead of music. To such an account we are tempted to reply 'Music conveys to us itself!'<sup>20</sup>

To gloss this and similar passages as Wittgenstein's endorsement of musical formalism betrays an insufficient awareness of the later

<sup>18</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, third edition, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), par. 109.

<sup>19</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, Conversations Recorded by Friedrich Waismann, translated by Joachim Schulte and Brian McGuinness (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979), 116–117.

<sup>20</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964), 178.

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Wittgenstein as a dialectical thinker. 'One cannot take too much care in handling philosophical mistakes' he wrote, since 'they contain so much truth.'<sup>21</sup> To retrieve truths that theories neglect, as well as to preserve truths that theories exploit and exaggerate, Wittgenstein conducts conversations with philosophical theorists. Looking at it this way, the passage cited by Ahonen falls in place as part of a conversation with the expressivist theorist who reduces music to the generation or expression of feelings. In response, Wittgenstein employs the truth that motivates formalism, namely, the importance of musical structure or sound patterns, to show that expressivist theories err by leaving a central element out of their account of music and our understanding of it. This truth that formalism 'contains' is played off against theories of musical expressivism, which, ironically, lose the music as they identify musical meaning with its emotional and causal effects. Of course, this is not to say that Wittgenstein in turn embraces musical formalism. Rather he wants to hold fast to the *truths* musical theories such as formalism and expressivism 'contain' or build on, as well as to the truths they are forgetful of. The theories themselves, however, are to be jettisoned, since they distort our appreciation.

There is a family resemblance as well as a difference between the later Wittgenstein and his Viennese elder Hanslick. Despite the fact that Wittgenstein throws overboard Hanslick's musical formalism, they are allies in their anti-reductionism. Hanslick is concerned to protect music's integrity against what he saw as Liszt's and Wagner's attempts to reduce it to 'nothing but a means for the generation of musical configurations.'<sup>22</sup> The trouble with Hanslick is that he goes to the other extreme: he isolates music from the other arts, such as poetry or painting, and speaks as if music has nothing to do with ideas, thought, argument, emotions and feelings. For Hanslick, 'The adagio is sad' is nonsense or a mere figure of speech, since music is not a sentient creature capable of feeling, and being sad without being sad about something strikes him as incoherent. Neither does music necessarily express the feelings of the composer while composing, nor does it necessarily have the effect of sadness on its listeners.

For the later Wittgenstein, in sharp contrast with Hanslick, 'The adagio is sad' may be an apt description of the music. The music is

<sup>21</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), par. 460, 82e.

<sup>22</sup> Op. cit. note 13, xxiii.

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sad like a person is sad: it speaks and moves slowly, it chokes, falters, stoops, wails. While Wittgenstein is critical of crude expressivist theories, the truth they contain but fail to articulate properly must not be lost. Consider what he says about Tolstoy on art: 'There is *much* that could be learned from Tolstoy's false theorizing that the work of art conveys "a feeling". And you really might call it, if not the expression of a feeling, an expression of feeling, or a felt expression. And you might say too that people who understand it to that extent "resonate" with it, respond to it. You might say: the work of art does not seek to convey something else, just itself. As, if I pay someone a visit, I don't wish simply to produce such & such feelings in him, but above all to pay him a visit, & naturally I also want to be well received.' He then proceeds to dismiss crude accounts of the role of expression in art: 'And it does start to be really absurd, to say, the [composer or performer] wishes that, what he feels when composing or performing, the other should feel when [listening]. Presumably I can think I understand a poem (e.g.), understand it in the way its author would wish, but what he may have felt in writing it does not concern me at all.'<sup>23</sup>

What role did musical formalism play then in the development of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language? From the early through the middle 1930s Wittgenstein was in transit away from a formalistic approach to music. His diary entries at this time indicate doubts about the permanence of musical forms and about the essence of music and suggest the oncoming shift toward plurality and contingency. Consider these remarks from 1930: 'I shouldn't be surprised if the music of the future were in unison. Or is that only because I cannot clearly imagine several voices? Anyway, I can't imagine that the old large forms (string quartet, symphony, oratorio etc.) will be able to play any role at all. If something comes it will have to be—I think—simple, *transparent*. In a certain sense, naked. Or will that hold only for a certain race, only for one kind of music?'<sup>24</sup>

Other remarks from the 1940s are characteristic of his anti-essentialist family resemblance stance about melodic form: 'The melodies of different composers can be approached by applying the principle: Every species of tree is a "tree" in a different sense of the word. I.e., don't let yourself be misled by our

<sup>23</sup> Op. cit. note 17, 67.

<sup>24</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Public and Private Occasions*, edited by James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 49.

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saying that they are all melodies. They are steps along a path that leads from something you would not call a melody to something else that you again would not call one. If you simply look at the sequences of notes & the changes of key all these structures no doubt appear on the same level. But if you look at the field of force in which they stand (and hence their significance), you will be inclined to say: here the melody is something quite different than there (here it has a different origin, plays a different role, *inter alia*).' <sup>25</sup> Although these passages admittedly require further interpretation, what is evident is that the first passage raises doubts about musical formalism, while the second goes on to repudiate it. The first not only accents the contingency of musical forms and envisages different conceptions of music, but by invoking 'transparency' suggests that no hidden or concealed form needs to be uncovered for musical understanding. The second passage flatly rejects the very idea of an essentialist melodic form and sketches a family resemblance, contextualist account which stresses the role the melody plays.

This turn away from musical formalism runs parallel to a turn toward an anti-essentialist and an anti-reductionist orientation in his philosophy of language. The later Wittgenstein leaves behind the theory that music is self-contained and only about itself, along with the picture theory of meaning and the idea of the general form of the proposition. Nothing is hidden, everything is in the open. Questions of meaning and understanding are to be explored through investigating use in context, through considering actual and fictitious examples, through looking and seeing, listening and hearing, and putting things side by side. This kind of approach connects the shift in Wittgenstein's musical thinking to the shift in his reflections about language, and thus helps to explain how his reflections on music played a role in the development of his philosophy of language. The attribution of a lifetime of musical formalism denies such parallel developments, and thus obscures or trivializes the analogies between music and language.

Looking at it this way provides a fresh way of seeing Wittgenstein's recurring comparisons of understanding a sentence with understanding a musical theme or phrase. In the early works the unveiled logical form is the paradigm for understanding and the analogy is drawn from music to language—the assumption is that the understanding of logic will throw light on the understanding of music. In the later works the analogy works the other way

<sup>25</sup> Op. cit. note 17, 54.

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around—our understanding of music is supposed to shed light on our understanding of the workings of language—or better still, since there is no paradigm, the comparisons cut both ways. The idea is to put things side by side for better understanding and appreciation. Instrumental music is not representational, it is not about something ‘out there’, or ‘in here’, nor is it reducible to a notational sequence, yet we have an impression that we understand it, that it is expressive through intonation, tone of voice, timbre and gesture: ‘... the theme is a new part of our language, it becomes incorporated in it; we learn a new *gesture*. The theme interacts with language.’<sup>26</sup> This observation, if taken seriously, allows an exit from representational and formalistic theories of linguistic meaning.

Analogy, of course, is not assimilation. A musical phrase, unlike an ordinary English sentence, cannot be paraphrased or translated into another language. Depending on whom you are talking to, you can substitute the sentence ‘Es regnet’ for ‘It is raining’ without loss of meaning or truth, but ‘If I admire a minuet I can’t say: “Take another. It does the same thing.” What do you mean? It is not the same.’<sup>27</sup> Such substitutivity is ruled out in a musical context, and so is it in poetic contexts. You can’t substitute one Chopin nocturne for another, just like you can’t replace one Shakespeare sonnet with another. We can, however, come to have a better understanding of the music by aptly putting it side by side with another work of art—another piece of music, a dance, a poem, a painting, or a face. Such juxtapositions are, like striking metaphors, sources that enable us to discern a similar physiognomy between the musical theme and other related cultural products. ‘A theme, no less than a face, wears an expression.’<sup>28</sup> One indication that a person follows a musical phrase with understanding is that he or she makes apt comparisons with other musical works or with works of art from other domains, such as a dance, a poem, a scene from a film, a gesture or a facial expression. For instance, Liszt’s *Les Preludes* is aptly juxtaposed with Lamartine’s *Poetic Meditations*; and, obviously, Brahms’ *Hungarian Dances* go hand in hand with certain Hungarian folksongs and dances.

<sup>26</sup> Op. cit. 59–60.

<sup>27</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, edited by Cyril Barrett, University of California Press (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 34.

<sup>28</sup> Op. cit. note 17, 59.



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Musical formalists, such as Hanslick, see such efforts to impart musical understanding irrelevant at best and distracting at worst. For them what matters in music is the structure, the pleasing pattern or kaleidoscope of sounds, while for the later Wittgenstein music is situated in a cultural tradition and can be understood in its connections with the forms of life and associated language games of that tradition. Music is not alone, but it reverberates and resonates with the whole field of our language games—with our artistic and social practices. This makes it possible to give verbal explanations in an attempt to lead someone to understand a theme: ‘If you ask: how I experience the theme, I shall perhaps say “As a question” or something of the sort, or I shall whistle it with expression etc. ... Does the theme point to nothing beyond itself? Oh yes! But that means:-The impression it makes on me is connected with things in its surroundings-e.g. with the existence of the German language & of its intonation, but that means with the whole field of our language games. If I say e.g.: it’s as if here a conclusion were being drawn, or, as if here something were being confirmed, or, as if this were a reply to what came earlier, then the way I understand it clearly presupposes familiarity with conclusions, confirmations, replies, etc.’<sup>29</sup>

Suppose that music were alone and isolated from the culture, as a formalist insistence on its radical autonomy suggests. It would follow that deterioration in music could not be seen as a symptom of cultural malaise. However, this is precisely how the later Wittgenstein sees the matter, and such a perspective is in alignment with his practice of music criticism. For instance, his appraisal of Mahler’s music as worthless<sup>30</sup> makes no sense—regardless of whether it is justified or unjustified—unless the music is heard as a symptom of cultural decline. To understand Mahler, he said to John King, ‘you would need to know a good deal about music, its history and development.’<sup>31</sup> Again, to the assertion (by Donald Tovey) that fate or tragedy had no role in Mozart’s music because Mozart had no access to literature of that sort, Wittgenstein replies: ‘Naturally books & music are connected. But if Mozart found no great tragedy in his reading, does that mean that he did not find it in his *life*? And do composers always see solely through the

<sup>29</sup> Op. cit. 59.

<sup>30</sup> Op. cit. 76.

<sup>31</sup> Rush Rhees, editor, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), 86.

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spectacles of poets?’<sup>32</sup> Finally, unless we had some knowledge of the history of European ideas, we could not understand what it means to say that the expression of the irony of fate or cosmic irony in Beethoven’s music is turned into something civic or earthly by Wagner and Brahms.<sup>33</sup> These observations presuppose a connectedness between understanding music and other aspects of culture, even though narrow and one-sided ways of construing such connections are rejected. Musical formalism disconnects music from the culture it is embedded in and thus impoverishes our resources for understanding music. To imagine and understand music, like imagining and understanding language, is to understand a form of life. We might even say, despite roaring lions, if a lion could sing or make music, we could not understand him.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Op. cit. note 17, 93.

<sup>33</sup> Op. cit. 93.

<sup>34</sup> Op. cit. note 18, par. 19, and 190.