Nineteenth-Century Music Review, 14 (2017), pp 51–64.
doi:10.1017/S1479409816000288
First published online 28 November 2016

Realism, Idealism and the French Reception of Hanslick

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When Charles Bannelier's French translation of Hanslick's Vom Musikalisch-Schönen *was published in 1877, it elicited discussions among French musicians and critics that can seem puzzling from our twenty-first century vantage point. The French were almost entirely ambivalent to the issue of descriptive versus non-programmatic music and were perfectly comfortable disregarding this seemingly central point of contention in Hanslick's treatise. French critics focused instead on issues that seem tangential to the main thrust of* Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*: German music education, the merits of philosophy versus philology, and so forth.*

The French reception of Hanslick becomes less puzzling, however, when we consider the conceptual framework within which French musical discourse operated in the late nineteenth century. By 1877, musical aesthetics and criticism in France were an extension of broader trends in French intellectual culture, in which a materialist, realist view of the world vied with a metaphysical, idealist conception of the divine. Between these two ideological poles lay a rich spectrum of ideas that had profound ramifications for music and art criticism. The degree to which works of art could be understood as products of historical circumstances, for example, or whether art embodied ineffable meanings resisting explanation, were questions whose answers depended on one's position along this realist–idealist spectrum.

In this article, I show how this tension between realism and idealism formed the conceptual framework for French critics' readings of Hanslick's Vom Musikalisch-Schönen. I survey writings by Théodule Ribot, Jules Combarieu, Camille Bellaigue and others to show how this network of texts, when placed alongside each other, was effectively a manifestation of the realist–idealist spectrum. By putting these writings in conversation with each other, this article brings to light the intellectual premises of French writings on music in the nineteenth century. Only by understanding these premises, I argue, can we make sense of the French reception of Hanslick.

In a 1902 article entitled 'L'imagination créatrice affective', philosopher Théodule Ribot set out to answer a question that he claimed had occupied French intellectuals throughout the nineteenth century (he cites François Pillon, Marcel Mauxion, Frédéric Paulhan and Fortia d'Urban) and that attracted renewed attention at the end of the century. The question was whether there existed a 'purely affective form of creative imagination, that is to say a form composed of nothing but sentiments, emotions and passions'.[1] Unlike the type of imagination arising from a particular manifestation of an emotional state – say, the love or

[1] Th[éodule] Ribot, 'L'imagination créatrice affective', *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 53 (January–June 1902): 599.

fear *of* something – the type Ribot was interested in derived from emotional states themselves, i.e. to love and fear themselves. After affirming that such an imagination indeed existed, he noted that this type could be found in several 'partial or attenuated' instances but was to be found in 'complete' form in only one place: music.[2]

In his ensuing explication, Ribot employed a series of musical categories that, on the surface, seemed to echo familiar nineteenth-century discourses of music. For example, Ribot distinguished between 'empty music' and 'full music'. He defined the former as 'architecture of sound' in which the primary focus lies in 'sonorous combinations, clever modulations, [and] original rhythms'. He defined the latter as music appealing to a listener's 'interior states, not in forms that address the intellect, as ideas or images do, but in an animated form that addresses the domain of sentiment'.[3] Further on, Ribot divides music into 'dependent' and 'independent' types. 'Dependent music' comprises texted works, in which external words and images are processed by the intellect of the composer, producing an 'affective state', which in turn is translated into sonic, musical forms. 'Independent music' comprises purely instrumental works, in which affective states generate musical forms directly without the impetus of external content.[4]

Given these premises, it is perhaps not surprising that Ribot spends some time discussing Eduard Hanslick's *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*. By the turn of the century, Hanslick's treatise had reached beyond the primarily musical readership in France to which it first appealed after Charles Bannelier's French translation in 1877; in the later 1880s and 1890s, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* was taken up by general philosophers who, like Ribot, were concerned less about the state of musical aesthetics in nineteenth-century France than about the implications of musical aesthetics for French intellectual culture more generally.

Ribot's discussion of *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, in particular, belied his primarily philosophical rather than musical concerns. He began by reading Hanslick's treatise through the lens of the binary oppositions outlined above. Ribot noted that 'the thesis of which Hanslick has made himself the most audacious champion is rigorously applicable' to 'empty music'.[5] As examples of 'empty music' Ribot cited 'pieces written solely to display virtuosity' and 'certain sonatas which consist of nothing but building, unbuilding, and rebuilding [themes]', and indeed this seemed to approximate Hanslick's focus on 'music consist[ing] of tonal sequences, tonal forms' and having 'no other content than themselves'. However, Ribot also took 'empty music' to include 'picturesque, imitative, or purely descriptive music' – music exhibiting precisely the qualities Hanslick relegated to secondary importance in the assessment of musical beauty. For Ribot, there was no contradiction in including 'extramusical' qualities alongside purely formal features within the general category of 'empty music'. Both types of music qualified as 'empty' because they rely on 'technical invention more than the expression of sentiments'.[6] The essential criterion for 'empty music' was not the absence of extramusical content but whether the music relied

[2] Ribot, 'L'imagination créatrice affective', 599.
[3] Ribot, 'L'imagination créatrice affective', 601.
[4] Ribot, 'L'imagination créatrice affective', 602–3.
[5] Ribot, 'L'imagination créatrice affective', 601. Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution toward the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music*, trans. Geoffrey Payzant (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986): 78.
[6] Ribot, 'L'imagination créatrice affective', 601.

exclusively on its formal features for its expressive power. In this sense, flute trills imitating the sound of birdsong were no different from motivic manipulations of a musical theme: in both cases the music's content can be located in precise elements of the score. Neither type of music was inscrutable or evoked an intangible essence beyond the power of words to describe. And for that reason, neither type of music was of much interest to Ribot.

In his bifurcation of 'dependent music' and 'independent music', Ribot similarly appeared to be in agreement with Hanslick's distinction between the 'subject' of music versus the 'content' of music – that is, 'the topic dealt with in the work' versus 'what [music] includes within itself', as Hanslick put it.[7] Ribot wrote that 'dependent music', which 'transforms ideas, images, and words – i.e. visual or verbal representations', necessarily begins with an external stimulus that the composer internalizes and translates into sound. As an example he cited Weber's *Freischütz*, which even in its purely instrumental passages 'remains the musical expression of a romantic sentiment of nature, of the solitude of trees, of forest life, of powerfully demonic acts' since the work as a whole was conceived in terms of 'scenic elements' and 'visual imagery'.[8] This differed from 'independent music', in which the composer is not burdened with the task of translating external ideas into sound. Instead, what 'independent music' expresses is presented in its pure, 'naked' state.[9] In Hanslick's terms, then, 'dependent music' conveys subject only, while 'independent music' can convey content.

Or so it would seem. Again, the similarity between the two writers is deceptive. Hanslick rejected anthropomorphized descriptions of music; he readily granted that music can 'whisper' or 'rage' but insisted that music could not whisper with 'the yearnings of love' or rage with 'the violence of conflict'.[10] Ribot, by contrast, wrote that independent, purely instrumental music was 'built entirely out of the vibrations of human passions'; indeed, that was the central claim of the article.[11] For Ribot, the essential distinction between 'dependent' and 'independent' music was whether the affective state of which music is an expression could be traced to a real referent or an ideal one. That both types of music were equally the language of the affects, Ribot did not question.

In short, Ribot's conceptual frameworks were not Hanslick's. Despite the apparent overlap in ideas, neither the empty–full nor the dependent–independent dichotomies that Ribot employed can be cleanly mapped onto the emotion–beauty or subject–content dichotomies that lay at the heart of *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*. When he wrote that Hanslick's treatise was most directly applicable to the secondary class of 'empty music', Ribot was either unaware or unconcerned that 'empty music', as he conceived it, was precisely the kind of music Hanslick was attempting to elevate.

What was it about *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, so fundamentally at odds with his own thesis, that drew Ribot's attention in the first place? The ideological premises from which Ribot was operating, and through which his assessment of Hanslick should be viewed, can be gleaned from another article he wrote some 25 years earlier, entitled 'Philosophy in France'.[12] Here, Ribot described what he viewed as

[7] Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, 78.
[8] Ribot, 'L'imagination créatrice affective', 602.
[9] Ribot, 'L'imagination créatrice affective', 602.
[10] Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, 9.
[11] Ribot, 'L'imagination créatrice affective', 602.
[12] Th[éodule] Ribot, 'Philosophy in France', *Mind* 2/7 (July 1877): 366–86.

the most dominant trends in French intellectual thought, citing a diverse array of intellectuals such as Félix Ravaisson, Jules Lachelier, Émile Littré and Hippolyte Taine. What they all have in common, Ribot suggested, is that their philosophical systems could be placed along a spectrum bounded by 'materialism' at one end and 'idealism' at the other. Ribot defined materialism as that school of thought which 'tends by successive steps to resolve everything into materials more and more elementary, to reduce the higher to the lower, thought to life, life to movement, movement to a change of relations between inert and passive bodies'. He defined idealism as an approach that 'arriv[es] by progressive generalisation at an idea of Being which is only the last degree of abstraction'.[13] French philosophy in the second half of the nineteenth century, Ribot implied, can be viewed as an attempt to navigate between these two ways of understanding the world, with some philosophers favouring one side or another, and many falling somewhere in between. For example, Ribot described Ravaisson's contribution to French thought as 'quarrel[ing] equally with materialism and idealism', arriving at a synthesis that Ribot called 'spiritualistic realism'.[14] By contrast, Ribot described the school of Littré and his followers, who self-identified with the doctrine of 'positivism', as adhering to the materialist side of the material–ideal spectrum by being 'founded on science' and 'distrusting metaphysics'.[15]

The precise stances of the various philosophers Ribot mentions need not concern us now. For our purposes, it suffices to note the general dualism between materialism and idealism – or, as I shall recast them in this article, realism and idealism – that served as the basis for Ribot's understanding of nineteenth-century French intellectual culture. This realist–idealist framework was foundational not only to his philosophical outlook but also to his musical aesthetics and, by extension, to his comments on Hanslick and music. Where Hanslick's principal concern was the discernment of specifically musical beauty, Ribot's was the degree to which music of any kind could be reduced to concrete, physical phenomena requiring no recourse to anything lying beyond the empirically observable.

The tension between realism and idealism, I will argue here, was the starting point from which Hanslick's writings were received in late nineteenth-century France, not just by Ribot but by other French aestheticians generally. Ribot's concerns about the role of the realist–idealist framework in contemporary aesthetics were shared by French intellectuals over a wide variety of fields. It was not simply a philosophical issue but a cultural one, with both terms serving as code words for various ideological causes. As critic Jacques de Biez wrote in 1896, the tension between realism and idealism 'represents the antagonism between earth and heaven, between proof and hope, between the Struggle for life and the Duty to life':

> The Struggle for life is the triumph of law over instincts. The Duty to life is the right that comes of restored conscience. France is the fatherland of Duty and Conscience. It can be conquered and subjugated, and its will to live annihilated, only by destroying these two fundamental principles of its native essence from which spawns this integrity of the heart, this equilibrium of the mind that places our

[13] Ribot, 'Philosophy in France', 369–70.
[14] Ribot, 'Philosophy in France', 369.
[15] Ribot, 'Philosophy in France', 374–5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409816000288 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> country in the first rank of apostles of good sense, of real, positive form applied by genius and by the ideal.[16]

For de Biez, idealism and realism served as synonyms for duties and rights, morals and laws, nation and state. While de Biez was an active commentator on (and fierce critic of) the politics of the Third Republic, this passage is taken not from his straightforwardly socio-political writings but from his biography of the sculptor Emmanuel Frémiet.[17] Evidently, the stakes of art and the stakes of culture were one and the same.

Musical aesthetics inevitably fell into this intellectual and political orbit as well. The realism–idealism framework, with all that it implied about the culture wars of late nineteenth-century France, inflected the French understanding of Hanslick. As a result, what French writers saw as the most pressing, germane issues of musical aesthetics raised by *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* often differed, sometimes subtly and sometimes considerably, from Hanslick's own concerns. French discussions of Hanslick only secondarily revolved around the role of emotions in music, over form versus content and so on. For the French, these issues were already settled – emotions *were* the content of music – and Hanslick's ideas were entertained only after this premise was acknowledged.[18] In *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, French writers instead found occasion to discuss sensation and psychology, epistemology and truth, spirituality and metaphysics and the like. By considering writings by Jules Combarieu, Camille Bellaigue and others, I will show how the French effectively reread Hanslick's *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* as a commentary on and contribution to uniquely French matters of aesthetics and culture at the turn of the century.

First, a word on terminology. Though I will be placing musical aesthetics within the context of French philosophy in this article, I will not always use the terms 'realism' and 'idealism' in their strict philosophical senses which, in any case, are not all that strict either. The terms have been used to cover vast and sometimes conflicting terrain. My use of 'idealism' is not, for example, restricted to Plato's theory of ideas nor to Berkeley's denial of mind-independent realities. Likewise, I do not necessarily use the term 'realism' in the senses to which readers familiar with the artistic culture of nineteenth century France may be accustomed, such as the realisms of Courbet's paintings or Zola's novels. Instead, I will use 'idealism' and 'realism' in their broadest senses as two ends of a spectrum that conceives of the world, and our experience of it, in terms of its physical, material aspects and its abstract, immaterial aspects. By 'ideal' I mean that which lies beyond the physical and material world, that with which the field of metaphysics concerns itself, that which exists in abstraction and cannot be reduced to the empirically observable. By 'real' I mean that which is concrete, worldly, human, pertaining to things as they are observed rather than contemplated, intuited or divined.

One form that this binary framework commonly assumed, for instance, was a tension between empirical observation and intuition as the ultimate arbiter of truth. This debate far predated the nineteenth century, of course, and was not even

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[16] Jacques de Biez, *Un maître imagier: E. Frémiet* (Paris: Aux Bureaux de l'Artiste, 1896): xii–xiii.

[17] For an example of de Biez's political screeds, see his *Question juive: La France ne peut pas être leur terre promise* (Paris: C Marpon et E Flammarion, 1886).

[18] Ribot, 'L'imagination créatrice affective', [598].

uniquely French. In philosophical circles it is usually associated with the Hume/Kant dichotomy. But in France, this debate had culturally specific implications.

For some French critics, it was mapped onto a nationalist discourse in which French intellectual culture was contrasted with its German-speaking counterparts. This can be sampled in a strand of French Hanslick reception revolving not around any particular claims in *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* but around the role that questions of musical beauty played respectively in French and German music criticism and education. In an article published in 1898, Maurice Emmanuel marvelled at how little curiosity the Germans tended to show in questions concerning the irreducible essence of music. 'For them', Emmanuel wrote, 'music remains an indeterminate art, and they do not bother to expound on the comparative merits of similar works, nor on the factors of genius in the great masters'.[19] As evidence of this, Emmanuel cited the two scholars he viewed as exemplary of Germanic musical scholarship: Philipp Spitta at the University of Berlin and Hanslick at the University of Vienna. Both figures, Emmanuel wrote, were representative of 'the usual preoccupations of contemporary German musicologists'.[20] Spitta, for example, is described as having single-handedly birthed the science of musical philology in Germany, and Emmanuel did not hesitate to applaud Spitta's 'technical competence', 'exacting science' and 'most delicate taste'.[21] Still, Emmanuel writes that matters of musical aesthetics were of little interest to Spitta and his school, and marvels that 'the Germans, who love philosophy so much, hardly apply it to music'.[22]

For Emmanuel, Hanslick's work is beset by the same lack of imagination, but a lack born of philosophical rather than philological short-sightedness. As he did with Spitta, Emmanuel made a show of praising Hanslick's 'novel perceptions, though systematic and of an irritatingly intransigent spirit'. But where Spitta's method was limited by its fixation with verifiable facts, Hanslick's was hampered by its rejection of content not firmly rooted in the music itself. This rejection, motivated by predominantly logical arguments and rationalizations rather than the visceral aspects of the listening experience, was ill-suited to matters lying beyond the 'grammatical or rhetorical inquiries' of German musicologists. Beyond those domains, Emmanuel claimed, the Germans dared not venture; they may 'feel' that a musical work may have greater significance than what is revealed by empirical observation, but 'they do not wonder why'. Ultimately, what Spitta and Hanslick had in common was that their purviews were defined by their limits: '[Spitta] taught musicologists what the study of music should be, now and in the future, and through his dogmatic writings Hanslick showed them what the study of music must not ever be'.[23]

In short, Emmanuel found Germanic criticism to be admirably thorough in its investigation of the realist ramifications of music but timid in the face of its idealist implications. Both Hanslick and Spitta restricted themselves to the tangible aspects of music – formal and stylistic analysis – but had little to say about the intangible, unquantifiable qualities of music. 'The Germans', Emmanuel wrote,

[19] Maurice Emmanuel, 'La musique dans les universités allemandes', *La revue de Paris* 3, fifth année (May–June 1898): 662.

[20] Emmanuel, 'La musique dans les universités allemandes', 661–2.

[21] Emmanuel, 'La musique dans les universités allemandes', 661.

[22] Emmanuel, 'La musique dans les universités allemandes', 662.

[23] Quotations in this paragraph taken from Emmanuel, 'La musique dans les universités allemandes', 662.

'have a conception of music in which they've created an absolute divide between the material of music, which is knowable, and its effects, which are mysterious'.[24]

Emmanuel was not the only French critic intrigued by Hanslick's place in German music education and criticism. Lionel Dauriac, an opera critic and philosopher, undertook a similar study under the official auspices of the French Ministry of Public Instruction between 1893 and 1895, when he was sent on a sort of reconnaissance mission to investigate the state of 'musical science' in the German-speaking lands. His trip included stops in Bonn, Heidelberg, Strasbourg and Vienna, and his findings were published in the *Revue internationale de l'enseignement* in 1897.

In Bonn, Dauriac was impressed with the 'precise and very objective' instruction: 'Here, the teaching of facts rather than appreciation dominates. And even these appreciations are impersonal enough'.[25] Contrasting this to French education, Dauriac writes:

> We want to stimulate the student to think for himself; and if he seeks to fill his mind, our hope is that it not be a chore. Whether or not he 'knows' what we have taught him, what is essential is that learning it was rewarding, even after he will have forgotten it. In German universities, the ideal is something else: the master wants, without doubt, to communicate something from his own mind to the student.[26]

Dauriac writes of the importance in German education that 'the student follow in the footsteps of the master. And this is why the master preoccupies himself with arming the student with transmissible material. And it's why he passes on facts before personal opinions'.[27] Where the French taught taste, in other words, the German taught knowledge.

In both cases, the ability to perceive musical beauty is determined by the listener's acumen: the French required a sufficiently discriminating aesthetic sense while the Germans required keen analytical observation. Both approaches, Dauriac implies, underestimate the irreducibility of music. Neither the French nor the Germans allowed sufficient room for the possibility that musical beauty is fundamentally ungraspable and cannot be ascertained by any one particular method, be it the subjectivity of French taste or the objectivity of German analysis.

Consequently, while unable to meet Hanslick during his stop in Vienna, Dauriac praised the University of Vienna's system, which he presumed to have been built on the underlying premise of Hanslick's work: namely, that 'musical beauty is irreducible and independent of what we want it to express'.[28] Criticizing the degree to which music had been claimed by various ideologues to represent this or that agenda, Dauriac welcomed *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* as an exegesis restricted simply to the notes, to the exclusion of not only 'expressive' and 'imitative' content but also ideological bias.

Ironically, this admiration for Hanslick's philosophical purity prompted Dauriac to defend a transparently ideological contention within Hanslick's critical writings: namely, the Austrian critic's antipathy toward Wagner. Dauriac states

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[24] Emmanuel, 'La musique dans les universités allemandes', 662.

[25] Lionel Dauriac, 'Les sciences musicales dans les universités germaniques', *Revue internationale de l'enseignement* 34 (1897): 400.

[26] Dauriac, 'Les sciences musicales dans les universités germaniques', 400.

[27] Dauriac, 'Les sciences musicales dans les universités germaniques', 401.

[28] Dauriac, 'Les sciences musicales dans les universités germaniques', 406.

upfront that he counts himself among those who 'owe to Wagner their most profound musical emotions, and who, in this sense … admire him in equal measure to Beethoven'. However, Dauriac was uneasy with the level of vehemence that Wagnerism had reached in France and the way Hanslick's reputation had suffered as a result. Dauriac cites an angry criticism of Hanslick by Jean Thorel that appeared in the *Revue des deux mondes*: 'M Thorel warns us that M Hanslick understands nothing about musical matters. In good French, this means M Hanslick does not like Wagner'. Dauriac expresses some sympathy with those who 'doubt the future of Wagnerism', and for this reason suggests that Hanslick's treatise be viewed as a defence rather than an attack.[29]

For both Dauriac and Emmanuel, then, the principal question Hanslick's treatise evoked was not whether music could be reduced to emotions versus form, but whether it could be reduced to objective musical analysis versus intangible aesthetic judgment. The two critics took opposing views on the matter: Dauriac claimed Hanslick exemplified the latter while Emmanuel accused him of the former. In both cases, their critiques operated along a conceptual spectrum bookended by a realist belief that the nuances of the musical experience can be put into words, on one hand, and by an idealist belief that the musical experience eludes our ability to articulate precisely, on the other.

The question of the translatability of music's essence, while of considerable interest to French aestheticians in its own right, also ran parallel to a much broader cultural debate about whether the essence of life and the universe can be articulated in humanistic terms (i.e. rational principles, logical categories, etc.) or whether there was a divine element of existence that would forever remain beyond human understanding. Like the tension between empiricism and intuition of which it is clearly a derivative, this dichotomy had a long history but took on special meaning in the political upheavals of nineteenth-century France. To the extent that the fate of the French monarchy was cast in divine terms – as epitomized by the Bourbon slogan *trône et autel* (throne and altar) – the vacillation between restorations and republics in France was, effectively, a struggle between God and man, faith and reason, religion and science.

This, too, was felt as much in the domain of art as in politics. On one side of the divide were figures like Hippolyte Taine, who viewed artworks as a function of an artist's social and historical circumstances and who claimed that, to the extent that sociology and history are the study of human activity, art could be understood in exclusively human terms. Indeed, for Taine the principles governing artistic inspiration were not only knowable but wholly observable and rigorously logical: in the preface to his *De l'idéal dans l'art* (1867), Taine states that his purpose is to study art 'as a naturalist, through methodical analysis, in order to arrive not at an ode to art but at a law of art'.[30] Later, Taine writes that all of art, in all its tremendous variety, 'corresponds in some fundamental degree to human nature or to some essential moment in human development'.[31]

On the other side of the divide were figures like Jean-Marie Guyau, a prominent aesthetician who explicitly rejected Taine's claims of comprehensive, humanistic analysis: 'M Taine amply explains *how* Italian or Flemish painting was what it was; but he does not and cannot tell us *why* it was'. Guyau contended that artistic

[29] Quotations in this paragraph taken from Dauriac, 'Les sciences musicales dans les universités germaniques', 406.

[30] H[ippolyte] Taine, *Dans l'idéal dans l'art* (Paris: Germer Baillière, 1867): 1–2.

[31] Taine, *Dans l'idéal dans l'art*, 13–14.

greatness was 'not a matter of milieu, but of innateness, of hereditary tendencies, born and developed by a series of causes too complex to be analysed scientifically'.[32] In his treatise *Les problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine*, he called art 'the last refuge' remaining after the encroachment of 'the scientific spirit'.[33] Specifically, it was the intangible, unparaphrasable aspect of art that Guyau believed was immune to the rational analyses of science, what he called 'the metaphysical mystery', claiming 'science cannot destroy [it]'.[34] Like most French philosophers, Guyau believed poetry to be the most elevated of the arts, but music was not far behind: at one point he writes that music is, of all the arts, the most removed from analytical and positivistic thought.[35] Guyau's faith in the ability of music to vouchsafe the spiritual content of art is most vividly illustrated by the very first example of a specific artist to be mentioned in his treatise, on page one of the Preface, no less: Beethoven, who is quoted as having heard in his symphonies the voice of 'God himself'.[36]

The most direct application of this aesthetic and cultural debate to Hanslick was Jules Combarieu's *Rapports de la musique et de la poésie considerées au point de vue de l'expression* (1894), an ambitious study inspired by the author's conviction that in France the topic of his title had been insufficiently addressed by music critics. The most illuminating writings on the matter, Combarieu notes, were to be found among philosophers; he cites Ribot, Dauriac and Guyau, among others.[37]

Like the previously surveyed writers, Combarieu placed Hanslick's aesthetics within a general binary spectrum, this one bookended by 'scientific materialism and metaphysics', which he claimed represented 'the two most opposing tendencies of the human mind'. He wrote:

> One side views the language of sound as a kind of superior language not only acting on our sensibility and imagination but also revealing to the mind a glimpse of inaccessible truth; the other side is inclined toward the basest animal instincts and approaches music with brutal empiricism and psychology.

Combarieu did not wholly side with one camp or the other; among both tendencies, he wrote, one finds 'groups that have stripped music of all its expressive virtue'. To be found among both camps were three groups in particular that Combarieu singled out for censure: 'savants, idealists and formalists'.[38]

Savants, coming from the scientific materialists, are those who 'have a tendency to absorb music into mathematics and physiology'.[39] Without denying the centrality of numerical proportions to music, Combarieu notes that, with the possible exception of rhythm, the mathematical aspect of music operates at a subconscious, unfelt level in the actual moment of musical experience and that an understanding of mathematics is consequently unnecessary in order to evaluate a

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[32] Jean-Marie Guyau, *Les problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine* (Paris: Germer Baillière, 1884): 143.

[33] Guyau, *Les problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine*, v.

[34] Guyau, *Les problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine*, 129.

[35] Guyau, *Les problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine*, 144.

[36] Guyau, *Les problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine*, v.

[37] Jules Combarieu, *Les rapports de la musique et de la poésie considerées au point de vue de l'expression* (Paris: Librairie Germer Baillière, 1894): [vii]–x.

[38] Quotations in this paragraph taken from Combarieu, *Les rapports de la musique et de la poésie*, 2.

[39] Combarieu, *Les rapports de la musique et de la poésie*, 2.

musical work.[40] Combarieu's principal example of this group is Hermann von Helmholtz, in whose works Combarieu detected traces of 'an aesthetician being bullied by a physicist': though Helmholtz acknowledged 'the active role of the soul in musical pleasure', he (according to Combarieu) was hampered by his fundamental premise that 'music does not seek to reproduce any natural truth, and cannot express any real object'.[41]

Combarieu's second group, idealists, are those who 'begin by discovering the origins of life and building the structure of the universe; then, encountering the fine arts on their path, assign it a place in their system'.[42] Where savants perceive music as a manifestation of numbers, idealists perceive music as a manifestation of a preconceived conception of reality. Both groups, Combarieu noted, are consequently misguided in equal measure, since neither group treats music as an entity in its own right. He divided idealists into two subgroups: 'abstract idealists' and 'concrete idealists'. The first includes figures like Schelling, for whom 'music expresses ideas independent of human beings', and Schopenhauer, for whom music 'expresses the sentiments and will, but independently of their representation in the human soul'.[43] The second group is most vividly illustrated by Hegel, who had the merit of 'having [his] feet on the ground' by acknowledging that 'the purpose of music lies in the human soul' but who, in his belief that music is best suited to convey 'calm and contentment', ascribed to music too limited a range of expressive content; Hegel's conception of music, Combarieu suggests, would not be able to account for the impassioned works Berlioz, Liszt or Wagner.[44]

Finally, Combarieu defined the formalists, whom he described as 'far more radical' than the other two groups, as those who believe 'the art work is an ensemble that touches us not by the nature of the elements contained within it, that is to say by its material, but by the relationship established between these elements, that is to say by its form', noting that this group was more likely than savants and idealists to place music atop the hierarchy of arts.[45] Hanslick was Combarieu's preeminent representative of the formalists. Citing praise of Hanslick by Helmholtz as well as Pierre-Charles Levesque (a French academic whose writings included studies of visual arts and philosophy as well as history), Combarieu nonetheless wrote that Hanslick exemplified the faults of both the scientific materialists and the metaphysicians equally. On one hand, Hanslick's purview, like that of scientific materialists, was limited to the observable and the concrete. The 'meaning' of a piece of music, according to this view, is a chimerical by-product of the relationships and interactions between observable things rather than the result of some intangible, metaphysical essence. On the other hand, Hanslick approximates the metaphysical view in his belief that the meaning of music cannot be put into words. This, Combarieu informed his readers, is why Hanslick claimed the content of music was only music itself.[46] Combarieu rejected such a notion, cautioning readers that 'from the impossibility of explaining the

[40] Combarieu, *Les rapports de la musique et de la poésie*, 2.
[41] Combarieu, *Les rapports de la musique et de la poésie*, 3–4. Combarieu is paraphrasing Helmholtz's *Lehre von den Tonempfindungen als physiologische Grundlage fuer die Theorie der Musik*, fourth edition (Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1877).
[42] Combarieu, *Les rapports de la musique et de la poésie*, 8.
[43] Combarieu, *Les rapports de la musique et de la poésie*, 9.
[44] Combarieu, *Les rapports de la musique et de la poésie*, 12–13.
[45] Combarieu, *Les rapports de la musique et de la poésie*, 13.
[46] Combarieu, *Les rapports de la musique et de la poésie*, 15.

meaning of music in words, one must not conclude that this meaning is an illusion'.[47]

Ultimately, Combarieu was less concerned with the role of emotional content in music than with role of objective analysis in the study of music. The former issue was already settled, in Combarieu's view, and he did not find it necessary to spill too much ink refuting Hanslick. The central question of Hanslick's treatise was not what type of content music has, but whether the disinterested, empirical stance Hanslick purported to adopt could adequately account for the content of music. That this content was emotional in nature was, for Combarieu, axiomatic.

This perhaps explains why Combarieu had no problem weighing Hanslick's claims against works that Hanslick's aesthetic system was supposed to have rendered irrelevant in the first place. That Combarieu was ultimately talking across Hanslick rather than to him is evident when he quotes what he considered Hanslick's principal claim:

> The painful impression a musical motive creates comes not from the real pain of the musician but from the motive's *intervals*; not from the anguish of the musician's soul but in the tremolo of the cymbals; not from the musician's melancholic regrets but from chromaticism.[48]

Combarieu counters that 'The author of these lines had undoubtedly forgotten the *Symphonie fantastique*'.[49] Combarieu seemed not to have considered that the very premise of his response – that programmatic music can be interpreted as the direct expression of a composer's pain, anguish and melancholy – was precisely the thing Hanslick was rejecting.

Combarieu's *Rapports de la musique et de la poésie* prompted a rejoinder from Camille Bellaigue in the form of a review-article entitled 'La musique et la poésie', published in *Le correspondant* the same year. Like Comabarieu, Bellaigue wrote that music is neither wholly metaphysical nor wholly material, and in navigating between these two poles Bellaigue initially rejected several competing theories of music at once:

> If music is not uniquely material, independent of any psychological intermediary, it is not purely ideal and abstract either. It is not true that music expresses ideas that lie beyond human understanding, nor that it contains 'the form of eternal things', as Schelling put it. It is not true that it translates the sentiments and the will beyond their manifestations in the soul, as Schopenhauer put it. Moreover, we do not see in music, as Hanslick did, a sonorous and living arabesque; we cannot say, according to Helmholtz, that music is incapable of representing objects, that sounds exist only for themselves, and produce their effects independent of any imitative function.[50]

However, Bellaigue immediate qualified this:

> I misspeak: one can say all of this; all of it is true, but it is an insufficient truth, one which wants to be completed. None of these theories are errors, properly speaking, but rather fragments of truth that must be gathered and adjusted together.[51]

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47 Combarieu, *Les rapports de la musique et de la poésie*, 15.
48 Combarieu, *Les rapports de la musique et de la poésie*, 16.
49 Combarieu, *Les rapports de la musique et de la poésie*, 16.
50 Camille Bellaigue, 'La musique et la poésie', *Le correspondant* 174 (1894): 1119–20.
51 Bellaigue, 'La musique et la poésie', 1120.

This, Bellaigue wrote, is what Combarieu had nobly attempted in his book. 'But', Bellaigue added, 'all of these theories, even when united, all of these German speculations are still lacking a central base: the notion of music's direct expressive value'.[52] Like the previously cited critics, then, Bellaigue accepted the emotional content of music as a given. After claiming that the origin of music lies in the human voice and that vocalizations respond to emotional impetuses in distinctly musical ways (stronger emotions produce louder sounds and so on), Bellaigue criticized Hanslick for dismissing the fundamental connection between music and basic human expression.[53]

This goes beyond simply rejecting Hanslick's thesis: what Bellaigue took issue with is Hanslick's falling victim to the dichotomy between materialism and metaphysics that had beset all music critics, the dichotomy Bellaigue was trying to reconcile. Elsewhere, in a book entitled *Psychologie musicale* which also took up the Hanslick discussion, Bellaigue made this reconciliation more explicit. Initially, Bellaigue appears to agree with Hanslick: 'In order to understand and appreciate music', he writes, 'one must without doubt consider it in and of itself, its intrinsic value'.[54] Bellaigue even writes that

> The composer does not preoccupy himself, while composing, with evoking such and such sentiment in us, with provoking such and such state of the soul; he has no other aim than the invention and combination of certain sonorous forms: melodies, harmonies, timbres and movements.[55]

On the other hand, Bellaigue also writes: 'in order to feel and love music, one must especially regard it, or better yet hear it, as the interpretation of the sentiments, the passions and ultimately of the soul'.[56] That Bellaigue did not see a contradiction between music's intrinsic properties and music's ability to reflect sentiments and passions demonstrates how much French musical aesthetics differed from the 'formalist' paradigms attributed to Hanslick.

When placed in this context, the writings of Combarieu, Bellaigue and the other writers surveyed here can be seen as an increasingly urgent confrontation with the line separating the real and the ideal, and to find a middle ground between the two directions in which French culture was being pulled. In the second half of the nineteenth century, especially, the gap separating realism and idealism grew in direct proportion to the growing tension between the political poles for which realism and idealism stood. As Victor Charbonnel wrote in 1897:

> Today, Religion and Science appear to be two fundamentally hostile forces; it is the great problem of our time, an intellectual and now social problem. Religion encloses itself in its dogma, in its 'windowless house, pitting faith against reason like an absolute and indisputable commandment'. Science, caught up in the enthusiasm of its discoveries, has confined man to the physical world, through materialism and agnosticism, willingly shutting off escape to the invisible world.[57]

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52 Bellaigue, 'La musique et la poésie', 1120.
53 Bellaigue, 'La musique et la poésie', 1120–21.
54 Camille Bellaigue, *Psychologie musicale* (Paris: Ch Delagrave, 1893): [v].
55 Bellaigue, *Psychologie musicale*, vi.
56 Bellaigue, *Psychologie musicale*, [v].
57 Victor Charbonnel, *Les mystiques dans la littérature présente* (Paris: Édition du Mercure de France, 1897): 135. Charbonnel is paraphrasing Édouard Schuré. See Schuré's *Great*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409816000288 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A one-time priest and later apostate as well as a man of letters, Charbonnel was well positioned to observe the divergence of realism and idealism in culture as well as in art. The tension Charbonnel describes, mirroring all too well the cultural and political climate of our own present day, was exactly paralleled in contemporaneous music and art criticism, in which sociological, humanistic theories of art competed with metaphysical, spiritual theories of art. That these concerns were shared by French critics of all fields is evidenced by the number of studies concerning the realism–idealism framework published in France in the second half of the nineteenth century, such as Victor Deheurle's *Réalisme dans la littérature et dans les arts* (1865), Alphonse Leblais's *Matérialisme et spiritualisme: Étude de philosophie positive* (1865), Étienne Vacherot's *Nouveau spiritualisme* (1884), A. David-Sauvageot's *Réalisme et le naturalisme dans la littérature et dans l'art* (1889), Joséphin Péladan's *Art idéaliste et mystique* (1894) and Ferdinand Brunetière's *Renaissance de l'idéalisme* (1896), to name only a few.

Vom Musikalisch-Schönen was very much part of this philosophical constellation. Indeed, it is ironic that the treatise was written partly out of a desire, as Hanslick states in the book's opening chapter, for a specialized, objective study of music to match corresponding studies in literature and the visual arts; for in France the treatise aroused as much if not more interest among critics who were not primarily specialists in music than among those who were.[58] *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* was not received as a discourse on the nature of beauty in music; it was received as a discourse on the nature of musical beauty within French culture.

Ultimately, the treatise was less a catalyst for new ideas than the newest forum in which to discuss old ideas. Nor was it the only musical forum to serve such a function. Concurrently with the writings surveyed here, French Wagner reception was also being carried out according to the same general tension pitting materialism against metaphysics, with critics tirelessly debating which was the dominant element of Wagner's music dramas: the exactitude with which the music translated the nuances of human emotions (realism) or the manner in which the librettos transformed human situations into abstract allegories and myths (idealism). Édouard Dujardin, one of the most vocal and energetic French Wagnerians of the late nineteenth century, felt no need to choose between the two: on one occasion he described Wagner's works as 'realist in form' and on another occasion as 'entirely idealist'.[59] Similarly, after the French interest in Hanslick peaked around the turn of the century, the next major figure to reopen the debate between realism and idealism in music was Debussy: when critics discussed his 'new style' of around 1900, defined by an unprecedented attention to minute detail, they debated whether 'there seems to be too much care, too much ingenuity' such that 'the system and the method have become visible', as Pierre Lalo put it in 1908.[60]

Initiates: Sketch of the Secret History of Religions, trans. Fred Rothwell (Paris: Perrin, 1889; reprinted Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2003): x.

[58] Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, 2.

[59] Édouard Dujardin, *De Stéphane Mallarmé au prophète Ezéchiel, et essai d'une théorie du réalisme symbolique* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1919): 15–16; Édouard Dujardin, 'Bayreuth: Théories wagnériennes', *La revue wagnérienne* 1 (8 August 1885): 208. For more on the ramifications of realism and idealism on French Wagner reception, see Noel Verzosa, 'Wagner Reception and French Modernity before and after Baudelaire: The Case of the *Revue wagnérienne*', *Music Research Forum* 22 (2007): 1–33.

[60] Quoted in Brian Hart, '"Le Cas Debussy": Reviews and Polemics about the Composer's "New Manner"', in *Debussy and His World*, ed. Jane Fulcher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 366.

This was an echo of the same debate we have been surveying here: whether music's expressive content was intangible and intuitive or concrete and analysable. Without suggesting that *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* was not of interest in its own right, one can see that Hanslick was only one in a series of musical figures whose writings provided an opportunity for French critics to address issues that reached far beyond music and aesthetics.