The Unifying Strands

Formalism and Gestalt Theory Span Centuries of Music Philosophy

By: Amanda Staufer
Music or Noise?

- Musical Aesthetics: Philosophical reflection on the origin, nature, power, purpose, meaning, and value of music
# Three Musical Philosophies

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Thesis:
Musical formalism and Gestalt theory in significant philosophies from ancient times to the present demonstrate that music perception and experience can be universal and timeless.
Definitions

Musical Formalism:

▪ Music’s nature is innate and self-evident
▪ Meaning is determined by form
▪ Musical perception requires rational activity

Gestalt Theory:

▪ An organized totality which transcends its constituent parts
▪ Parts of a melody given in temporal succession, perceived as a whole
• Musical comprehension depends on the ear, sense perception, and memory

• Value of music lies in perception of sonorous patterns, not sonorities themselves

• Musical meaning is defined by things objectively ‘there’ in the music
Aristoxenus and Gestalt Theory

- Music’s significance must be explained in terms of tendencies, connections, and functions within a musical system.
- Musical theory must address the function of tones and intervals in practice.
Descartes & Musical Formalism

• The senses derive meaning from things objectively present in the music

• Music is orderly and patterned; the product of rules

• Musical meaning relies on the detection of patterns and form

Rene Descartes
“The Father of Modern Philosophy”
Music contains an orderly underlying principle accessible to human reason

Music is less a matter of sense than of mind
Theories of Musical Meaning

Absolutism: Abstract; intellectual

Referentialism: Reference to extra-musical world

Formalism: Cognitive perception of musical relationships

Expressionism: Feelings and emotions caused by perceptions of musical relationships
Meyer (continued)

• Emotional meanings arise from an understanding of music’s abstract, intellectual meaning
• Musical meaning requires cognitive anticipation of likely modes of continuation
• “Music is not a banana split”
• Music is a unified whole
As the leading voices of music philosophy in their eras, Aristoxenus, Descartes, and Meyer demonstrate a

Universal Human Response to Music