



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

Philosopher	Era	Musical Formalism	Gestalt Theory
Aristoxenus	Ancient	✓	✓
Descartes	Enlightenment	✓	
Meyer	20 th -Century	✓	✓

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 Formalism

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”

Descartes (continued)

Music contains an orderly
underlying principle accessible to
human reason

Music is less a matter of sense
than of mind

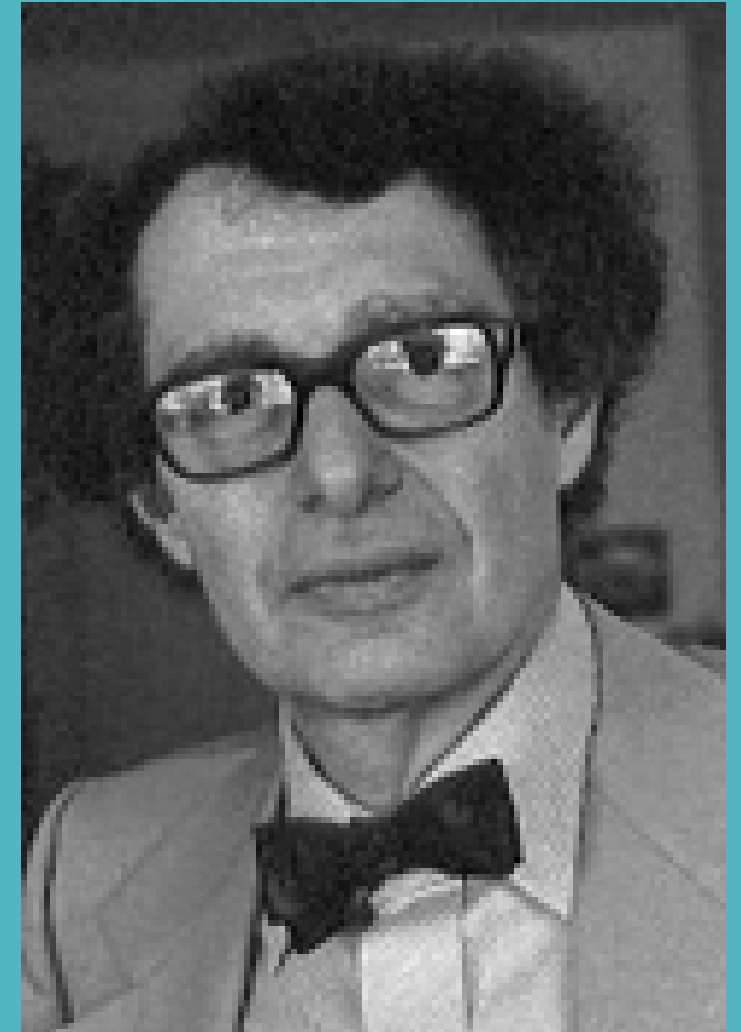
Theories of Musical Meaning

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



Leonard Meyer

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