

SCHOPENHAUER'S THEORY OF
MUSIC



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A NEW PERSPECTIVE BY K. STRANG

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In his masterpiece, *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer argues that the world is presented to us in two ways: our sensory experience of the world as appearance or representation of an underlying reality and our immediate experience of reality or the Kantian 'thing in itself' in our own will. The first of these is quite Platonic but the second departs radically from a platonic reality of ideal essences and takes on a more Nietzschean tone.

Schopenhauer includes aesthetics and evaluates the various arts and finds that music surpasses all of them. His reasoning is quite convoluted but I believe his idea is that music somehow bypasses representation and provides an immediate insight into the nature of the world as will.

'The connexion of the metaphysical significance of music with this its physical and arithmetical basis rests on the fact that what resists our apprehension, namely the irrational relation of dissonance, becomes the natural image of what resists our will; and, conversely, the consonance or the rational relation, by easily adapting itself to our apprehension, becomes the image of the satisfaction of the will. Now as that rational and irrational element in the numerical relations of the vibrations admits of innumerable degrees, nuances, sequences, and variations, music by means of it becomes the material in which all movements of the human heart, i.e., of the will, movements whose essential nature is always satisfaction and dissatisfaction, although in innumerable degrees, can be faithfully portrayed and reproduced in all their finest shades and modifications; and this takes place by means of the invention of the melody. Thus we here see the movements of the will linked with the province of the mere representation that is the exclusive scene of all the fine arts. For these positively demand that the will itself be left out of account, and that we behave in every way as purely knowing beings. Therefore the affections of the will itself, and hence actual pain and actual pleasure, must not be excited, but only their substitutes, that which is in conformity with the intellect as a picture or image of the will's satisfaction, and that which more or less opposes it as a picture or image of greater or lesser pain. Only in this way does music never cause us actual suffering, but

still remains pleasant even in its most painful chords; and we like to hear in its language the secret history of our will and of all its stirrings and strivings with their many different delays, postponements, hindrances, and afflictions, even in the most sorrowful melodies. On the other hand, where in real life and its terrors our will itself is that which is roused and tormented, we are then not concerned with tones and their numerical relations; on the contrary, we ourselves are now the vibrating string that is stretched and plucked.' [Trans E. F. J. Payne, Dover edition 1966, Vol II p451

From Pythagoras onwards, music and mathematics have been connected but it is not exclusively a matter of consonance and dissonance: with its scales, tempo, pitch, tone, rhythm and repetition or self-similarity it mirrors or is an analogue of a fractal universe.

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