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ONTOLOGY

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Ontology

Ontologists of music have been interested in a number of questions, including the following ones. Are there musical works? If there are musical works, what are they like? If there are musical works, what relation do they stand in to their performances? In this chapter, we will be focusing primarily on the second of these questions, the question of what musical works are like. In addressing this question, ontologists of music have asked a number of further questions, including the following ones. What ontological category or categories do musical works belong to? Where are musical works located in time? How are musical works individuated?

Let us assume for now that there are musical works. (We will come back briefly to this assumption later.) In particular, let us assume that Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 29 in B-flat major, Op. 106 – the *Hammerklavier* – exists. First, there are questions about its ontological category. For example, is the *Hammerklavier* a type? Or an event? Or something else? Second, there are questions about its temporal location. For example, did the *Hammerklavier* come into existence when Beethoven composed it, in 1817–18, or did it always exist? And, third, there are questions about its individuation. For example, is the *Hammerklavier* distinguished from other musical works entirely by how it sounds? Or is it distinguished from other musical works in part by the historical context in which it was composed, or by the instrument that Beethoven specified that it should be performed on?

Ontological category

The dominant view in the ontology of music is the *type theory*, according to which the *Hammerklavier* is a type (Wollheim 1980: §§35–7; Levinson 1980: 78–82, 1990a: 216; Currie 1989: 66–71; S. Davies 2001: 37–43; Dodd 2007: chs 1–5, 2008; Kivy 1983: 35–6, 1987: 59–60, 1988: 75; Wolterstorff 1980: pt. 2). A natural starting point for type theorists is the view that the *Hammerklavier* is

a type whose tokens are sound events that sound exactly like note-perfect performances of the *Hammerklavier*. This view can then be modified or extended in various ways, for example, by excluding sound events that are not performances of any musical work because they are natural occurrences (such as the wind whistling through the trees), or by including sound events that deviate to some extent from note-perfect performances of the *Hammerklavier*.

But not everyone is a type theorist. Some who reject the type theory think that the *Hammerklavier* is a set, either of correct performances (Goodman 1976: 210) or of possible and exemplary performances (Effingham ms.). The main difference between sets and types is that only the former are *extensional*: necessarily, two sets are identical if and only if they have the same members; but it is possible for two distinct types to have the same tokens. For example, if everyone who is Canadian happens to be a hockey player, and vice versa, then the set of Canucks is identical to the set of hockey players, but the types *Canuck* and *hockey player* might still be distinct, because, for example, being able to skate is one of the requirements on being a hockey player, but it is not one of the requirements on being Canadian (even if all Canadians happen to know how to skate).

Others who reject the type theory think that the *Hammerklavier* is an event, something that occurs in space and time, namely, Beethoven's compositional activity (D. Davies 2004). Still others think that it is a mereological sum of performances: something that each of those performances is a part of and every part of which has a part in common with one of those performances (Alward 2004). And still others think that it is a *sui generis* non-physical object, which is distinct from but nonetheless intimately connected to performances and recordings, copies of the score, and mental representations (Rohrbaugh 2003, ms.), or to a type whose tokens are sound events (Evnine 2009).

Some defend their view on the grounds that it identifies the *Hammerklavier* with something ontologically respectable that is already in their ontology, for example, a set (Effingham ms.). And some defend their view on the grounds that it best explains some feature or features of the *Hammerklavier*. For example, type theorists might say that their view best explains its *repeatability*, how it can have multiple performances: each of the *Hammerklavier*'s performances is a token of it (Dodd 2007: 9–19, 2008). And those who think that the *Hammerklavier* is a *sui generis* non-physical object might say that their view best explains its *temporality* (how it can come into and go out of existence), its *modal flexibility* (how it could have been different than it actually is), and its *temporal flexibility* (how it can change over time). Types might be temporal (see below), but type theorists generally deny that they are modally or temporally flexible (Dodd 2007: ch. 2), whereas *sui generis* non-physical objects might well be temporal, modally flexible, and temporally flexible (Rohrbaugh 2003, ms.).

In response to the claim that their view does not best explain the temporality, modal flexibility, or temporal flexibility of the *Hammerklavier*, some type theorists deny that the *Hammerklavier* has those features and offer an

explanation of why it *seems* to have those features, even though it really does not (Dodd 2007: chs 4–5, 2008). Perhaps the *Hammerklavier* is not temporal after all (see below), and even some who reject the type theory admit that it might not be temporally flexible (Rohrbaugh ms.). But the *Hammerklavier* does seem to be modally flexible: it does seem that in composing the *Hammerklavier* Beethoven could have called for a different note here or there, in which case the range of the *Hammerklavier*'s correct performances would have been slightly different. Those who think that the *Hammerklavier* is a modally inflexible type might say that, although the range of the *Hammerklavier*'s correct performances could not have been even slightly different, Beethoven could have composed a different work, the *Near-Hammerklavier*, with a slightly different range of correct performances (Dodd 2007: 90–1, 2008: 1127).

Temporal location

The *Hammerklavier* was composed in 1817–18. Did it come into existence at that time? Opinion is pretty evenly divided. Some say *yes* (Levinson 1980: 65, 1990a: 217; Rohrbaugh 2003, ms.); others say *no*, either because the *Hammerklavier* is not located in time or because it is located at all times (Dodd 2007: 99). (Not being located in time and being located at all times are not often distinguished in the literature.) The conjunction of the type theory and the claim that the *Hammerklavier* and other musical works do not come into existence is known as *musical Platonism* (Dodd 2007: 99). One reason for asserting that the *Hammerklavier* came into existence in 1817–18 is that, in composing it, Beethoven created it; and, in creating it, he brought it into existence (Levinson 1980: 65–8, 1990a: 217–21, 227–31). Of those who deny that the *Hammerklavier* came into existence in 1817–18, some say that Beethoven created it without bringing it into existence (Deutsch 1991), whereas others say that he composed it without creating it and, instead, creatively discovered or selected it (Kivy 1983: 38–47, 1987: 66–73; Dodd 2007: ch. 5). One reason for denying that the *Hammerklavier* came into existence in 1817–18 is that it might be hard to square its coming into existence with the type theory, since types are often thought to exist at all times or outside of time (Dodd 2007: ch. 3). Of those who assert that the *Hammerklavier* came into existence in 1817–18, some say that types can come into existence (Levinson 1980: 79–80, 81–2, 1990a: 259–61), whereas others say that the *Hammerklavier* is not a type (Rohrbaugh 2003, ms.).

Eventually, perhaps millions of years from now, all traces – including all performances, recordings, and memories – of the *Hammerklavier* will have disappeared. Will it go out of existence at that time? Those who deny that the *Hammerklavier* came into existence in 1817–18 deny that it will go out of existence in the distant future (Dodd 2007: 99). Of those who assert that the *Hammerklavier* came into existence in 1817–18, some are ambivalent about whether it will go out of existence in the distant future (Levinson 1990a: 261–63), whereas others assert

that it will (Rohrbaugh 2003, ms.). The question of whether the *Hammerklavier* will go out of existence in the distant future has received less attention in the literature than has the question of whether it came into existence in 1817–18 (but see Trivedi 2008), presumably because only the latter question is connected to questions about composition and creativity.

Individuation

Beethoven composed the *Hammerklavier* in 1817–18 and specified that it should be performed on a piano (a "hammer-keyboard" or "*Hammerklavier*"). As it happens, no one else composed a sound-alike musical work – a musical work that sounds exactly like the *Hammerklavier* – 175 years later, nor did anyone else compose a sound-alike musical work and specify that it should be performed on a Perfect Timbral Synthesizer (PTS), an electronic device that can duplicate the timbre of any actual instrument. But those are historical accidents. Suppose that Beethoven composed the *Hammerklavier* in 1817–18; someone else composed a sound-alike musical work, the *1993 Hammerklavier*, 175 years later; and someone else composed another sound-alike musical work, the *PTS Klavier*, and specified that it should be performed on a PTS. According to *sonicism*, the *Hammerklavier*, the *1993 Hammerklavier*, and the *PTS Klavier* are in fact the same musical work, since the *Hammerklavier* is distinguished from other musical works solely by how it sounds (Kivy 1987: 60–6, 1988; Dodd 2007: chs. 8–9). But, according to *contextualism*, the *Hammerklavier* and the *1993 Hammerklavier* are distinct musical works, since the *Hammerklavier* is distinguished from other musical works not just by how it sounds but also by the historical context in which it was composed (Levinson 1980: 68–73, 1990a: 221–7; Currie 1989: 34–40; S. Davies 2001: 72–5). And, according to *instrumentalism*, the *Hammerklavier* and the *PTS Klavier* are also distinct musical works, since the *Hammerklavier* is distinguished from other musical works not just by how it sounds but also by the instrument that its composer specified it should be performed on (Levinson 1980: 73–8, 1990a: 231–47; S. Davies 2001: 60–71).

Contextualists argue that the *Hammerklavier* and the *1993 Hammerklavier* differ in their aesthetic and artistic properties. For example, the *Hammerklavier* is exciting and original in ways in which the *1993 Hammerklavier* is not. So, by Leibniz's Law, they must be distinct (Levinson 1980: 68–9, 1990a: 221–4; Currie 1989: 34–40). Sonicists reply that the *Hammerklavier* and the *1993 Hammerklavier* do *not* differ in their aesthetic and artistic properties. There are various ways for sonicists to say that. For example, sonicists might say that the *Hammerklavier* is exciting in exactly the ways that the *1993 Hammerklavier* is and that, although Beethoven and his compositional actions might be more original than the twentieth-century composer and her compositional actions, neither the *Hammerklavier* nor the *1993 Hammerklavier* is itself original (Dodd 2007: ch. 9).

Instrumentalists can offer a parallel argument: the *Hammerklavier* and the *PTS Klavier* differ in their aesthetic properties. For example, the *Hammerklavier* is thundering in ways in which the *PTS Klavier* is not. So, by Leibniz's Law, they must be distinct (D. Davies 2009: 168–70). Sonicists can offer a parallel reply: the *Hammerklavier* and the *PTS Klavier* have the same aesthetic properties. For example, the *Hammerklavier* is thundering in exactly the ways that the *PTS Klavier* is. But this reply is not available to all sonicists. For example, some sonicists (e.g. Dodd 2007: ch. 8) say that the *Hammerklavier* is thundering in exactly the ways it is only because its performances are correctly heard as performed on a piano (even if they are not in fact performed on a piano). But it might come to be that performances of the *PTS Klavier* are correctly heard, not as performed on a piano, but rather as performed on a PTS. And, in that case, the *PTS Klavier* would not be thundering in exactly the ways that the *Hammerklavier* is (D. Davies 2009: 168). (One might be tempted to draw a different conclusion, one that goes beyond instrumentalism, namely, that a musical work is individuated not just by how it sounds, or by the instrument that its composer specified that it should be performed on, but also by the instrument that its performances are correctly heard as being performed on, even if that instrument is not the instrument that its composer specified that it should be performed on.)

Meta-ontology

Suppose that the goal of a given ontology of music is to handle those intuitions of ours that are relevant. For instance, in considering whether musical works can be created, one might appeal to the commonly held belief that musical works are created and conclude that musical Platonism must be rejected in favor of a theory according to which musical works are the sorts of things that can be created (cf. Levinson 1980: 65–8, 1990a: 216–21). In this case, an ontological issue is settled solely by a direct appeal to our intuitions concerning ontological matters. That is, for the purposes of this little exercise, the only relevant intuitions are ontological intuitions concerning whether musical works can be created.

However, this basic approach faces a few problems. Even if it can be used sometimes – for instance, with respect to creatability – most people do not have enough ontological intuitions to generate a fully fleshed-out ontology of music. Furthermore, those that they do have are rarely the product of careful consideration and often are not very strongly held. At this point, although there might be several candidate theories, we simply do not have enough data to pick a winner. We can augment our list of data by bringing into consideration issues that can be plausibly considered to be relevant and about which non-metaphysicians have strongly held opinions. In other words, we can hold that the goal of an ontology of music is to handle a much broader range of intuitions concerning musical (or critical) practice, that is, what musicians, music audiences, music critics, and music theorists say and do (D. Davies 2004, 2009; Rohrbaugh 2005; Stecker

2009). For instance, consider the claim that the aesthetic or artistic properties that we attribute to the *Hammerklavier* differ from those we would attribute to the *1993 Hammerklavier*. If this claim is true, then, since sound-alike musical works can differ in their properties, sonicism must be false and contextualism true. In this case, our non-ontological intuitions can be used to adjudicate between rival ontologies of musical works.

Appealing to musical practice raises some further questions. Musical practice could have been different in many ways. How would the ontology of music have been different if musical practice had been different? And must the actual ontology of music, now, already be ready to accommodate all of these different possible practices or, at least, all possible extensions of our current actual practice?

But, even putting these large-scale questions aside, appealing to musical practice does not by itself settle the issue between sonicism and contextualism. Sonicists can deny that the differences between the *Hammerklavier* and the *1993 Hammerklavier* should be construed as requiring two works that have different properties. One way to do this would be to regard the case as an example of one work that bears different relations to different audiences – in this case, an audience from 1818, which hears the work as revolutionary, versus an audience from 1993, which hears it as old-fashioned (cf. Kivy 1987: 64–5). Similarly, although a musical Platonist would have to agree that, strictly speaking, musical works fail to be creatable, she would add that acts of composition occur in time and have a beginning. According to the musical Platonist, when we say "Musical works are created," the truth in the vicinity might be that a given work is indicated or conceived for the first time on a certain date (cf. Kivy 1983: 38–47, 1987: 66–73; Dodd 2007: ch. 5).

Each of these strategies relies on a technique known as *paraphrase*. For instance, a philosopher might believe that, strictly speaking, only sensory ideas exist. Nevertheless, she wishes to preserve certain claims such as "My piano is in the corner of the room" by capturing the sentence in the language of ideas. According to her theory, although we are wrong at a fundamental level, we still utter true sentences under her construal or paraphrase of them. Furthermore, our basic error might not require us to change our everyday speech or behavior. However, if paraphrase is permissible and available, then ontological issues might not be decidable. If the sonicist and the musical Platonist can provide friendly paraphrases of what seem to be truths that are problematic for their views, then we do not seem to have a way of adjudicating between those views and their rivals.

If we are to proceed further, we need to bring in this constraint: if our practice implies the attribution of an aesthetic or artistic property to a musical work, then the best ontology of music is one according to which the musical work in question really possesses the property in question (Levinson 1980: 84 n. 29, 1990a: 224; D. Davies 2004: 16–24). Musical Platonism loses on the creatability question under this constraint if it paraphrases claims about a work's being

created as claims about the occurrence of an action of composition; sonicism loses the *1993 Hammerklavier* case if it paraphrases claims about the aesthetic or artistic difference between two works as claims about different relations that hold between a single work and different audiences. Another methodological wrinkle stems from the fact that, if one's theory seems not to fit the data supplied by musical practice, one can modify one's data set for ostensibly independently motivated reasons. For instance, if a writer supports some sort of musical empiricism, according to which all of a work's aesthetic properties are in some sense readily hearable, then that writer can simply reject the claim that the *Hammerklavier* and the *1993 Hammerklavier* could differ in their aesthetic properties, since they are sound-alikes (Dodd 2007: chs 8–9). Of course, in the absence of persuasive arguments for musical empiricism, opponents can maintain that a theory's inability to handle our apparent aesthetic judgments about this case should count as a flaw.

The possibility remains that no ontology of music can save all of our current intuitions concerning musical practice, no matter how much creative paraphrasing we employ. Or, perhaps, all of our intuitions can be saved only by an extremely cumbersome and unwieldy theory. In these circumstances it might be best to consider ontological theories that sacrifice a few of our intuitions for the sake of preserving the rest of them in a theoretically virtuous way. Our final theory and the particular claims concerning music it generates might conflict with the views that we started with in important ways, both about basic ontology and about our understanding of musical practice. This methodology is akin to reflective equilibrium in philosophical ethics. Suppose that the ethical theories we start with are in conflict with our intuitions about particular cases. We resolve the conflict by revising our theory and revising our beliefs about particular cases (to the smallest extent possible) so that we eventually arrive at a coherent and powerful ethical theory. However, at the outset, everything is up for grabs, at least in principle. Some writers identify works with things that have long been in our general ontologies. For instance, David Davies (2004) asserts that musical works, and indeed all artworks, are actions that artists perform. As such they form a species of event tokens. Others, such as Jerrold Levinson (1980, 1990a) and Guy Rohrbaugh (2003, ms.), devise new things – types that come into existence or *sui generis* non-physical objects – that are tailor-made to play the role we accord to musical works. Each of these theorists identifies musical works with new or unexpected things, because the old, familiar candidates for being a musical work cannot do the job of preserving all or even most of the things we want to say about musical works.

But not everyone sees the need for reflective equilibrium. Some take musical practice to be sacrosanct because the term "musical work," if it refers at all, must refer to something that conforms completely to what actual musical practice requires (Thomasson 2005, 2006). But, on this view, there is no guarantee that our term "musical work" will refer to anything at all, unless we start with an

ontology so plenitudinous that we are guaranteed to refer to something no matter how it is characterized. Others see no need to take into account general theoretical or metaphysical claims beyond those implicit in musical practice, since they see ontology of music as solely being in the business of describing how we think about musical works (Kania 2008b). But ontology of music is not solely in the business of describing how we think about musical works; it is also in the business of describing how musical works are. Others think that preserving what is implicit in musical practice is so easy that no reflective equilibrium is required, since they see ontology of music as solely being in the business of preserving the truth of certain sentences and they think that those sentences can be made true even if there are, strictly speaking, no musical works (Cameron 2008). But, even if our musical practice is coherent and there is a way of simultaneously making true all of the sentences that correspond to it (and at this point there's no guarantee that that is possible), there is more to preserving what is implicit in musical practice than preserving the truth of some sentences: musical practice includes what musicians and audiences do, and one might think that playing and listening to musical works requires the existence of musical works and not just the truth of some sentences about them. In any case, insofar as we care about the truth of sentences about musical works, we think that those sentences are made true by the existence of musical works (Stecker 2009).

Some doubt the usefulness of the ontology of music altogether, because to be useful an ontological theory about the *Hammerklavier*, for example, would have to tell us ahead of time what would count as a performance of that musical work, and there is no way of knowing what would count as a performance of the *Hammerklavier* before hearing all possible performances of it (Ridley 2003). These anti-ontological concerns can be side-stepped, because the usefulness of the ontology of music does not depend on its telling us ahead of time what would count as a performance of what (Kania 2008a). But they can be profitably viewed as a starting point for an examination of the issue of "grounding," which in the ontology of music largely concerns the relation between claims about musical works and claims about their performances. Is the *Hammerklavier* thundering in virtue of the thundering nature of its performances, or are the performances thundering in virtue of the thundering nature of the work? In other words, are the aesthetic or artistic properties of the musical work grounded in the properties of its performances, are the aesthetic or artistic properties of its performances grounded in the properties of the musical work, or neither? This is a metaphysical question; as such, it should be distinguished from a pragmatic or epistemological question, which is also of interest: How should we go about finding out which aesthetic or artistic properties the *Hammerklavier* has? For instance, should we ascertain that the *Hammerklavier* is thundering via a close examination of the score or by an imaginative engagement with possible performances? Although there is renewed interest in grounding among metaphysicians (e.g. Schaffer 2009), philosophers of music have not begun to address the issue.

Critics and musicians frequently distinguish the properties of performances from the properties of musical works. If ontologists of music were to consider grounding, they would be able to address issues of greater importance to musical practice than that of pigeon-holing musical works in some ontological category or other. Until now, ontologists of music have been very active at the theoretical level, but they have tended to simply accept what is said by other participants in the musical community. Perhaps this is due to assumptions they might have made about the limited role of, and possibilities inherent in, the philosophy of art. However, the issue of grounding might sometimes make it possible for ontologists of music to play a part in guiding practice, which would be a very good thing for those philosophers who want to do more than record and regiment what the "real" practitioners are doing.

See also Authentic performance practice (Chapter 9), Jazz (Chapter 39), Medium (Chapter 5), Performances and recordings (Chapter 8), Rock (Chapter 38), and Song (Chapter 40).

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