

**Some Thoughts on Simon Vestdijk's Essay
'Muziek is mooi omdat zij mooi is'
in *De Gids*, 1956**

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This paper examines the contribution made by Simon Vestdijk to the aesthetics of music in his 1956 article '*Muziek is mooi omdat zij mooi is*' for the journal *De Gids*. After a short introduction situating Vestdijk's paper within the context of aesthetics in general, and of music aesthetics in particular, four approaches to the definition of music as presented by Vestdijk are examined in detail. A discussion of the 'idealist' approach, which asks whether there is a transcendental dimension to music, and whether we can read a composer's 'mind' or 'mood' in music, is followed by an examination of the 'materialist' approach, which deals with music in terms of physics, acoustics, and listener response, and the associated question of pleasure or bewilderment on the part of the listener. In this context, it is shown that Vestdijk's conservatism seems to indicate his lack of familiarity with the so-called New Music, which causes him to underestimate the problematic relationship between composers and audience. After looking at the 'empiricist' approach, which emphasizes musical analysis to the detriment of other aspects of music and may lead to 'atomism,' and, finally, the 'relativist' approach, which attempts to define music in terms of expression and originality, Vestdijk ends on a note of agnosticism: Music is beautiful because it is beautiful. Music partakes of the ineffable, and like Wittgenstein, Vestdijk seems to suggest that "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."

Key terms: History of Music; Aesthetics of Music; Reception Theory; the New Music.

Introduction

In 1956 *De Gids*, the Netherlands' pre-eminent literary journal, published an article by Simon Vestdijk, poet, essayist and prolific novelist, with the title *Muziek is mooi omdat zij mooi is* ('Music is beautiful because she is beautiful').¹

Now it may appear that Vestdijk is an unlikely source for writing about music, but it may be remembered that in a previous article in *CJNS* (Dierick 2002) I indicated the close ties Vestdijk maintained with the most important composer of his day, Willem Pijper, notably his collaboration on the opera *Merlijn*.² Vestdijk in fact wrote frequently about music and was well versed in it and its history.³ The article, we are informed by its author, is in fact the eleventh chapter of his book *Het Eerste en het Laatste: Grondslagen eener praktische Muziekaesthetiek* ('The First and the Last: Foundations of a practical Music Aesthetics', 1956), which was about to be published in the fall of that year by D. A. Daanen in the Hague. *De Gids*, on the other hand, is a somewhat unlikely

¹ Simon Vestdijk (1889-1971) was a Dutch poet, novelist, and essayist. After studying medicine he made his literary debut with *Verzen* ('Poems', 1932), but quickly developed into one of the most prolific and versatile novelists of the first half of the twentieth century. His psychological novels – many of them with autobiographical elements, especially those in the series which have Anton Wachter as their hero – focus on the morals and attitudes of the middle classes: *Terug tot Ina Damman* ('Back to Ina Damman', 1934), *Else Böhler, Duits dienstmeisje* ('Else Böhler, German servant girl', 1935), *Pastorale 1943* ('Pastoral 1943', 1948), *De koperen tuin* ('The garden where the brass band played', 1950), *Het glinsterend pantser* ('The shining armour', 1956), *Ivoren wachters* ('Ivory guardians', 1951). His historical novels explore the inner life of complex characters: *Aktaion onder de sterren* ('Aktaion among the stars', 1941), *Het proces van Meester Eckhart* ('The trial of Master Eckhart', 1970), *De nadagen van Pontius Pilatus* ('The declining years of Pontius Pilate', 1938), *Het vijfde zegel* ('The fifth seal', 1937). In all of his novels the influence of psychoanalysis is pervasive.

Vestdijk was also a prolific and influential essayist, with a wide interest: examples are *Albert Verwey en de idee* ('Albert Verwey and the idea', 1940), *Astrologie en wetenschap* ('Astrology and science', 1949), *Het schuldprobleem bij Dostojewski* ('The problem of guilt in Dostoyevsky', 1945). His special interest was music, however, and his output in this domain comprises ten volumes of critical essays and reviews.

All English translations are my own.

² Willem Pijper (1892-1947), a student of Johan Wagenaar, was for many years a feared and independent music critic for the *Utrechts Dagblad* ('Utrecht Daily'), a teacher of harmony at the Amsterdam Conservatory and editor of *De Muziek* (1920-1935). Pijper was a gifted teacher who had among his pupils such eminent Dutch composers as Rudolf Escher, Hans Henkemans, Piet Ketting, Guillaume Landré, and Henk Badings. Pijper composed orchestral music (among which are three symphonies), music for piano, chamber music, and the opera *Merlijn*.

³ Some titles from his later years: *Gustav Mahler* (1960), *De Symphonieën van Jean Sibelius* (1962), *De Symphonieën van Anton Bruckner* (1966). Vestdijk's musical essays were collected in *Verzamelde Muziekessays* ('Collected essays on Music', 1963), and comprise ten volumes.

place for the discussion of music, given that it is primarily a literary journal, but the name Vestdijk surely explains the appearance of the item here.⁴

It is legitimate to ask what relevance an article of 1956 may still have for us, apart from its connection with one of the Netherlands' most prominent literary figures. I hope to show that both its historical situation and the actual content of the article still hold considerable interest. In one crucial respect, to be sure, Vestdijk's title appears not only to be outdated, but in actuality questionable, namely in his use of the term *mooi*. Since it refers to a category pertaining to more traditional aesthetics, it is hardly appropriate for modern or contemporary serious music, and in general beauty is no longer a prime category of aesthetics in modern art in general either.⁵ As we shall see, Vestdijk's categories may be apt enough for the consideration of earlier music, but especially in view of the music already being written in his time, notably the *Neue Musik* (see below), the term is hardly appropriate. Fortunately, Vestdijk's inquiries into beauty broaden on several occasions into a more general calling into question of the very possibility of attaching meaning to music. The problems raised by the attempts to define beauty are, at the same time, questions about the nature and being of music, and for that reason retain their interest.

There is a second preliminary point I would like to make, one which will throw light on my way of proceeding in certain parts of this paper. Vestdijk's theses, I would argue, arise out of a specific historical situation. The years 1950-1960 mark the apogee of the critical reputation of the New Music (*Die neue Musik*), specifically the Second Viennese School (Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, Anton Webern), but also of Stravinsky; at the same time these years mark the beginning of the ascendancy of the next phase in musical history, the breakthrough of what has been called abstract music, *musique concrète* and post-modern music (Edgar Varèse, early Pierre Boulez, Karl-Heinz Stockhausen, and Hans Werner Henze, for example). A situation of general dis-orientation on the part of audiences, with a growing abyss between producers and consumers of serious music, led a number of critics and aesthetic philosophers to rethink the very definition of music. In the year of Vestdijk's article, 1956, Leonard B.

⁴ *De Gids* ('The Guide') was the most prominent literary and cultural journal of the Netherlands for most of the 19th and 20th century. Founded in 1830 by P.A. Beyerinck, *De Gids* featured articles on art, science, political and social issues, but had a special emphasis on literature. Important editors and contributors were E.J. Potgieter, Bakhuizen van den Brink, Cd Busken Huet, Joh. de Meester, Louis Couperus, Lodewijk van Deyssel and Frederik van Eeden in the 19th century and A. Roland-Holst, Aart van der Leeuw and Hendrik Marsman in the early 20th century. After the hiatus of the Second World War, the journal was newly established. Among its contributors were Simon Vestdijk and Harry Mulisch.

⁵ R.G. Collingwood states categorically: "Aesthetic theory is the theory not of beauty but of art" (1958, 41).

Meyer published *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. Two years later it was Theodor W. Adorno's turn to focus on the *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (1958). Susanne K. Langer's thoughts about music (notably in *Philosophy in a New Key* [1942] and *Problems of Art* [1957]) were still predominant, but they were gradually being replaced by the approaches of the contributors of *Aesthetics Today*, and again by writers like Donald Mitchell in his *Language of Modern Music* (1963). Echoes of these debates must have been heard in the Netherlands also: Hendrik Andriessen, a contemporary of Vestdijk, in his critiques later collected by the publishing house *Het Spectrum* as a *Prismaboek, Over muziek* (1950), refers to the new – though not avant-garde – music and pursues, in a casual language, some of the questions raised in the above-mentioned works, and in the process shows a remarkable agreement with Vestdijk's main claims. Vestdijk himself, especially in his contacts with Pijper, more than likely was influenced by the same historical situation.



*Simon Vestdijk plays piano, date unknown, Vestdijkbeeldbank.
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Vestdijk tells us that his book, of which the article in *De Gids* forms part, had in general a practical orientation, but the chapter under discussion is not descriptive, but analytical: it examines the question whether there can be norms and values in music. Since in traditional aesthetics beauty is one of the central concepts for which values and norms are suggested, beauty in music would

appear to occupy a similarly central position. The title of Vestdijk's article, however, expresses the opinion that no matter how hard and long we may labour in the garden of music aesthetics, the fruits of such labour will not yield a greater understanding of what constitutes music's beauty (however beauty is defined). Of course Vestdijk is aware that a simple statement of agnosticism is not sufficient to warrant the approval of his readers. Hence, though he writes, "Personally, I am convinced that musical beauty cannot be explained", he continues, "but I am quite willing to accommodate people who have a different opinion" (309).⁶

This is sound strategy. All revolutionary positions, including those in the sciences and humanities, entail an implicit or explicit dialogue with previous positions. In philosophical terms, Vestdijk's tautological explanation affirms, but also negates something, or at least implies that other explanations are either redundant or wrong. To support the challenge and provocation voiced in the title, he therefore develops but negates these other positions or explanations in the rest of the article. Though he admits that much of what he says about music is valid for all forms of art, music takes the lead in the debate about beauty, once again, "because there is so little else to explain" (310).⁷

To understand along which theoretical lines Vestdijk is arguing, and what he is arguing against, I propose to give a short summary of the main tendencies in the history of music aesthetics. It is understood, of course, that what has been theorized about music applies to some degree to all the arts. But one of the main tendencies of more recent music aesthetics has been precisely to warn against facile analogies with other arts, and to work out their differences rather than the features common to them.

Background

Music aesthetics as a distinct discipline has a relatively short history. To be sure, as part of the philosophy of art it reaches all the way back to the Greeks, notably Plato and Pythagoras. As an autonomous field of study, however, music aesthetics basically came into its own in the 19th century, and primarily in Germany, where it is intimately tied to developments in music itself – starting with its emancipation in the Romantic period from the service of feudalistic institutions, rising to its glorification as a kind of secular religion or a new

⁶ "Zelf ben ik ervan overtuigd, dat de muzikale schoonheid niet te verklaren is ... ; maar ik wil gaarne diegenen gerieven die een andere mening toegedaan zijn."

⁷ "omdat er in en aan de muziek verder zoo weinig te verklaren is."

mythology in the case of Wagner, and then transforming into the so-called New Music of the 20th century.⁸

Music aesthetics is generally considered a sub-field of the philosophy of art, though strictly speaking in the philosophy of art there are no divisions: art is the only appropriate subject for philosophy and all subdivisions are un-philosophical, according to R.G. Collingwood (1958).

The philosophy of art asks such typical questions as: "What is artistic expression? Is there truth in works of art?⁹ What do works of art mean? How do they mean? Is there a universal definition of art, are there values in art, and are there standards by which we can measure art?" In discussing music aesthetics, such more general questions must always be kept in mind, since questions concerning music are only raised to the level of aesthetics if they operate within this larger framework.

In addition to problems of the kind just iterated, music aesthetics specifically also asks questions about the matter or stuff of music, i.e. how it works (analysis, methodology of music, all the way from acoustics to questions of tonality, form and structure). Such problems are raised by philosophers (Hegel, Schopenhauer, R.G. Collingwood, for example), by cultural philosophers, sociologists (Theodor W. Adorno and Fredrick Jameson, lately also Alessandro Baricco), by psychologists who are focused on the effect of music on individual listeners (Carl Stumpf in the 19th century), by music critics, as well as by practitioners of music such as composers and performers themselves.¹⁰

For a definition of music aesthetics in the traditional sense, I have found the one given by Jan Wisse to be helpful:

Its purpose would be an investigation of the musical and extra-musical elements of a composition and the attempt, with the help of such an investigation, to come to the elaboration of objective criteria by which the aesthetic value of a composition can be measured once and for all.

(Wisse 1956, 108)¹¹

Note the key words here: objective criteria and aesthetic value. What the definition suggests is that musical aesthetics go beyond description – though

⁸ For the most recent writing on music and musical history in light of musicology see Katz (2011).

⁹ Claude Debussy's answer: "L'art est le plus beau des mensonges" (Debussy 1971, 60).

¹⁰ Aesthetics in general can be approached by referring to Barrett (1965), Philipson & Gudel (1980) and Roche (1998).

¹¹ "Het doel ervan zou zijn het onderzoeken van de muzikale en buiten-muzikale elementen van een compositie en het trachten met behulp van een dergelijk onderzoek te komen tot het vaststellen van objectieve criteria waaraan de esthetische waarde van een compositie eens en voor al kan worden afgemeten."

description and analysis are the basis of the whole exercise – and attempts to arrive at a judgment.

But can we attain this goal? Clearly there is the problem of the relativity of all judgment on beauty. An examination of musical history in all its complexity and multiplicity of manifestations similarly suggests that objective criteria do not exist. In due course, therefore, in light of what musical aesthetics can be about, we see the emergence of a much different definition of musical aesthetics. Again in the words of Jan Wisse: "Music aesthetics is the study of the relationships that exist between music and the human senses and the intellect" (109).¹²

Music aesthetics as a specific field of study gathers momentum only in the 19th century, and questions about the nature of music are raised especially by German thinkers. But the idea of meaning is already available in the Greeks. A thorough study of the subject would show that music aesthetics is part of the larger framework of aesthetics of art, and ultimately of philosophy itself.

Philosophy

In Eastern cultures, the Philosophy of music is narrowly related to cosmic and religious ideas, and to ethics. In the West, early thinking about music manifests itself in e.g. Plato's remarks in the Republic on the moral value of music and on the moral/amoral character of certain musical modes (Doric vs. Ionic). Pythagoras speculated on the music of the spheres and worked out certain relationships of numbers in music, which provided him with an understanding of acoustics and the proportions giving rise to octaves and fifths. The relationship of music to mathematics has remained strong ever since. In the Middle Ages, by contrast, music was considered strictly in functional terms – music is the handmaiden of liturgy and thinking about it is restricted to notions of skill and technique.

It is in the Baroque period that we see such philosophers as Descartes, Leibniz, Bacon, Locke, and Pascal begin to defend the idea that music is autonomous. But the links with extra-musical ideas remain: Leibniz wrote about music and mathematics while, at a much later date, Schopenhauer considered music to be the expression of the World Will.

Linking music with some transcendental idea remains a possibility even in the 20th century. Efforts have been made to link music to the study of symbolic forms, as in the case of Ernst Cassirer (*The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1923-1929), from whom Suzanne Langer takes her cue. The aesthetics of music is here

¹² "Muziekethiek is de studie van de betrekkingen die bestaan tussen de muziek en de zinnen en het intellect van de mens."

practiced as a philosophical discipline – but this is not the main emphasis either for Vestdijk or for me.

Music Aesthetics

When we turn to the aesthetics of music itself, when we move away from the consideration of the function of music to the consideration of its character and meaning, the key questions appear to be:

First: is music primarily a matter of sensuous elements (sounds) or is music primarily a matter of what lies beyond such sonorous elements, in other words intellectual content, or ideas? Formulated slightly differently: is music autonomous (absolute music) or is music to be understood as being in the service of an extra-musical idea or emotion?

Second: what is the relationship between intellect and emotion? This conflict or harmony between the sensuous and intellectual aspects of music is a leitmotiv for most writings about it, but in earlier times emotion seems not to have been a major category. A first indication of the importance of expressiveness in music comes with the late Dutch Schools (in the second half of the 16th century), the so-called *musica reservata*. But even at this stage, the guiding principle is not that music must move the listener. Since the music must follow the text very closely, and since rhythm is dictated by this need and retains the greatest value, we can say that it is an intellectual principle that dominates. A second guiding principle is that music must follow and imitate nature: As Jan Wisse writes: "The task of the composer was the revelation of the inner value of the subject (*soggetto*). This was only possible through the compositional procedure of imitation" (Wisse 1956, 111).¹³

The polar opposition of the senses vs. the intellect, or of musical autonomy vs. extra-musical values, remains a topic throughout the history of Western music. Gluck, for example, wrote that music is a very limited art, especially where the melody is concerned: "In the combination of notes one looks in vain for characteristics which correspond to human passions – they do not exist" (quoted in Wisse 1956, 111).¹⁴ Monteverdi, on the other hand, basing himself on Plato, attributes very strong extra-musical values to music. And whereas Couperin remarks regarding his titles that they have no meaning whatsoever and are only chosen to differentiate between pieces of music (Wisse 1956, 112), a shift in emphasis from purely musical ideas to extra-musical ideas

¹³ "De taak van de componist was de innerlijke waarde van het onderwerp [*soggetto*] te openbaren. Dit was alleen mogelijk door het compositorische procédé der imitatie."

¹⁴ "...men kan in de combinatie van noten die een melodie vormen, tevergeefs zoeken naar eigenschappen die met de menselijke passies overeenkomen – zij bestaan niet."

can be discerned in Rousseau. In someone like C.P.E. Bach, finally, in his *Affektenlehre*, we find the aesthetic theory that the most important goal of music is the depiction of typical emotional situations (Wisse 1956, 112). Whether such contrasting opinions in the 18th century can be related to the two movements of Enlightenment and Pre-Romanticism – as is the case in literature (cf. Dierick 1998) – I cannot say.

This side-by-side emphasis on these two aspects of music pertains also to Romanticism, but generally the contention is that musical aesthetics should look for its norms outside the music itself. This is the conviction of people like Schlegel, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, but also of Liszt, and partially also of Wagner.¹⁵ In the 20th century the defenders of extra-musical values in music are Hermann Kretzschmar (1848-1924), Hugo Riemann (1849-1919), and especially Arnold Schering (1877-1941). Here also lie the roots of the tendency to relate the music to the composer's life. It is Schering's belief that a composition is nothing but a means to transmit a composer's *Erlebnis* (experience, especially in an emotional sense) to the listener. Suzanne Langer, in the late 1930s, also defends extra-musical expressivity when she considers music to be a kind of language for that which cannot be said. Similarly, André Cuvelier in *La musique et l'homme, ou relativité de la chose musicale* claims that music is, to be sure, not a language in the strict sense, but that its essence nevertheless lies beyond what is sounded (Wisse 1956, 113).

Defenders of absolute music are, in the 19th century, Joh. Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841) and especially Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904), who, in his *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* ('The Beautiful in Music') of 1854 defined music as "*tönend bewegte Form*" ('form moving in sound'). Followers of Hanslick in the 20th century – those who insist on the separation of life and nature on the one hand and music on the other – include Ferruccio Busoni, René Leibowitz, and Igor Stravinsky.

It must be noted that, different as they are, all these theories accept aesthetics as something relevant to music, as an objective quality. They only differ about whether aesthetic value is inherent in music or added to it. But in the 20th century, psychologists began to inquire whether aesthetics is not in reality located outside music itself. Their efforts led rather to an examination of the effect of music on the listener, to a psychological approach to music. One of the first of such investigators was Carl Stumpf (1848-1936). In his *Tonpsychologie* ('Psychology of Sound') of 1883-90 he located the category of value away from music itself – in other words he denied any objective criteria with which to attribute beauty, and placed it in the domain of the listener, in the reception.

¹⁵ For a discussion of Romantic music, the standard work remains that by Einstein 1947.

Music, whatever it is in itself, becomes something relative. This gives rise to the argument that musical content (if one can talk about it at all) is not exclusively determined by the composer, but is dependent also on the listener. A very simple point is often made in this context: Great differences can exist between the mood of the composer while creating his music, and the resulting music, as well as the mood perceived by the listener during its reception.¹⁶

It was Arnold Schoenberg, Jan Wisse argues, who, although he adhered to the theory that musical beauty is exclusively located in the music itself, was “one of the first composers who defended the point of view that the composer has no other language than that of constructing sounds, and that it then depends on the receptivity of the listener to what extent during a performance a correct construction and an experience of beauty takes place” (1956, 113).¹⁷ Unfortunately, the many experiments to put such listener reactions on a scientific basis, especially in the United States, have shown that no solid data can be obtained. In any case it should be evident that from the mere reactions of listeners no actual values can be derived for the compositions in question.

In summary then, there appears to be, both in theory and practice, one line in musical aesthetics which goes from Pythagoras to electronic music (mathematical, rational, absolute music), and another from Plato to Hindemith (emotional-philosophical music). Neither has found universal acceptance, but Jan Wisse suggests that an old theory might be recalled to help out:

For Aristotle music possesses an intrinsic value, which flows from the immanent laws of musical logic. But because the composer sets to music life – and this term interpreted in its broadest sense – as it presents itself transformed through his personality, music is also connected to its maker. To the extent that the listener is able to experience that transformation by means of his own personality emotionally and through his knowledge of musical laws rationally, music will have a great effect.

(Wisse 1956, 114)¹⁸

¹⁶ It is crucial to note, however, that this way of looking at art already arose in the later stages of the Enlightenment and of Pre-Romanticism (late 18th century), and was partially initiated by the writings of the Dutch philosopher François Hemsterhuis, as noted above.

¹⁷ “een der eerste componisten die het standpunt verdedigde dat de componist geen andere taal heeft dan in klanken te construeren, en dat het dan aan de ontvankelijkheid van de toehoorder ligt of en in welke mate bij de vertolking van een juiste constructie er een (schoonheids)ontroering zal ontstaan.”

¹⁸ “Voor Aristoteles bevat de muziek een eigen intrinsieke waarde, voortvloeiende uit immanente wetten van muzikale logica. Daar de componist echter het leven - en deze term dan in de ruimste zin op te vatten - verklankt zoals het zich, getransformeerd door zijn persoonlijkheid aan hem voordoet, is de muziek ook aan de maker gebonden. Naarmate de luisteraar in staat is door

This effect is threefold: ethical exaltation, purging of emotions, transcendence of the present through ecstasy. But, as Wisse writes, “[f]ortunately, [this definition] does not touch the ultimate secret of music and of art in general either” (1956, 113).¹⁹

This final statement of agnosticism by Jan Wisse seems to coincide admirably with the point made in the title of Vestdijk’s article. But, as the article itself demonstrates, Vestdijk’s judgment is not a priori: it is based on a thorough acquaintance with the traditions in musical aesthetics and takes up many of the points I have referred to up to now.

Vestdijk’s book from which the article is extracted, has, so the author tells us, in general a practical orientation, but the essay that is here reproduced is not descriptive but analytical. What follows, he admits, is to a large extent valid for all forms of art, but music takes the lead in the debate about beauty.

Vestdijk’s theses

Vestdijk supplies us with four main explanations concerning the concept of beauty: idealist, materialist, empiricist, and relativist.

The idealist explanation

Music, art, is beautiful, Vestdijk claims, because it partakes of “the beautiful idea, or the idea of beauty...The individual ‘art object’ partakes in a general concept” (310).²⁰ Vestdijk appears to accept, perhaps for the sake of argument, a Platonist point of view – the idea of beauty is manifested in the work of art. But he sees difficulties in accepting this idea. He cites two possibilities:

If behind the concept of beauty, i.e. behind the abstract, there is nothing transcendental, supra-sensual, then using the concept (abstraction) adds nothing to the individual thing which is or has beauty. Rather than arguing from the abstract to the individual beautiful item, it makes more sense to see beauty as the totality of all beautiful things. But either way, this has little to do with an explanation.

On the other hand, if something is hidden (hovers, rests, creates, exists) behind the concept of beauty (if there is a metaphysical sanction), then this would not help things very much either, since it would only explain that beauty

middel van zijn eigen persoonlijkheid emotioneel en door zijn kennis van de muzikale wetten rationeel die transformatie mee te beleven, zal de muziek een grote werking uitoefenen.”

¹⁹ “Aan het laatste geheim van de muziek en van de kunst in het algemeen ... raakt [deze definitie] gelukkig ook niet.”

²⁰ “de schoone idee of de id e der schoonheid ... Het bijzondere ‘kunst ing’ heeft deel aan een algemeen begrip.”

exists, not how it exists. In Kantian terms (not Vestdijk's), we have no access to "*das Ding an sich*" ('the thing in itself'), not even in music. Vestdijk himself is pretty clear about where he stands in the attempt to attain the transcendental via music: "Don't come to me with this kind of thing", he concludes (311).²¹

Although he does not do so specifically, Vestdijk probably would also be skeptical about reading into music the reflection of a composer's mind or the state of his emotions – a popular notion since Arnold Schering.²² Hendrik Andriessen in any case counsels his listeners to be wary of "profound discourses ... in which the 'movement of the soul' of the composer is explained with shameless arrogance Do not read the descriptions of Beethoven's unearthliness, but listen to the play of the deepest emotions and be happy with that" (Andriessen 1950, 179).²³ Both Andriessen and Vestdijk would probably have agreed with Maurice Ravel's pithy statement: "Music does not need philosophy" (Grunfeld 1973, 124).

The materialist explanation

Sensuous elements, vibration of the air, nerve stimuli, frequencies, decibels etc. are claimed to give a scientific explanation of the beauty of music, undoubtedly a good explanation, Vestdijk admits, but too scientific (311). It would not be amiss in this connection to mention once again some American experimental methods applied to the reception of music. Such experiments concentrate on the measurable effects of certain sounds produced by various types of music on individual listeners – pulse, blood pressure, heartbeat etc. They are frequently associated with behaviorist psychology, but have in the main not yielded significant or even tangible results.²⁴

Vestdijk does accept the idea that beauty can be related to elementary tone combinations. Some chords e.g. are more pleasurable than others, but they are in themselves not artistic creations. Again, there are human preferences for

²¹ "Mij moet men met dergelijke zaken niet aan boord komen."

²² A view probably inspired by Wilhelm Dilthey's theory of literature and one held with conviction by Hendrik Marsman about 'true' poetry. See Marsman 1926.

²³ "diepzinnige vertogen ... waarin u de 'zielegang' van de componist met onbeschaamde eigengereidheid wordt verklaard [...] Lees niet de beschrijvingen van Beethoven's bovenaardsheid, maar luister naar het spel der diepe aandoeningen en wees er gelukkig mee."

²⁴ An early 'materialist' reaction to music is quoted by Grunfeld (1973, 41). Samuel Pepys confessed in 1688 that his ignorance of music probably made his reactions flawed, but "[t]hat which did please me beyond anything in the whole world was the wind-musique when the angel comes down, which is so sweet that it ravished me, and indeed, in a word, did wrap up my soul so that it made me really sick, just as I have formerly been when in love with my wife." Equally amusing is the flap text accompanying Baricco (1996), which tells of an experiment in Wisconsin, whereby the production of milk by cows exposed to the music of Mozart improved considerably.

mathematical relations that are experienced as agreeable, pleasant, or even significant, and certain harmonies, even considered in isolation, can already move us, but when in music such harmonies (chords) are used in applications that differ according to their function, the character of such individual sounds may change. A scientific explanation at that level has little chance of succeeding. Efforts of this kind will lead, Vestdijk objects (with a variation on Wilhelm Dilthey's [1906, 1910] philosophy) to explanation (*erklären*) rather than understanding (*verstehen*) – the former being the method used by the sciences, the latter the appropriate term for what the *Geisteswissenschaften* ('humanities') strive to achieve.

Nevertheless, the argument from sound leads to – and is related to – the idea that the beauty of music bears some relation to the idea of pleasure. "Pleasure, and pleasure alone is the proper purpose of art", Walter Sicker wrote (quoted in Hill 1949, 7). This is a theme that is common in much thinking about art, and it involves a new set of questions, for is the source of such pleasure to be found in the sensuous alone or in the recognition and understanding of such elements of music as scales and harmonies? Is there a pleasure in the discernment of structures (repetition, imitation, variation, etc.)?²⁵

If we restrict ourselves to the idea of sensuous pleasure, it can be demonstrated that the ear is far more accommodating to certain sounds and sound-combinations than to others. This is probably not only a matter of convention, but might be a more fundamental quality by which musical preferences are created. As early as in the philosophy of Pythagoras, certain proportions in mathematics were brought to bear on music, such that the Greek philosopher postulated a cosmic music, a "music of the spheres".

For the non-initiated, those to whom music appears only as more or less pleasing sound – people for whom in the more specific sense music does not "mean" anything – the harmonious and the melodious, be they defined in terms of mere acoustics or of habit (Western music as opposed to Eastern music, for example) will inevitably hold greater attraction than dissonance, and regularity and predictability will be preferred over surprise. This can most clearly be seen in the preference of most serious music lovers for the Classical period (especially Mozart); in popular music, music with a regular beat and simple harmonies prevails and is mainstream.

At the next level, where a more sophisticated appreciation (not meant here in an elitist but in a cognitive sense) prevails, the ability to recognize structures and patterns of music enters into the criteria for the enjoyment of

²⁵ The separation of sensuous and syntactical elements referred to here is discussed in terms of thought and feeling, of emotion and technique in Meyer (1980, 267-286). For a general discussion on this topic see the same author's *Emotion and Meaning in Music* of 1956.

music. An appreciation of these latter elements in music obviously requires an acquaintance with the technicalities of music. These may be gained by training, by sessions and courses in music appreciation etc., or simply by repeated and frequent exposure. Ralph Hill writes: "... the enjoyment and pleasure of music is not only a matter of lovely tunes, stirring rhythms, and gorgeous orchestral colouring. There are subtleties of harmonic change and of instrumental treatment that are not necessarily apparent even after repeated hearing of a work" (1949, 7).

The result of such frequent exposure, however, is somewhat ambivalent. Hill warns us that the object of musical appreciation is "simply to help people to enjoy music more" (1949, 7). But there are complications here. As with all forms of art, music appreciation depends on a certain horizon of expectation (*Erwartungshorizont*). One cannot appreciate an artistic or musical language without initiation,²⁶ but such initiation creates its own boundaries beyond which it is often difficult to go. Once a certain type of musical language has been absorbed, it becomes a kind of norm, against which the unknown is measured. And since most listeners – and performers – become familiar with the classics, and the established and well-known composers first (in the case of Vestdijk those of serious music, in our days of a variety of musical genres) they will tend to move within a range of languages and styles as within a kind of comfort zone. The result of this can become obvious when one examines typical programmes of music offered by our major orchestras and ensembles. In most cases, the audience's enjoyment of music is defined, and in some cases severely restricted, by a certain conservatism in taste. Frequent concertgoers or collectors of recorded music, rather than demonstrating an expanding range of musical tastes, may come to indulge in a game in which a very limited catalogue of musical compositions is enjoyed in an unlimited number of performances, each pitted against the other with minute variations and subtlety. In almost all cases, however, the catalogue is one that demonstrates criteria not so very different from those for whom music is, as suggested above, more or less pleasant sound. Here, too, we find an overwhelming tendency to demand the euphonious, the uncomplicated harmonics, and to show a preference for the well-defined melodic line. "I like a piece of music with a tune", I overheard someone saying at a recent concert in my home town. In such a context, that which falls outside of this narrow range does not even come into focus, and specifically more avant-garde music poses problems which references to pleasure cannot cope with.

²⁶ This applies not only to the student of music, who, Sem Dresden repeatedly stresses in his *Algemene Muziekleer* (1952), needs a *leermeester* ('teacher'), but even to the listener, for whom the experience of music otherwise can be likened, as the flap text to Ralph Hill's *The Symphony* (1949) puts it, to a hot bath or a pipe of tobacco.

This is a topic that does not figure prominently enough in Vestdijk's treatment, I feel. As already indicated, Vestdijk starts from a rather conventional idea of beauty, and even though he was aware of modern music, all of his examples are drawn from pre-20th century music. In modern serious music (which is after all the music of Vestdijk's time) there is a growing bafflement on the part of the listener, a growing lack of understanding. In the main, there are three sources of this confusion, each of which appears to work precisely against Vestdijk's conventional idea of beauty and harmony:

First, there is the increasing use of dissonance, which is felt by many as absence of beauty, or experienced as ugliness, even a source of pain. Modern music frustrates the listener's expectations – one of the major sources of pleasure being the resolution of conflict, which in contemporary music is either suspended beyond the customary boundaries or unresolved.

Second, there is an increasing loss of melodic lines or of melody altogether, which has as a consequence a disorientation, since it deprives the listener of a crucial and effective structuring principle. In music we do not have a perception of individual notes, but of a sequence, and the total experience of hearing a tune is a progressive and irreversible series of experiences which telescope into one another. Hearing a tune is one experience, not many. The absence of a tune in contemporary music makes this experience difficult if not impossible. What is needed then, is an intellectual, organizing effort.

Finally, the advent of atonality and the transformation of contemporary music into what Donald Mitchell calls 'abstract music' again becomes a source of bewilderment since it circumvents or negates the existence of an aural home.²⁷ Alessandro Baricco has written: "It is not by accident that serious music which should be the expression of modernity, in other words so-called contemporary music, is a music that severely and systematically stifles emotion and pleasure" (1996, 58).²⁸

Contemporary serious music seriously undermines the ability to envisage modernity as pleasure.

The empiricist explanation

Here the explanation of beauty is analytic. Since in music smaller units build into larger units, a reverse process could be adopted to explain how it is done, and how music ends up being beautiful. Music can become the subject of analysis; it

²⁷ Interestingly, Baricco considers that atonality and dissonances, originally intended precisely for the 'shock-effect', have now become irrelevant (1996, 82-83 *and passim*).

²⁸ "Ce n'est pas un hasard si la musique cultivée qui devrait être l'expression de la modernité, autrement dit la musique contemporaine, est une musique qui lésine avec sévérité et systématiquement sur l'émotion et sur le plaisir."

can be deconstructed into smaller components which will yield the reasons why music is (un)pleasant, beautiful, profound, and meaningful. Music is examined in an effort to make the beauty of the composition dependent on the fragments, the measures, the harmonies, the themes, the motifs, the smallest thematic unities, and also of the more synthetic elements, such as repetition, variation, relations etc. (312). Alban Berg, in analyzing Schumann's *Träumerei*, went so far as to claim that there is a limited number of such units in a composition. Vestdijk's objection to this approach is that these smaller units need an explanation in their turn (leading to atomism); moreover, the possibilities of such elements, both individually and in combination, are infinite – and what 'laws' govern these smaller/smallest units? The question of building blocks in music of course poses a major problem for the listener – as opposed to the expert reconstruction of a composition with score in hand. To what extent such elements are recognizable in real time, in the process of being sounded, is a vexing one. A solution must be seen in the context of music appreciation and education, which in turn has its own problems. It is an unquestionable fact that even the enlightened lay person will conclude that an over-emphasis on this approach to musical composition – and to music reception – leads to assessments such as Cor van Berkel's about Schoenberg: "In this way music turns into arithmetic and mathematics, as captivating as a logarithm table, as soulless as a formula" (1950, 226).²⁹ At the same time, it must be granted that any debate about the meaning of music is best demonstrated by the controversies surrounding the New Music: they provide an excellent testing ground for the re-examination of the role of musical language and vocabulary, method and structure, and abstraction and understanding in music aesthetics.

The relativist explanation

This explanation is considered by Vestdijk to be "by far the most interesting [...] because here, after the idea, the nature and the musical structure, Man himself is given a voice" (313).³⁰ Vestdijk is referring to the idea that the value and meaning of music has to be sought in its effect on the listener. Discussion of this view (*Rezeptionsaesthetik*) has in the 20th century acquired a considerably more sophisticated vocabulary of a philosophical and technical nature, rather than a psychological one.³¹

²⁹ "zo wordt de muziek reken- en wiskunde, boeiend als een logarithmetafel, zielloos als een formule."

³⁰ "verreweg de interessantste . . . omdat hier, na de idee, de natuur en de muzikale structuur voor het eerst de mensch zelf aan het woord komt."

³¹ See above, the work of Leonard B. Meyer and Susanne K. Langer.

Vestdijk is correct in that he locates value in a judgment,³² this value being the result of the fulfillment of certain conditions. The criteria of beauty are no longer located in the phenomenon itself (music), but in the effect of the phenomenon on the receiver: "We are no longer concerned with the characteristics of the music itself, but with as accurate as possible a formulation of our judgment, after which of course the music itself is then once again given its due, because the judgment is related to it" (313).³³

To express such judgments of value, it is common to use certain synonyms of *mooi*, of which some are appropriate, others not. We may feel that 'clever', 'characteristic', 'interesting' or even 'touching' or 'dignified' belong to the first category, but in fact Vestdijk finds only 'expressive' and 'original' to be useful. An examination of these terms follows.

i) 'expressive'

This particular notion has a long history. Let me expand a little here, and provide some background. There are a number of theories that interpret art as expression: Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) sees good art as bringing pre-consciousness into consciousness; for Suzanne Langer (1986) art, more specifically music, is a language for the otherwise inexpressible. The debate whether music is in effect a matter of expression of emotions, or rather a matter of the formulation – or at least the suggestion – of intellectual ideas, is a central one in the history of Western aesthetics.

Vestdijk notes that the term has two meanings – in the sense of 'depicting' (*iets afbeelden*) and 'expressing' (*iets uitdrukken*).³⁴

Depiction (*afbeelden*) applies at best to programme music – which in itself is, as Hendrik Andriessen has pointed out, a problematic genre: its dependence on a subject is of negative value: "the positive meaning of a composition lies always in the musical powers themselves [...] Good programme music can do without its programme" (Andriessen 1950, 171-2).³⁵ Vestdijk himself, using the terms 'illustrative music' and 'music of ideas,' contrasts this type of music unfavorably with absolute music, "which denotes nothing" (314).³⁶

³² This is in the tradition of Kantian philosophy; Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 1790) is concerned with aesthetic judgments.

³³ "Het gaat hier dus niet meer om kenmerken van de muziek zelf, maar om een zoo nauwkeurig mogelijk formuleeren van ons oordeel, waarna dan natuurlijk ook weer de muziek tot haar recht komt, omdat het oordeel daar nu eenmaal op betrokken is."

³⁴ For a more extensive discussion of this aspect of music (and of art in general) see Bouwsma (1980).

³⁵ "de positieve betekenis van een compositie ligt altijd in de muzikale krachten zelf. [...] De goede programma-muziek kan zijn programma missen."

³⁶ "die niets 'bedoelt'."

Schoenberg, praising absolute music, heaps scorn on those who seek a type of music that represents: "One finds few people who can grasp music from a purely musical standpoint. The notion that a composition must create images or concepts, and could not be understood without words, is one of the most banal ideas about a work of art that exist" (quoted in Gräter 1955, 8).³⁷ In a more general way, R.G. Collingwood declares that "art proper is not representative", and "[t]oday, the only tolerable view is that no art is representative" (1958, 43).

As for expression (*uitdrukken*): what is expressed? Vestdijk is correct in warning us against an unexamined acceptance of the term. Though there have been many theoreticians and practitioners of music, especially since the Pre-Romantic era (C.P.E. Bach in his *Affektenlehre*, for example), who have accepted the idea that music can express emotions, many have denied music this capability. Gluck, as we have seen, denied that there is a correspondence between music and human passions; one may also quote Stravinsky: "... expression has never been an immanent property of music" (Wisse 1956, 113).³⁸ Against this contention, however, it is useful to place the claim by Hector Berlioz that the dominant features of his music were "*passionate expression, inner fire, rhythmic drive and the element of surprise*" (Grunfeld 1973, 96; my emphasis).

That music is capable of expressing ideas is an even more dangerous notion, according to Vestdijk.³⁹ Certainly it is extremely hazardous to attribute to music a World View, as Adorno appears to do in his *Versuch über Wagner* (1964 [1952]), and inter alia in his *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (1972). Some enthusiastic Marxist theoreticians like Fredrick Jameson (1980) even claim to generate the whole decline of the bourgeoisie out of the development of music since the beginning of the last century. Such theories, in that they make references to a master narrative which itself has been jettisoned, hardly inspire confidence in the theory of transference of ideas in music.⁴⁰

³⁷ "Man findet nur wenige Menschen, die Musik vom rein musikalischen Standpunkt her erfassen können. Die Einbildung, dass eine Komposition Bilder oder Vorstellungen erwecken müsse, und ohne Worte nicht verstanden werden könne, ist die banalste Auffassung vom Kunstwerk, die es überhaupt gibt."

³⁸ Wisse continues to quote Stravinsky: "The phenomenon of music has been given to us only to create order in the chaos, in particular order between man and time. Once the construction is completed, and order has been established, everything has been said" (1956, 113). One may well ask, however, whether the establishment of a relation between man and time is perhaps an 'idea,' which would make Stravinsky's aesthetic an example of the idealist category.

³⁹ Yet Carl Czerny, after hearing music by Beethoven, told Bettina Brentano, "music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy" (quoted by Grunfeld 1973, 81).

⁴⁰ Similarly, the skepticism concerning analogies in the arts themselves (music/literature, music/art etc.) is shared by Vestdijk and Andriessen.

In any case Vestdijk suggests that it is difficult to say what musical ideas are, since they may be inherent in music (absolutely musical) or referential (in which case they may deteriorate into such cases as indicated above). Moreover, even if we were to accept such ideas, reference to them would say nothing about their value: ideas, after all, are neutral. Here once again, Vestdijk's conclusion is clear: "music points to itself"⁴¹ – we could in this special case perhaps even go so far as to say that music expresses itself.

While one may agree with Vestdijk that extra-musical elements may safely be discarded, his agnosticism vis-à-vis those ideas that are inherent in music makes Vestdijk miss out on some of the most significant writings about music that were already available to him when he wrote his essay. For one, Susanne K. Langer wrote a profound chapter entitled 'On Significance in Music', in her *Philosophy in a New Key* (1986 [1942]), and she explored this theme further in a chapter entitled 'The Image of Time' in her subsequent *Feeling and Form* (1953). The approach there is a philosophical one, which perhaps explains why Vestdijk does not deem it appropriate to refer to these writings: after all, his book was intended as a practical approach to music, though, as we have argued, the essay under discussion is – despite its casual tone – a theoretical one.

ii) 'original'

Again there are two meanings involved: original in the sense of new, i.e. not having been there before; and original in the sense of pertaining to the personality of the artist. Usually of course these two meanings coincide – it is hard to think of a composer who is new but not original and vice versa.

Is music beautiful because it is modern? Certainly this appears to be the thinking of such theoreticians of modernism as Donald Mitchell (1993 [1963]), who rejects even such composers as Richard Strauss and Paul Hindemith because they have to a large degree retained formal and tonal characteristics from before the Second Viennese School. It is precisely against this tendency and its representatives, the 'modernity maniacs' (*moderniteitsmaniakken*), that Hendrik Andriessen warned. In the field of music, he argues, the times are irrelevant and to speculate or bet on the temper of the times or the future is not a positive (Andriessen 1950, 140). Behind this question, moreover, we must postulate the idea of progress in the arts – a notion generally dismissed by philosophers.

Vestdijk raises the problem by asking a rather crude question: Is popular music (*amusementsmuziek*), which is much more modern and new than the compositions of e.g. Brahms, thereby more beautiful? Clearly, the question of what is more valuable enters into the debate here. The question of newness

⁴¹ "muziek verwijst naar zichzelf."

needs to be supplemented by that of level or quality – newness or originality by themselves cannot be criteria, or at least not exclusive ones.

The idea of originality is modern. It has no currency before Romanticism – Vestdijk points to the frequent practice of borrowing in the Baroque – cf. Bach or Vivaldi. Even if we find cases of borrowing in our own time (Respighi, Casella, Britten, even Mahler), it soon becomes clear that any objections we might have to such procedures are rather more a question of the function or quality of the borrowing than of the activity as such. I believe that Vestdijk would maintain the same opinion also in view of such phenomena as the Neo-Classicism of Stravinsky and the Post-Modern movement, with its frequent resorting to earlier stylistic characteristics in a parodic or playful vein.

Conclusion

In putting the case for an end to all speculations about why there is, or is supposed to be, beauty in music, Vestdijk adopted an extreme position. It is possible, however, to find Vestdijk's conviction in other places, though usually in somewhat more cautious terms. Hendrik Andriessen, to quote but one example, writes in *Over Muziek*: "One speaks of the essence of music, of the soul of music, of her cosmic meaning, of her metaphysical background, of the connection between religion and music. Nevertheless, the riddle of music is not solved, the content of the game remains a mystery" (1950, 178).⁴² Music is perhaps indeed, as Vestdijk suggests, like love: we know (or think we know) what it is, but a definition does not help. At the same time, definitions and descriptions are not without value: "They hit on something that is inherent in the true experience of beauty ... they can render an important service in the description of the beautiful, in the assertion of concrete values that can claim the name 'beauty,' and in the collecting and classifying of concrete value judgments" (317-18).⁴³

Is this a retreat from his original extreme position? Not really: Vestdijk suggests that there is a distinction between explaining and describing, and that the latter is a legitimate activity, while the former is an illusion. In that case, however, the activity of the critic seems to be deprived of its cognitive and evaluative basis. The task of the music critic presupposes that of the aesthetician, for in discussing and evaluating works of music the critic employs

⁴² "Men spreekt van het wezen der muziek, van de ziel der muziek, over haar kosmische betekenis, over de metaphysische achtergrond, over het verband van religie en muziek. Nochtans wordt de muziek niet ontraadseld, de inhoud van het spel blijft een geheim."

⁴³ "Zij treffen iets dat inhaerent is aan het daadwerkelijk ervaren van schoonheid ..., zij kunnen gewichtige diensten bewijzen bij het beschrijven van het schoone, bij het vaststellen van concrete waarden, die op de naam 'schoon' aanspraak maken, bij het vergaren en klassificeeren van feitelijke waardeoordeelen."

the concepts that are analyzed and clarified by the philosopher of music. Thus the critic may say that a work of art is expressive or beautiful; but it is the philosopher of art who asks what one means when one says that a work of art has these characteristics and whether such a statement may be supported. If the critic is deprived of these concepts, his legitimacy is in doubt.

Precisely this appears to be the position of Glenn Gould. In speaking of critics, he states:

The critic as aesthetic arbiter has, I think, no proper social function, no defensible criteria upon which to base his subjective judgments, and, historical precedent to the contrary notwithstanding, no strong case at law with which to defend them... An easier task would be to redefine the critic's role as consumer advocate... Conceivably [...] the critic could be retrained as a data collector, confined to the production of objective statements, and encouraged to redeem himself in a society for which, as Beethoven suggested almost two centuries ago, he has served as a morally disruptive, and aesthetically destructive, influence.

(Gould 1990, 258)

Both Vestdijk and Gould – the latter with a kind of grim irony – seem to want to restrict writings on music to an objective, descriptive, value-free and data-based discourse. What constitutes the beauty of music, what makes music beautiful, how music achieves beauty – this is the beyond, the great unknown, the indescribable, the 'unnamable' – to employ a term from Samuel Beckett – in short, the ineffable. Vestdijk, perhaps Gould also, appear to consider beauty in music, perhaps beauty as a concept, ultimately as one of those domains to which Ludwig Wittgenstein's dictum, first sounded in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* of 1918, applies: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."

However, even if it is granted that the concept of beauty is a problematic one, and, as I indicated, probably no longer a fully appropriate term in the discussion of modern art (at least not in its unmodified form), there appear to be no solid reasons to expect that writings about music which include evaluation and judgment about production and performance, will cease altogether. And tacitly or explicitly they will likely continue to claim legitimacy beyond the scope granted so grudgingly by Vestdijk and Gould.

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