

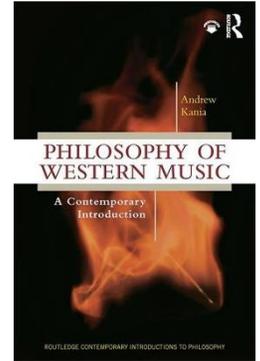
Introducing Philosophy of Music

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One of the fundamental challenges I've faced in introducing students to the philosophy of music over the years is that when they think of music, they think of *song*. Indeed, many English speakers use the word "song" as synonymous with "piece of music." The main reason for this is not surprising: most of the music that most people listen to—here and now, and across history and the globe—is song, that is, music including words. Why does this present a challenge? Because much of the literature in philosophy of music—notably the literature on emotional expressiveness, musical understanding, and the value of music—takes as its target "pure," instrumental music, particularly that of the Western classical tradition. And most students are largely unfamiliar with such music and that tradition.

This challenge was much on my mind as I planned writing a book introducing readers to the philosophy of music. My response, in the book that has recently been published, was to begin with a chapter on song.¹ I open with the puzzlement many people felt on Bob Dylan's being awarded the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature. Even many Dylan fans thought that there was something odd about awarding a literary prize to someone on the basis of their songs. Indeed, this case raises fundamental questions about the nature of artistic media, understanding, and value.²



But I also use the discussion of song to limit the focus of the rest of the book to the medium of pure music.³ I argue that song (like film, ballet, and so on) is a complex amalgam in which music is just one component. A complete philosophy of song would thus require (at least) a theory of (something like) language and its artistic uses, music and its artistic uses, and what happens when these media are intimately combined in song. Because, first, this is a lot (!); second, the philosophy of song is in its infancy; and, third, my brief was, in part, to introduce readers to extant philosophy of music, I focus throughout the book on pure music.⁴ However, such a focus does not entail that one consider only instrumental music. Once we have some sense of music as a *medium*, we can cautiously use "hybrid" examples (song, film music, etc.), both to introduce readers to the philosophical questions music raises, and to test the answers philosophers have given to them.

Moreover, to focus on the medium of music does not imply an exclusive concern with *classical* music. As I put it in the preface,

It is difficult to deny the connections between classical music, class, and race in the English-speaking world during the flourishing of analytic philosophy of music over the past half-century. For instance, jazz is an equally obvious place to look for pure instrumental music, yet it has received a fraction—albeit, happily, a growing fraction—of the philosophical attention that classical music has. This is surely due in part to jazz being a historically black and popular musical tradition, while analytic philosophy has been dominated by middle-class white men. (xv)

Hence, I strive throughout the book to use non-classical and hybrid musical examples (though I by no means eschew classical examples). (I have also attempted to make the examples accessible to readers by creating publicly accessible Spotify playlists of all the examples discussed in the text.)

Following the first chapter, on song, the next eight chapters fall into two main parts. Chapters 2 through 5 address what I think of as the heart of extant analytic philosophy of music: the attempt to account for music's value, along with the metaphysical and epistemological issues raised by the most popular theories of that value. Hence, in chapters 2 and 3, I address music's emotional expressiveness and listeners' emotional responses to music, respectively. In chapter 4, I address the nature and understanding of non-emotional musical features, such as pitch, rhythm, harmony, and form. With this material under our belt, in chapter 5, I turn to the question of how these various aspects of music might account for its value.

Chapters 6 through 9 turn from the medium of music to various kinds of music-making, and our appreciation of them. In chapter 6, I address the nature of musical performance in general, and the performance of works in particular. In chapter 7, I explore work-

performance more deeply, with a focus on classical music and the debate over authentic performance (and a coda on authenticity in popular music). In chapter 8, I consider improvisation, with a focus on jazz. In chapter 9, I turn to recordings, considering how they affect the theories of classical and jazz already covered, before focusing on recording-centered theories of popular music.

Two chapters remain. Chapter 10 is devoted to the intersection of music and morality. There has been relatively little analytic work in this area. Perhaps this is partly because the issues raised seem more generally about the intersection of *art* and morality; perhaps it is partly because of the supposed abstractness of music. But these seem like assumptions ripe for philosophical interrogation. I briefly cover four issues: (i) whether a moral flaw in a piece of music need be an artistic flaw; (ii) whether singing along to morally flawed songs is itself morally bad; (iii) whether instrumental classical music contributes to the oppression of women; and (iv) whether it is morally acceptable for white musicians to play music that is part of black culture.

The final chapter is devoted to the definition of music. Though some might have expected this chapter to come first, it seems to me that the issue is better addressed having already thought about musical understanding and value. There are doubtless different reasonable concepts of music, and it is very easy for people to talk past one another without having first grappled with what sense of “music” we are attempting to define.

Readers of this newsletter may be interested not only in the content of the book, but also in the process of writing it. The book essentially took three years to write, followed by one year of revision and production. It ended up considerably longer than I expected it to be. I had proposed an eight-chapter, 115,000-word volume; the finished book comprises 11 chapters, and something like 150,000 words. The reasons (and causes) of this change are many and varied.

The expansion was only *possible* because I had an academic leave in 2017-18—the central writing year—and my partner and I were fortunate enough to be able to spend the year in New Zealand, where we found a wonderful place to live and lots of support (musical, social, and philosophical). Philosophically speaking, where I had proposed one chapter on music and the emotions, and another on music and values (including ethical values), I realized that doing justice to these topics (if the publisher would allow it!) required separate chapters on emotions in the music, emotions in the listener, music’s artistic value, and the intersection of music and morality. Similarly, where I had planned to cover performance, work-performance, and authenticity in a single chapter, I ended up spreading those topics over two.

Following the sage advice I give to my students, I did not begin writing at the beginning, but rather halfway through. In particular, I was inspired to engage with David Davies’s work on the nature of performance.⁵ This led naturally (for me, anyway) into a consideration of work-performance, and hence the debate over classical authenticity, and improvisation. Perhaps because I feel that I have largely said my piece on these topics, the further I got into initially drafting this part of the book the more unhappy I was with my work. However, at the risk of getting too personal, around this time I began taking antidepressants. This was not directly connected to my work on the book. I had long experienced low-level depression. (“Suffered” is too dramatic a word for my condition, though it may aptly describe what my partner had to deal with for many years.) But only at this point was I willing and able to try medication as a solution. This made (and continues to make) a huge difference to my ability to deal with minor setbacks, and played a role, I am sure, in my productivity during my leave in New Zealand, where I drafted over half the book, starting again at the beginning of the book. I mention this personal aspect of the process in case it is of help in some small way to others in the profession dealing with mental health conditions.

My productivity while on leave meant that I had only two chapters left to draft (along with plenty of revision) when I returned to teaching in 2018-19. For this situation, I had reserved two topics on which I had done some previous work, but still felt I had something new to contribute: recordings and the definition of music. The following year was devoted to revision (particularly in light of extremely helpful comments from an anonymous reader) and production (e.g., producing the printed musical examples, correcting the proofs, and writing the index). Fortunately, I completed the last of these tasks—supplying the index—the weekend before America woke up to the severity of the coronavirus pandemic and all our lives were thrown into disarray. It will be interesting to see whether and (if so) how the on-going public health situation will affect the reception of the book.

This is not the place to recapitulate the thanks I give in the book to the many individuals and institutions without whose help it would be poorer than it is. But I can’t omit repeating my thanks to the community of the American Society for Aesthetics that has sustained me intellectually since I attended my first meeting in 1998. Like many of us, I’m sure, I am very sorry we will not be able to meet in person this year, though the society is doing a great job of shifting the sessions online.

I hope that my book will be helpful to students and scholars coming to philosophy of music for the first time, but also of interest to those already familiar with the field. While most of the book aims to introduce readers to the extant literature, there are several places where I suggest fruitful avenues for future research, such as the medium of music and its combination in hybrid forms, the intersection of music and morality, and the musical experiences of d/Deaf people. If, for whatever reason, you find yourself with a copy in your hands, I hope you'll let me know what you think.

¹ Andrew Kania, *Philosophy of Western Music: A Contemporary Introduction*. New York, Routledge, 2020. All page references are to this book.

² One problem that I did not foresee with this opening example is that significant numbers of undergraduates are apparently unaware of who Bob Dylan is!

³ As I note in the book, "The term pure music has unfortunate moralistic, perhaps even racist, connotations, but I know of no better alternative. It is more awkward to talk of the 'absolute' or 'instrumental' music of a song, for instance, since those terms typically refer to the *genre* of 'music alone' in Peter Kivy's phrase (1990), that is, pieces with no elements or aspects other than the musical" (26, n. 28).

⁴ Two other ways in which the scope of the book is restricted, which can be justified by little more than the limits of my expertise, are to *analytic* philosophy of *Western* music.

⁵ David Davies, *Philosophy of the Performing Arts*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, particularly chapter 1.