

Interpreting music: Beyond Platonism¹

Otávio Bueno
Department of Philosophy
University of Miami
Miami, Florida, U.S.A.

1. INTRODUCTION

Central to the philosophical understanding of music is the status of musical works. According to the Platonist, musical works are abstract objects; that is, they are not located in space or time, and we have no causal access to them. Moreover, only a particular physical occurrence of these musical works is instantiated when a performance of the latter takes place. But even if no performance ever took place, the Platonist insists, the musical work would still exist, since its existence is not tied to spatiotemporal constraints (Kivy [1993], and Dodd [2007]).

In this paper, I offer a critical assessment of the Platonist view. I argue that, despite some benefits, Platonism faces significant difficulties in the interpretation of music. In spite of the Platonist's attempt to overcome the problem, the view ultimately doesn't mesh well with the way we actively respond to performances and fail to respond, in any way similar, to abstract patterns. Platonism also makes knowledge of music something extremely mysterious, given that we have no access to the abstract objects that, according to the Platonist, characterize the musical works.

The ability to understand how we respond to musical works is, of course, central to any interpretation of music. This ability is also crucial in explaining the role music plays in various aspects of our culture, from bonding with others to music therapy. Given the problems faced by Platonism, it makes more sense to adopt an alternative, non-Platonist view. I conclude the paper by sketching such a non-Platonist proposal.

2. MUSICAL PLATONISM: SOME BENEFITS

There are different versions of musical Platonism depending on the kind of abstract object musical works are identified with. These works may be thought of as

¹ My thanks go to Teresa Lesiuk and to all of the participants of the 2007 RAIME Symposium for extremely helpful feedback on an early version of this work.

universals, as structural types, classes, aggregates of properties, or other kinds of abstract objects. To each kind of abstract object we posit, we have a different form of musical Platonism.

For example, if a musical work is identified with a certain universal, then it is an object that can be multiply instantiated, and is located wherever its instances are located. In this case, the instances are the particular performances of the musical work in question. None of the performances are the same: to say the least, they are performed in different locations and in different moments of time. There are, of course, much more substantive differences among the various performances: different interpretations of the same musical work may be offered on different occasions, shedding interestingly new light on the original piece. What all of the performances have in common is the fact that they are instances of the same universal: the same abstract musical work. This is, clearly, a very natural way of conceptualizing the nature of musical works, since we immediately acknowledge the distinction between a musical work and its performances. And this version of musical Platonism accommodates this distinction very naturally by noting the difference between a universal—a certain musical work, such as Villa Lobos' *Bachianas Brasileiras*—and its instances—namely, the many performances of that work.

Alternatively, a musical Platonist may insist that musical works are better thought of as structural types; that is, abstract types of a certain form that encode the information that is then exemplified in particular tokens of that type, i.e. in particular performances of the work (see Dodd [2007]). The relation between types and tokens (similarly to the relation between a universal and its instances) is a relation between an abstract object (a type) and a particular exemplification of that object (a token). Consider, for instance, the letter 'a'. What you're reading now as the letter 'a' is a particular token, an exemplification of an abstract type—an abstract object—that the token 'a' stands for. We can exemplify the same letter of the type 'a' using different tokens; for example, by italicizing the tokens. We then have the distinct tokens: 'a' and 'a'. Similarly, in the case of musical works, the same abstract type can be exemplified by different tokens, different performances of the work. What makes this form of musical Platonism particularly attractive is the fact that the connection between types and tokens is particularly structured. Tokens are closely connected to the types they are

tokens of, since they basically share the same structure as their types.² As a result, it's possible to "trace back" the types from the tokens we have access to. This is a significant feature of the structural type form of musical Platonism, given the importance, in musical practice, of being able to associate a particular performance of a given musical work (a particular token) to that work itself (the relevant structural type).³

Despite the similarities between structural types and universals, on the one hand, and tokens and particulars, on the other, there are important differences between them. Although universals and structural types are abstract entities, universals seem to form a larger category than structural types. In fact, some universals do not seem to be structural types. Colors, for instance, may be thought of as universals, and they are instantiated in the perception of particular physical objects. However, colors don't seem to form a structural type. To be a structural type, colors would need to have a definite structure. And although one could think that the wavelength associated with each color might be enough to provide such a structure, we cannot simply identify each color with a certain wavelength. After all, the perception of a color is an integral part of its individuation. And what a color looks like is not something that has such a definite structure. This means that a musical Platonism based on universals will be significantly different from a musical Platonism based on structural types. However, both will be forms of Platonism, since they identify musical works with certain abstract entities. The difference is which kind of abstract object is involved: universals or structural types.

In this respect, musical Platonism is similar to *mathematical Platonism*, the view according to which mathematical objects exist and are abstract. That is, according to the mathematical Platonist, existing mathematical objects are not located in space-time, and are such that we have no causal access to them. One can be a mathematical Platonist by positing mathematical objects of very different kinds. One can invoke standard abstract entities that are known via mathematical intuition (Gödel [1964]), or abstract

² Tokens will not share *exactly* the same structure as their types if the latter are infinite. For in this case, the tokens, given that they are concrete (i.e. they are located in space and time), and assuming that the physical universe is finite, will only share an initial segment of the full abstract structure.

³ There is a similarly close connection between universals and particulars if we claim, as is commonly done, that the universals are located wherever the particulars are. But, in the case of universals, perhaps the connection is too tight. For one could then dispense with the universals altogether, and simply keep the particulars. After all, the particulars are doing all the work here. It's to the particulars that we have access; they are the kind of thing we can listen to and appreciate. I'll return to this point below.

mathematical structures, not reducible to an aggregate of mathematical objects, that are known from the manipulation of concrete templates (Resnik [1997], and Shapiro [1997]), or Fregean constructs, characterized from logical concepts plus definitions (Frege [1974], and Hale and Wright [2001]). In all of these cases, mathematical objects are abstract, since they are identified with suitable abstract entities. However, we have here different versions of Platonism, since the abstract entities in question are distinct. In each case, a different form of Platonism emerges.

From the considerations offered so far, it becomes clear that musical Platonism has significant benefits. (a) The musical Platonist, in any of the formulations considered above, can make perfect sense of the fact that the notation used to express a piece of music is not the musical work itself, but just a representation of it. After all, the musical work is an abstract object that cannot be identified with any of its physical instantiations. (b) The musical Platonist can also make sense of the fact that the *same* musical work can be performed in different ways. Each performance is a particular exemplification of the abstract object that characterizes the work, and thus has its own special features. For instance, a given performance can offer a novel, moving interpretation of the work. It can truly change our appreciation for the musical work in question. These two benefits highlight important aspects of our musical practice (our practice with music and musical works), and the fact that the Platonist is able to accommodate them provides a significant support for the view.

3. MUSICAL PLATONISM: SOME COSTS

Despite the important benefits that musical Platonism offers, it also has considerable costs. Although the worries I raise in this section do not refute the view—there is much going for musical Platonism, after all—they indicate areas in which the musical Platonist may need to develop the proposal further. As will become clear, most of the difficulties raised apply to any formulation of musical Platonism. When this is not the case, I'll indicate which version of the view is at stake.

(a) The first worry deals with the object of our musical experience. What are we listening to when we listen to music? As we saw, for the Platonist, musical works are abstract objects, and we have no causal access to such objects, since they are not located

in space and time. It follows that, on a Platonist view, we cannot literally listen to a musical work, since we can only listen to spatiotemporal events. At best, we listen to a *performance* of the work. But this introduces a significant gap between the musical work and our experience of the work. We never really experience the work; we never listen to it. Only the performances are within our experiential reach. However, the performances are not the musical work, and the latter is never part of our experience.

The Platonist may complain that the objection disregards the central role that the distinction between a musical work and its performance plays in Platonism. As we saw above, it's based on this distinction that the Platonist is able to earn the benefits her view has. Thus, rather than presenting a "gap", the distinction between the performance and the musical work is the core of Platonism. We don't have an objection to Platonism here, but a description of what the view entails!

This is a fair point. The trouble, however, is that musical Platonism does introduce a *gap* between the musical work and its performance, given that the former, as opposed to the latter, is a non-spatiotemporal object. And it's precisely because of this *gap* that the Platonist is unable to make sense of how we can appreciate the musical work itself. However, it is at odds with our musical practice to claim that we cannot appreciate the musical work (but only its performance). After all, we expect to hear a work of music when we listen to music. That's the point of the objection.

(b) The second worry raises a related point regarding music appreciation. What do we appreciate when we appreciate a musical work? Once again, on the Platonist picture, we can't appreciate a musical work, since we can't appreciate an abstract object that cannot be perceived. But, the Platonist reminds us, we can appreciate the *performance* of the work: its nuances, subtle variations, and the novel interpretation the performance may provide of the musical work in comparison with other performances. The trouble here is that the musical work—understood as an abstract object—doesn't play any role in music appreciation. All the focus is now on the performance. And if what we appreciate is the performance rather than the musical work, we may start wondering whether the latter can be dispensed with altogether. (I'll return to this point below.) The distinction between musical work and its performance starts to look otiose.

The Platonist may reply by insisting that the distinction is not otiose. It's needed, for instance, to explain the fact that the score is not the musical work, and that it's possible to have different performances of the same musical work. The Platonist is not simply multiplying abstract objects without necessity. She is invoking a distinction that is crucial for the explanatory benefits of Platonism.

I don't deny that the distinction between musical works and their performances does some work for the Platonist. The worry is that the distinction may not be needed to obtain the explanatory benefits of Platonism. If it's possible to explain the same phenomena that Platonism accounts for without invoking abstract objects (such as universals and structural types), we will have made a clear progress. The point of the objection above is to motivate an additional worry as to why the musical work/performance distinction may be unnecessary after all.

(c) The third worry moves one step forward in this direction, and it concerns the nature of music. What exactly is music on the Platonist conception? Either music is identified with the musical work, or it's identified with the performances of that work. These are, after all, the two components of musical Platonism. But if music is identified with the musical work, then as argued above, we cannot listen to music, given its abstract character—a very odd consequence indeed. Alternatively, if music is identified with the performances of a musical work, it's then unclear why we need to be committed to musical works as abstract entities. For now it seems that all the work is done by the performances. We listen to the performances, we appreciate the performances; we are touched by, are moved by, and argue about the performances. At this point, the musical work just becomes an abstract placeholder so that we can indicate the performance of which work we are referring to. But, to refer to the performance of a certain work, we need not be committed to the existence of an abstract entity—the musical work itself. We can simply refer to the score that was produced by a given composer at a certain moment in time, and which has been reproduced on multiple occasions since then. After all, it's based on the score (or on memories of the tunes the score engenders) that the performance emerges. Abstract works of music drop out of the picture entirely; they seem to play no role here. (More on this later.)

(d) The final worry has as its target specific versions of musical Platonism, and it raises the concern that the ontology posited by particular versions of Platonism is inadequate. Consider, first, the characterization of musical Platonism in terms of universals. Can universals provide the right sort of abstract entity to which we could identify musical works? If we accept, as part of the data from our musical practice, that we should be able to listen to a musical work, then universals do not seem to be the right ontological category for our understanding of music. After all, we should be able to listen to music, but we cannot listen to an abstract universal, since we cannot listen to something not located in space-time. In fact, sounds—the kind of item we experience when we listen to something—are not universals. For a crucial feature of sounds is the subjective experience that certain vibrations in the environment produce in us. There is something, for each of us, of what is like to experience a sound. This subjective experience cannot be reduced to a simple physical vibration; it's an entirely subjective experience, after all. There might be the instantiation of a particular vibration in the air. But that alone is not a sound: it's just a vibration. To become a sound, the vibration needs to be heard, it needs to be experienced. But what is heard and experienced is no longer a universal—it becomes a sound. Thus, by identifying musical works with certain universals, the musical Platonist doesn't seem to offer the right ontology for music. On this conception, musical works cannot be heard.

A similar worry plagues the characterization of musical Platonism in terms of abstract structural types. It's unclear that structural types provide the right ontology for musical works. After all, it's not obvious that sounds are structural types. Such types have a definite structure, which allows them to be instantiated by certain tokens and not by others. For example, most inscriptions will not count as a token of the letter 'a'. A certain structure—a particular configuration of lines—needs to be in place for the token to emerge. That structure emerges from the structural type that characterizes the letter. Now, as noted above, sounds require more than a simple token in the world; they require more than a particular vibration in the environment. Sounds emerge as a particular subjective experience, and this experience need not have the same structure over different people. In fact, some people respond very differently to the same type of sound (e.g., a type of music that thrills some can be extremely boring to others), even though,

of course, there are also importantly common responses. As a result, sounds seem to lack the definite structure that is required if we were to count them as structural types. But if sounds are not structural types, and musical works are identified with structural types, once again, the musical Platonist seems unable to accommodate how we can hear a musical work. The identification of musical works with structural types, therefore, seems inadequate.

4. AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW: MUSICAL NOMINALISM

Given the troubles faced by musical Platonism, is there an alternative proposal that avoids the difficulties of the view, but which preserves its benefits? I think there is. Central to this alternative is the rejection of the identification of musical works with certain abstract objects, whether they are universals or structural types. The view is then nominalist, in the sense that it does not presuppose the existence of abstract entities. For obvious reasons, I'll call it *musical nominalism*.

To make sense of our own experience with music, it makes sense to focus on the *performances* of musical works. After all, given that performances are spatiotemporal events, they are the kind of thing we can experience. According to musical nominalism, a musical work *as an abstract object* need not be taken to exist. Rather, a musical work is *created* in a particular context, in a particular moment of time, by the intentional, selective acts of the composer. Before the composer selected certain configuration of notes to make up the score, there was no musical work. In fact, the composer engendered the work. And the work is then reproduced (in a sense, it's recreated) when we listen to a performance of the work. On the nominalist conception, a work of music is not an abstract object. It didn't exist before some of the intentional acts of the composer took place, and it may get out of existence if certain persistence conditions are not realized. The persistence of a musical work depends on the existence of many *concrete* things and events: copies of the scores, performances of the work, and the existence of a community who is able to play, listen to, reproduce, and understand the work. A musical work will no longer exist if none of these concrete things and events are in place. Thus, if the scores of a musical work are destroyed, and there is no memory of them, if the work is no longer performed, and no community is able to play, listen to, reproduce, and

understand it, the musical work will no longer exist.⁴ This fact highlights the temporal, spatial, and hence, non-abstract nature of musical works.

On the nominalist conception, the status of a musical work is similar to the status of fictional characters in a novel or of mathematical objects in mathematics—understood in a non-Platonist way. In both cases (in fiction and in mathematics), the objects in question are created by suitable intentional acts of their authors, whether it's by telling the deeds of a brilliant detective in the streets of London, or by specifying some comprehension principles that characterize certain numbers.⁵ But the fact that objects are introduced by these stories, and that we can talk about these objects, doesn't mean that we need to be committed to the *existence* of objects as abstract entities. In fact, we often talk about things we don't take to exist. Consider, for example, the sentences:

- (1) The average mom has 2.4 kids.
- (2) There are fictional detectives who don't exist.

Despite the usefulness of talking about average moms and fictional detectives, we don't think for a moment that these objects exist (see Azzouni [2004]). They are simply a useful fiction.

Similarly, we can talk about musical works without having to assume that these objects exist. In particular, we don't have to follow the musical Platonist who insists that musical works exist *as abstract entities*. We focus instead on the *performances*. After all, they are the kind of thing to which we have access, and that we can experience. On the nominalist view, although musical works are not assumed to exist, we can still talk about these objects, as we do with other fictional entities, such as mathematical objects and fictional characters.

⁴ I'm here applying to musical works Amie Thomasson's insightful artifact theory of fictional objects, according to which fictional objects are artifacts created by intentional acts of their authors (see Thomasson [1999]). As will become clear shortly, differently from Thomasson, I'm not committed to the existence of fictional objects as abstract entities.

⁵ For example: 0 is a natural number; the successor of a natural number is also a natural number, and these are all the natural numbers. Given these principles and a logic, we are then in a position to determine what follows from this conception of numbers. By telling a story about such numbers—that is, by specifying principles about these objects such as those just listed—we create these entities, just as an author creates a fictional character by telling a story about it.

By focusing on the performances, the musical nominalist can preserve the benefits of Platonism without the corresponding costs. (a) First, the scores and the notation used to express a piece of music are not the musical work. They are the guidelines for how the work should be performed.⁶ The selection process of the composer creates the work. Once created, the work is an object of thought. When the composer writes down the scores, she allows others to access this object, and perform it—whether aloud or only mentally, by reading the score. On the nominalist conception, since works of music are not abstract, we can listen to them, appreciate them, interpret them, and respond to them. The music and its various performances move us, challenge us, touch us. By bringing the musical work back from the Platonist's clouds, the musical nominalist can make sense of how we can experience music after all.

On the nominalist conception, the creation of music is an entirely concrete process, again not different from the creation of other art objects. As Ernst Gombrich points out:

What we call “works of art” are not the results of some mysterious activity, but objects made by human beings for human beings. A picture looks so remote when it hangs glazed and framed on the wall. And in our museums it is—very properly—forbidden to touch the objects on view. But originally they were made to be touched and handled, they were bargained about, quarreled about, worried about. Let us also remember that every one of their features is the result of a decision by the artist: that he may have pondered over them and changed them many times, that he may have wondered whether to leave that tree in the background or to paint it over again, that he may have been pleased by a lucky stroke of his brush which gave a sudden unexpected brilliance to a sunlit cloud, and that he put in these figures reluctantly at the insistence of a buyer. For most of the paintings and statues which are now lined up along the walls of our museums and galleries were not meant to be displayed as Art. They were made for a definite occasion and a definite purpose which were in the artist's mind when he set to work (Gombrich [2006], p. 28)

Although Gombrich is describing here the (very human) process of creation in fine arts, exactly the same points apply to the creation of musical works. Creating music is not a

⁶ Similarly, the written words of a novel are the guidelines for how the novel should be read. In fact, reading a novel is itself a particular performance (see Kivy [2006]). But a novel should not be taken to be an abstract entity. In fact, we wouldn't be able to *read* it if it were one!

mysterious activity, but is a process in which human beings create objects for human beings. Every feature of a musical work is the result of the composer's decision, and she may have pondered over them and probably has changed them many times. The music was made for a definite occasion and a definite purpose, and all of this was on the composer's mind when she set to work. Clearly, the musical nominalist has no difficulty in accommodating this aspect of musical practice.

(b) Second, the musical nominalist can still make sense of how the same musical work can be performed in different ways. For the composer had something in mind when she created the music: a certain complex pattern was selected, and became an object of thought. That's the musical work. Being an object of thought, the musical work is a concrete entity, and others can have access to it via the score.⁷ Each performance then highlights different aspects of the musical work, offering, in some cases, distinctive interpretations of it. Once again, this aspect of musical practice can also be understood without the postulation of abstract entities.

5. CONCLUSION

Musical Platonism offers an intriguing conception of music. By characterizing musical works in terms of abstract entities, it offers important benefits *vis-à-vis* the ontology of music. But despite the benefits, Platonism still faces significant costs, particularly given its inability to explain how we can appreciate musical works and even listen to and, hence, interpret them.

As an alternative, I sketched a non-Platonist proposal: musical nominalism. As opposed to Platonism, the nominalist view doesn't assume that musical works are abstract objects. Rather, the nominalist emphasizes the crucial role played by concrete objects and events in musical practice, from the production of scores and the performance of works to our capacity to listen to, engage with, and respond to these performances and these works. As a result, the musical nominalist is in a better position than the Platonist to understand how we can interpret and appreciate music, given that

⁷ In a similar way, readers can have access to a novel by reading the corresponding book, and mathematicians can have access to mathematical objects by studying the relevant comprehension principles. On the nominalist view advanced here, there are significant connections between mathematics, fiction, and music. (There are, of course, obvious differences as well!)

the latter is not thought of as some causally inaccessible, non-spatiotemporal object. In the end, music is something we do. Not surprisingly, it is as concrete as we are.

There is, of course, much more to be said about all of these matters. But I hope I have said enough to suggest that we need not be Platonists to make sense of music. A nominalist alternative is readily available.

REFERENCES

- Azzouni, J. [2004]: *Deflating Existential Consequence: A Case for Nominalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Benacerraf, P., and Putnam, H. (eds.) [1983]: *Philosophy of Mathematics: Selected Readings*. (2nd edition.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dodd, J. [2007]: *Works of Music: An Essay in Ontology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frege, G. [1974]: *Foundations of Arithmetic*. (Translated by J.L. Austin.) Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Gödel, K. [1964]: "What is Cantor's Continuum Problem?", in Benacerraf and Putnam (eds.) [1983], pp. 470-485.
- Gombrich, E. [2006]: *The Story of Art*. (Pocket edition.) London: Phaidon Press.
- Hale, B., and Wright, C. [2001]: *The Reason's Proper Study*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kivy, P. [1993]: *The Fine Art of Repetition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kivy, P. [2006]: *The Performance of Reading*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Resnik, M. [1997]: *Mathematics as a Science of Patterns*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Shapiro, S. [1997]: *Philosophy of Mathematics: Structure and Ontology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thomasson, A. [1999]: *Fiction and Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.