

# MUSIC, ART, & METAPHYSICS

Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics



JERROLD LEVINSON

OXFORD

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Jerrold Levinson

**OXFORD**  
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## Preface

This book brings together the bulk of my work in aesthetics to date, spanning a bit more than a decade. It consists of twelve previously published essays, plus four new ones appearing here for the first time. Some remarks on the new essays in relation to the old ones are in order. Chapter 10, “What a Musical Work Is, Again,” offers further reflections on some of the issues raised in its predecessor, in the course of responding to discussions and criticisms which that paper has attracted. Chapter 11, “The Concept of Music,” originally composed as the introduction to a reader in philosophy of music destined never to see light, has links with the definitional enterprise of Chapters 1 and 3, as well as with the other explicitly musical essays of Part Three. Chapter 14, “Hope in *The Hebrides*,” is loosely continuous with Chapter 13, addressing aspects of emotional expression in music there presupposed without being directly examined. Finally, Chapter 16, “Authentic Performance and Performance Means,” although composed in response to a particular essay by another writer, can be seen as a natural development and partial fusion of concerns present in several of the preceding essays, especially Chapters 4 and 15.

The reprinted essays appear with little alteration. There have been minor changes of wording throughout, but no real cuts (with the exception of a short concluding section dropped from “Aesthetic Supervenience”). Some footnotes have been shortened, some lengthened, and some superfluous ones eliminated altogether. To nine of the re-



printed essays I have appended "Additional Notes." This seemed a good medium for accommodating a modicum of latter-day thoughts, while also affording me the opportunity briefly to situate those papers in relation to work that has appeared subsequently.

My justification for reprinting the previously published essays with minimal alterations is twofold. First, I have not substantially changed my views since writing them, and those views are, as far as their author can tell, more or less of a piece. Second, the essays have, as scrutinized texts, already begun to acquire a small life of their own, and my leaving them largely intact, for better or worse, is a recognition of that.

Most of the essays in this volume, old and new, are situated at the intersection of aesthetic and metaphysical concerns: how the category of art in general is to be circumscribed in a way that is both extensionally adequate and illuminating of the act of art making ("Defining Art Historically" and "Refining Art Historically"), how the nature and proper interpretation of an art form cannot be detached from issues about its roots or causal origins ("Hybrid Art Forms"), how entrenched modes of aesthetic experience and aesthetic discourse entail or enjoin certain conclusions about the ontology of art ("What a Musical Work Is," "Autographic and Allographic Art Revisited," "Titles," and "What a Musical Work Is, Again"), how the aesthetic and artistic content of a work of art relates to the nonaesthetic structure on which it is erected, be it in sound, word, paint, or stone ("Aesthetic Uniqueness" and "Aesthetic Supervenience"), and how this content, though historically determined, does not fundamentally evolve over time ("Artworks and the Future").

An important second focus of the essays as a whole is a special concern with the art of music. This means, in particular, both (1) examination for their own sake of aesthetic problems peculiar to music, and (2) illumination of problems of wider aesthetic import seen through the lens of that particular art form. In the first category I would place "The Concept of Music," "Truth in Music," "Hope in *The Hebrides*," "Evaluating Musical Performance," and "Authentic Performance and Performance Means"; in the second category, perhaps, "What a Musical Work Is" together with its sequel, and "Music and Negative Emotion."

If one were to characterize my position in art theory as a whole, it would emerge, I think, as a historicist and contextualist objectiv-

ism. This melding of historicist and contextualist considerations with a fairly thoroughgoing objectivism about aesthetic content, artistic meaning, and the concept of art in effect stands as a third thematic pole of the collection; more specifically, the idea that artworks are ontologically, interpretively, and evaluatively bound up with their histories of production, the art-historical situations in which they come to be, and the history-involving intentions of their makers is a central theme of the three essays in Part One and of a number of those in Parts Two and Three as well.

In rough fashion, then, this accounts for the tripartite grouping of the essays. Those in Part One emphasize above all the historicity of art making. Those in Part Two explore metaphysical issues—as to the nature of art objects, art properties, art causation, and art identity—most prominently. And those in Part Three, while usually evincing historicist and metaphysical concern in some fashion, are predominantly contributions to the rather specific metatheory of musical appreciation and criticism. That said, it is clear that on thematic grounds alone, and a somewhat different weighing of the substance of each essay, Chapters 9 and 11 might reasonably have landed in Part One, Chapters 4 and 10 in Part Three, and Chapter 2 in Part Two. But I was also concerned that essays be placed in proximity to those they presuppose or to which they crucially refer, and that chronological order be preserved, if possible, for the reprinted essays. These additional desiderata, together with the obvious thematic ones, determined the final grouping.

Finally, as the essays will make plain, I generally stand opposed, in style as well as substance, to sociological, relativist—and more narrowly, deconstructivist—approaches to the realm of art which have been fashionable of late. This is meant neither as apology nor as defiance; rather, as a *caveat lector*.

I thank particularly four individuals who have had most to do with these essays being written: Kendall Walton, for first having shown me how aesthetics could be both rigorous and imaginative, and for a core of insights I have tried to add to in my own work; Peter Kivy, for having early shown an interest in my work on music, and for enriching it by his sometimes dogged opposition; Richard Wollheim, for his philosophical example and encouragement, and his unselfish praise of

my efforts beyond what they deserved; and last, Nicholas Wolterstorff, whose specific choice of philosophical subjects is one I found myself somewhat paralleling, beginning with my early work in general metaphysics and continuing with my shift to aesthetics. What is of worth in these essays is partly due to them.

I thank next Lydia Goehr and Jenefer Robinson, who read through the entire manuscript, offering many valuable suggestions. I thank my editor, John Ackerman, for his unfailing encouragement and his staff at Cornell University Press for their very professional assistance.

I also express my appreciation to all of the following who—sometimes unknowingly, though usually quite deliberately—have made helpful comments on various essays at various stages, contributing to their improvement: Dennis Ahern, John Bennett, Baruch Brody, John Brown, Malcolm Budd, Noël Carroll, James Celarier, Gregory Currie, Stephen Davies, Douglas Dempster, Mark De Bellis, Richard Eldridge, Kit Fine, Michael Gardner, Norman Gillespie, Joshua Halberstam, Göran Hermerén, Terry Horgan, Warren Ingber, Gary Iseminger, David Luban, Jack Meiland, Michael Slote, Kim Sterelny, Lawrence Stern, Joseph Tolliver, Alan Tormey, and Susan Wolf. I thank my colleagues in the Maryland philosophy department for their support and stimulation over the past fourteen years. Finally, I owe a special debt to my wife, Karla Hoff, who was an inspiration to me in at least two respects. As a much harder worker than I am, and as a better editor than I will ever be, she helped bring this book to fruition earlier than would otherwise have been the case, had I had only my own company to dwell in and only my own reflection to observe.

Two last debts: to Michael Eckersley, for design of the illustration in Ch. 6, and to Leonard Meyer, whose collection *Music, the Arts, and Ideas* (1967) provided the model for my own title.

JERROLD LEVINSON

*College Park, Maryland*

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“Defining Art Historically,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 19 (1979): 232–50.

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“Refining Art Historically,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 47 (1989): 21–33.

“What a Musical Work Is,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 77 (1980): 5–28.

“Autographic and Allographic Art Revisited,” *Philosophical Studies*, 38 (1980): 367–83. (Copyright © 1980 by D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht, Holland.)

“Aesthetic Uniqueness,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 38 (1980): 435–49.

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“Titles,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 44 (1985): 29–39.

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“Truth in Music,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 40 (1981): 131–44.

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## Introduction

When the present volume appears it will be two decades since the original publication of *Music, Art, and Metaphysics*, and about eight years since it was allowed to go out of print. Though I believe there are good reasons to reissue it now, which I will mention in a moment, I should say that without the urging of various friends and colleagues, most notably David Davies and Andrew Kania, and that of Peter Momtchiloff at Oxford University Press, I might, nevertheless, not have taken the steps necessary to bring the reissue about. For it is hard to revisit one's past, whether academic or personal, and thus to confront one's former self. Though it is only twenty years since the publication of *Music, Art, and Metaphysics*, some of the essays in the book first appeared over thirty years ago, and the thinking in them, as far as that is concerned, goes back to my graduate studies of almost forty years ago.

In any event, what are the reasons, alluded to above, for reissuing *Music, Art, and Metaphysics*? The first reason, I suppose, is that many of the essays have had a significant influence on the direction and character of analytic aesthetics, beginning naturally in the English-speaking sphere, but exerting an influence eventually also outside that sphere, in Scandinavia, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany, and other countries. The essays continue to be referred to and commented on with regularity, most notably "What a Musical Work Is," "Defining Art Historically," "Music and Negative Emotion," and "Hope in *The Hebrides*," but also, if to a lesser extent, "Titles," "Hybrid Art Forms," "Artworks and the Future," and "The Concept of Music." The second reason for reissue, not unrelated to the first, is to make the essays, especially those not so widely reprinted in anthologies of aesthetics, readily available to current and future generations of students and scholars.

As for this Introduction, it affords me an opportunity to briefly describe and situate the essays for the benefit of those who encounter them for the first time, and to remark further on some of the issues that they address. But most enjoyably, for me, is the occasion here afforded to recall and share aspects of the genesis of certain of the essays that may be of interest to others.

In commenting briefly on the essays, a task to which I now turn, I address them more individually than I did in the volume's original preface, which follows this Introduction, where I was mainly concerned to justify how the essays were grouped and to foreground broad lines of connection among them. Here, by contrast, I simply indicate in a straightforward manner what each essay is about, what philosophical question it engages, what philosophical problem it seeks to illuminate.

## The Essays: Summaries and Remarks

Two of the essays, “Defining Art Historically” and its sequel “Refining Art Historically,” are concerned with the problem of the definition of art in the most general sense, one covering all art, of whatever genre, in whatever culture, whether actual or merely possible. The account offered in the first essay, and defended and elaborated in the second, places the accent on the connection that an art maker must effect between his or her activity and pre-existing art by the manner in which what is made is projected for regard. It thus offers an account in which both the intention of a maker and the concrete history of art play an essential role in securing for something the status of artwork; in short, an intentional-historical theory of art. The account was developed against the background of traditional formalist, expressionist, and aestheticist accounts of arthood, which it clearly rejects, but also in contradistinction to functionalist and institutional accounts of arthood, from which it more subtly distances itself.<sup>1</sup>

“Hybrid Art Forms” is concerned with exploring the concept of an art form that in some way fuses, straddles, or blurs the boundaries between two or more pre-existing art forms. As both the biological label and the gloss just given may already suggest, the concept of a hybrid art form is argued to be an essentially historical one, making ineliminable reference to the artistic hybrid’s antecedents, and not a concept analyzable entirely in formal or structural terms. The essay also provides a rough taxonomy of hybrid art forms according to the manner in which aspects or elements of preceding art forms have been combined in the hybrid in question, and draws some lessons for the proper appreciation of works in such art forms.

The ontology of music is manifestly the focus of both “What a Musical Work Is” and its sequel “What a Musical Work Is, Again”, which explicitly restrict themselves to the ontology of the standard work of classical music. At issue is what is to be understood as comprised in or as partly constituting such a work, apart from the sound structure that is its most salient feature. For instance, are any of these essential to the identity of such a work: its creator; its title; its time of composition; its aesthetic properties; the artistic intentions governing it; its context of origination; its specified instrumentation; its performing history; its critical reception? Underlined throughout is that the grasp of a musical work’s ontological status and character is relevant to aesthetic appreciation of it, and that a work is misunderstood where such grasp is absent, distorted, or incomplete.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Much subsequent work on the philosophical definition of art engages with the theory presented in those essays. Some of the most important such works, often critical of the account or proposing modifications of it, is that of Noël Carroll, Gregory Currie, Stephen Davies, Berys Gaut, Aaron Meskin, Alessandro Pignocchi, and Robert Stecker.

<sup>2</sup> A happy development in recent philosophical aesthetics is much more attention to the methodology of ontological inquiry, to what might be called *meta-ontology*. More generally, for the increased sophistication now brought to questions about the ontology of music and other forms of art, much is owed to the important contributions of Peter Alward, Ben Caplan, David Davies, Stephen Davies, John Dilworth, Julian Dodd, Simon Evnine, Lydia Goehr, Robert Howell, Sherri Irvin, Andrew Kania, Robert Kivy, Carl Matheson, Charles Nussbaum, Stefano Predelli, Guy Rohrbaugh, Robert Stecker, and Amie Thomasson.

“Autographic and Allographic Art Revisited” is a sort of corollary to the two essays just discussed, though the field of inquiry is widened from that of music to that of the arts as a whole. The central target is the famous distinction, proposed by Nelson Goodman, between *autographic* art forms, those clearly admitting of forgery, such as painting and drawing, and *allographic* art forms, those putatively not admitting of forgery, such as music and poetry. What I aimed to show was that Goodman’s way of drawing this distinction was flawed, and that it is not so much a work’s susceptibility to forgery or essential connection to an artist and a time that characterizes the class of autographic arts Goodman had in mind, but rather, a work’s not comprising a structure defined, either wholly or in part, by a notation. In short, Goodman’s characterization of the autographic arts will not work, since given the considerations advanced in “What a Musical Work Is” and “What a Musical Work Is, Again,” musical works turn out to exhibit such an essential connection and so are, after a fashion, as forgeable as paintings.

The main objective of “Titles” was twofold, the first relatively simple, the second more complicated. The first objective was to characterize *true* artwork titles, that is, verbal expressions that are actually parts of works as constituted by their creators, as opposed to nicknames, definite descriptions, museum catalog designations, and the like. The second objective was to defend and illustrate the claim that a work’s true title is always *relevant* to its understanding and appreciation, even in cases where the meaning-constituting potential of titling appears to have been declined or neutralized, as with a title such as “Untitled”.

The issue in “Aesthetic Uniqueness” is the uniqueness of individual artworks, as regards aesthetic properties, artistic properties, expressiveness, meaning, and experience offered. Might two distinct artworks ever display identical aesthetic, including expressive, characters? Might they ever possess all and only the same aesthetic properties, or all and only the same artistic properties? Whether or not they might possess all the same aesthetic and artistic properties, might they ever give appreciators the very same aesthetic experiences? And if so, does that possibility hold only for works within the same art form, or might it even hold for works in different art forms, for instance, a charcoal drawing and a piano prelude? This essay remains perhaps the least remarked on of the essays in *Music, Art, and Metaphysics*, and yet the issue with which it is concerned is one I continue to regard as fascinating.<sup>3</sup>

“Aesthetic Supervenience,” which was written for a Spindel Conference at Memphis State University, is concerned with the nature of aesthetic properties and their underlying bases in non-aesthetic properties, and the conceptual and causal relations between the non-aesthetic and aesthetic properties of an artwork.<sup>4</sup> My main objectives

<sup>3</sup> I hope to fruitfully revisit the issue in a projected essay on the possibility of expressive equivalences between abstract painting and instrumental music.

<sup>4</sup> Of important subsequent work on aesthetic properties and aesthetic supervenience, I would note especially the contributions of John Bender, Malcolm Budd, Gregory Currie, Rafael De Clercq, Alan Goldman, Peter Lamarque, Roger Pouivet, and Nick Zangwill.



in the essay were these: to offer useful characterizations of the supervenience, or asymmetrical dependence, of an artwork's aesthetic properties on its non-aesthetic properties; to relate my reflections on aesthetic supervenience to Frank Sibley's and Monroe Beardsley's groundbreaking work on the manner and degree to which aesthetic properties are or are not conditioned by non-aesthetic properties, emphasizing Beardsley's often-overlooked distinction between *application* conditions for aesthetic terms and *occurrence* conditions for aesthetic properties; to defend a loosely *objectivist* and *emergentist* view of aesthetic properties, and aesthetic content more generally; and to argue against the extreme physicalist claim of the existence of *a priori* physico-phenomenal laws that would permit the deduction of phenomenal and aesthetic properties from physical ones. In the last part of the essay, the notion of aesthetic supervenience is given concrete application through case studies of the aesthetic content of an abstract painting by Mondrian and a keyboard prelude by J. S. Bach.

The focus of the rather lengthy essay "Artworks and the Future" is the nature of artistic content and meaning, and its degree of stability over time. Does the passage of time, the emergence of new audiences, the arising of new contexts, necessarily induce alteration in the artistic content or meaning of works of art? I argued, in opposition to a postmodern article of faith in support of the inevitability of such alteration, that such meaning and content, rightly understood, does *not* change over time, even if the situation-relative *significance* of a work and its meaning does. As it happens, I returned to the theme of this essay in a subsequent essay, in which I was led to qualify its "no change in content or meaning over time" thesis, at least for the special case of works within the oeuvre of a given artist, where it seems that later works may in some cases subtly affect the content or meaning of earlier ones.<sup>5</sup>

"The Concept of Music" is concerned with the problem of defining music, of characterizing it as a specific art form distinct from other forms of art. The definition arrived at proposes two features as essential to the art form of music: one, the employment and organization of sound; two, a certain projected reception, involving enrichment of experience through attention to organized sounds as such. The aim was to characterize music in such a way that instances of music of any style or any culture would be covered, but not every instance of organized sound, excluding those organized for purposes not recognizable as musical.<sup>6</sup>

"Music and Negative Emotion" and "Hope in *The Hebrides*" are both concerned with emotion in relation to music. The former focuses on the *evocation* of emotion by music, whether in literal or imagined mode, and the latter focuses on the *expression* of emotion in music, though the issues are of course related, in that emotional evocation by music is most often the result of the listener's awareness of and sensitivity to

<sup>5</sup> "Work and Oeuvre," in *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Some important subsequent work on the concept of music has been done by Stephen Davies, Andy Hamilton, Andrew Kania, and Roger Scruton.

emotional expression *in* music. The more specific focus of “Music and Negative Emotion” is the ostensibly paradoxical phenomenon of negatively expressive music, whose tendency to induce negatively emotional states in attentive and responsive listeners would seem to make it the sort of music one would go out of one’s way to avoid, and yet this is manifestly not the case, such music often being the most earnestly sought after and prized. After initial presentation of the paradox and some clarifications on the nature of emotions, much of the remainder of the essay explores ways to defuse the paradoxical appearance of pursuing emotion of a negative sort from darkly expressive music, issuing in a number of rewards that one might plausibly reap from such a pursuit. The more specific focus of “Hope in *The Hebrides*” is the question of whether purely instrumental music might be capable of expressing higher, cognitively complex emotions, such as shame, pride, regret, or contempt. As its title suggests, the specific higher emotion chosen for illustration in this essay is hope, and a case, both philosophical and musical, is made for its expression by a particular passage in Mendelssohn’s famous overture.<sup>7</sup>

“Evaluating Musical Performance” and “Authentic Performance and Performance Means” are both concerned with what makes a performance a performance of a given musical work *at all*, with what makes it a *correct* or *authentic* performance of that work, and with what makes it a *good* performance of that work—three ideas which, though logically connected, are scarcely equivalent. The former essay is more pragmatically oriented, and considers performance evaluation from a variety of involved perspectives, including those of listeners, performers, critics, and composers, while the latter essay has more theoretical objectives in sight, on the one hand, providing philosophical ammunition for what is sometimes called the “historical authenticity” movement in music performance, and on the other hand, offering further support for the instrumental-essentialist view of standard musical works defended in “What a Musical Work Is” and “What a Musical Work Is, Again.”

Of the essays in *Music, Art, and Metaphysics* it is “Truth in Music” that I now harbor the most reservations about. Certainly I would not approach the topic that way today, nor would I be likely to defend the thesis that I there settle on. But what I was trying to do was find some plausible and interesting sense in which a passage of purely instrumental music, unconnected to any text or narrative, might be said to be true or false. I did manage to find something—that such a passage might be thought of as true to the extent that its sequence of emotional expressions was one that had some psychological plausibility in reality—but from my present vantage point this seems even more strained to me than it did at the time. What I now think is that if there is an important sense in which music is true, that lies not so much in the verisimilitude of such a sequence of

<sup>7</sup> Of important subsequent work on emotional expression and evocation in music, and the bearing of music’s emotional dimension on its value as music. I would note especially that of Jeanette Bicknell, Paul Boghossian, Malcolm Budd, Stephen Davies, Peter Kivy, Derek Matravers, Aaron Ridley, Jenefer Robinson, Roger Scruton, and Robert Sharpe.

expressions, but rather more in the nature or character of the expressiveness achieved in individual passages of music.<sup>8</sup>

## The Essays: Anecdotes and Reminiscences

“Titles.” The nature and significance of artwork titles was my first idea for a doctoral thesis while in graduate school at the University of Michigan in the early 1970s, during which time my interest was roughly equally divided between aesthetics, which I studied with Kendall Walton, and metaphysics, which I studied mainly with Jaegwon Kim. When I aired this idea I was told—with justice, I eventually saw—that that was perhaps too narrow and specialized a topic for a dissertation in philosophy. So I ended up writing one in metaphysics instead, on the nature of attributes, which became the source of my first two published essays in philosophy, “Properties and Related Entities” (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1978) and “The Particularization of Attributes” (*Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 1980). Anyway, not long after, I returned to the topic of titles and devoted an article to it, which format suited what I had to say about titles, I am sure, rather better than a dissertation would have.

“Aesthetic Uniqueness.” This essay was in effect my first full-fledged effort in aesthetics. The story connected with its genesis may be of some interest, and perhaps of inspiration to those who may be tempted prematurely to abandon philosophy for some financially surer pursuit. In the spring of 1976 I found myself nearing the end of a second one-year position with no clear future, at a private university in New Jersey that shall remain nameless. One fine spring day I received a call from Samuel Gorovitz, then chair of the philosophy department at the University of Maryland, asking me if I remained interested in the post they were trying to fill for a philosopher of art, and whether I had a paper in aesthetics I was willing to present to them. Since at that time most of my work in philosophy, including my dissertation, represented me as a metaphysician, it was reasonable for Gorovitz to inquire whether I also really was as well, or was at least prepared to become, an aesthetician. I replied that I was indeed still interested in the post, and that I was more than willing to present an appropriate paper to the department. But the fact is that I *hadn't* yet written the paper in question, though the ideas for it were pretty clearly worked out in my mind. Anyway, within a week the paper was written, and was apparently good enough to secure me the post, which I have occupied happily now for thirty-four years, and, for the most part, as an aesthetician. The paper I gave then was an early version of “Aesthetic Uniqueness.”

“Music and Negative Emotion.” The essay begins with a lurid and melodramatic image of the music lover who fancies music of starkly distressing emotional character as some sort of masochist whose listening room thus appears in the guise of a torture chamber. I leave to it readers to discover the rhetorical purpose of that attention-getting

<sup>8</sup> For some hints in this vein see my “Musical Profundity Misplaced,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50 (1992).

device, but what I want to add here, more soberly, is that that image remotely derives from my practice—at least in early years, when I was in the first blush of my inordinate passion for music—of listening to recorded music in seclusion, in the dark, eyes closed, and in a reclined or semi-reclined position. For it seemed that it was in such conditions, which facilitated total attention to and immersion in the music, that music had its most powerful effects on me emotionally, both positive and negative, and however those effects are best analyzed from a philosophical perspective. There was, to my ritual of seriously listening to music, an undeniable aspect of submission, of opening myself up to the power of music to ravish, entrance, and overpower, for better or worse. It thus took little tweaking to convert that practice into the overheated image with which “Music and Negative Emotion” endeavors to ensnare the reader.

“What a Musical Work Is.” This essay takes as an exemplar of the standard notated classical composition Beethoven’s Quintet for Piano and Winds, op. 16. The choice of Beethoven was natural, since he occupies in both the popular and the learned mind the place of classical composer *par excellence*. The choice of the Quintet as an illustration was rather more arbitrary, except that I wanted a piece that was not too well known, that used a number of instruments, and that used them distinctively. Plus, I was quite fond of it. Ironically, however, though the crucial role of instrumentation in the identity of such a work was a main theme of my essay, in the essay’s original appearance in the *Journal of Philosophy* I had incorrectly given the instrumentation as piano, *flute*, oboe, clarinet, and horn—instead of piano, oboe, clarinet, horn, and *bassoon*—a mistake my keenest philosophical adversary on this issue, Peter Kivy, was only too happy to point out. Yet a subsequent development convinced me that my choice of that piece to illustrate my ideas on musical ontology was not so random as all that, but had, perhaps, been guided by an unseen providence. For when my daughter Melanie was born, on the very last day of 1989, what was playing on the sound system of the delivery room but that very piece of relatively obscure chamber music . . .

“Hope in *The Hebrides*” has the curious distinction of having had a poem written in its honor by another philosopher, a poem that appears to contain a gentle critique of its main thesis—though since it is a poem it is a little hard to tell with assurance. The poem is by Roger Scruton, is entitled simply “Hope”, and can be found in a recent collection of the philosopher’s incidental writings.<sup>9</sup> I will not quote the poem in full, but this excerpt will give a fair idea of its good natured and witty flavor:

The cellos ride B minor, and charm it into D;  
 Young Felix wrote no finer theme, and if it hopes then hope exists in melody.

Just make your boat of music-staves, for then you’ll float  
 On waves of sound; those dancing naiads are really triads,  
 And every sea-change, just a key-change, your ballast just a note.

<sup>9</sup> *Gentle Regrets* (London: Continuum, 2006). Note that not all line breaks and capitalizations have been retained in this excerpt, so interested readers are encouraged to consult the original in the source cited.

But can I steer this ship to port and find the thing I hope?

The answer's clear: yes sure, in thought; but in the real world, nope.

My last reminiscence concerns both “Defining Art Historically” and “What a Musical Work Is,” which continue to be my most often cited and reprinted papers. Early in my philosophical career certain thinkers who loomed large in the philosophy of art naturally exerted an important personal influence on me. Most significant among those thinkers was my graduate school mentor in aesthetics, Kendall Walton, and a second, unofficial mentor in aesthetics that I acquired later in Richard Wollheim. (Walton’s essay “Categories of Art” remains probably the single most important influence on my various forays in aesthetic theory, while Wollheim’s *Art and Its Objects* was the first book in aesthetics I was completely taken with.) In addition to Walton and Wollheim there were then also Nicholas Wolterstorff and Peter Kivy, two excellent aestheticians with whom I had personal contact early on, and whose research specifically in philosophy of music was of particular inspiration to me.

Arthur Danto, on the other hand, a formidable art critic and art theorist as well as a philosopher of worldwide renown, and thus an unavoidable presence in aesthetics, was not someone with whom I was particularly close. Still, we became acquainted not long after my first publications in the field, and I remember asking his opinion, on some occasion or other, of the two essays of mine that had begun to attract some attention, namely “Defining Art Historically” and “What a Musical Work Is,” essays that I thought he was likely to have taken note of, since he was indirectly a target of the critique of prevailing theories of arthood advanced in the former, and belonged to the editorial board of the journal that had published the latter.

His response, which I quote as best I can, remains engraved in my memory thirty years on: “What I think, Jerry, is that the paper on defining art is probably correct, but not interesting. Whereas the paper on musical works is so interesting, it hardly matters whether or not it is correct.” I leave to others to assess the justice of those judgments, but as may be imagined, that was not the sort of comment, coming from someone of Danto’s stature, that was easily forgotten by one just beginning to make his way in the field.

Jerrold Levinson  
College Park, Maryland  
September 2010

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**PART ONE**

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**ART AND HISTORY**

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## I *Defining Art Historically*

The question of what makes something art is probably the most venerable in aesthetics. What is the artness of an artwork? Wherein does it reside? We would certainly like to know. We would certainly be interested to learn what ties together Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, Tallis's *Spem in alium*, Flavin's *Pink and Gold*, Balanchine's *Variations for a Door and a Sigh*, Wilson and Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, the Parthenon, and countless other unknown and unsung objects under the common banner of art. After rejecting the many proposals made by philosophers from Plato to the present on grounds of narrowness, tendentiousness, inflexibility, vagueness, or circularity, one would appear to be left with no answer to the question at all, and perhaps a suspicion that it is unanswerable. Nevertheless, the question has been taken up in recent years and given a new sort of answer: the institutional theory of art, adumbrated by Arthur Danto and propounded explicitly by George Dickie. In short, the theory is that artworks are artworks because they occupy a certain place, which they must be given, in a certain institution, that of Art.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Dickie's definition of art runs as follows: "A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the art-world)" *Art and the Aesthetic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 34.



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