

The Factors and Purpose of Music and Art

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From the beginning of time, music and art have been a part of every culture on the face of the Earth. From this, it can be assumed that music and art are integral to people all over the world, which forms the question, what factors constitute music and art? I will approach this question from several different angles as I determine the factors, origins, and relationships of music and art.

Definitions and Biblical Origins of Music and Art (and what they are not)

Music, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary, consists of “vocal or instrumental sounds (or both) combined in such a way as to produce beauty of form, harmony, and expression of emotion.”¹ The first mention of music in the Bible occurs in Genesis 4, where Jubal, the great-great-great-great grandson of Cain (son of Adam, the first man), is credited as “the father of all who play[ed] the lyre and the flute” and likely the first human musician.² Since Jubal needed inspiration and knowledge of how to play instruments and create music, this verse implies that God is the author and creator of all music. Dozens of other references to music can be found throughout the Bible, including music therapy in 1 Samuel, marching music in Isaiah 23, and angel choirs in Revelation 15.³

However, music is not the same thing as poetry, which is defined as a “literacy work in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by use of distinctive style and rhythm.”⁴ Examples of poetry historically classified as music include Steve Reich’s works “Come Out” and “It’s Gonna Rain”. Although these works do include vocal sounds, they lack any expression of emotion, as looping tracks fail to convey an emotional aspect to the listener, and many philosophers of music believe that a major part of music is its “apparent ability to express emotions.”⁵ Therefore, these and similar works should be categorized as poetry instead of music.

John Cage, a prominent twentieth century composer and philosopher, faced criticism over his well-known piece *4'33"*, which involves a pianist sitting at the instrument in silence

1. Oxford Dictionary, “Definition of Music,” Oxford University Press, 2019, accessed April 27, 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/music>.

2. Holman Christian Standard Bible, *Genesis 4:21* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2009), 10.

3. Anderson, Ken, *Music* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996), 344.

4. Oxford Dictionary, “Definition of Poetry,” Oxford University Press, 2019, accessed April 27, 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/poetry>.

5. Kania, Andrew, “The Philosophy of Music”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2017, accessed April 27, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/music/>.

for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. Cage viewed the moments of silence in music “as being as filled with sound as the sound created by performers playing their instruments”; in essence, stating that silence is as musical as sound is.⁶ However, in an interview in 1980, he stated that “the noises around me *are 4’33*” in response to the question, “[Do the sounds around you] influence you and are they in any way [significant] for your compositional work?”⁷ Because everyday sounds lack harmony or expression of emotion, among other required elements of music, Cage, by his own words, declared that compositions such as *4’33* should also not be classified as music.

Art is “the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power”, according to the Oxford Dictionary.⁸ The first mention of art in the Bible occurs in Psalms 19, where the psalmist states that “the heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky proclaims the work of his hands.”⁹ This verse implies that, like music, God is the author and creator of all art. In the contexts of both art and music, according to the Bible, God has to allow humans to understand them and the processes for creating them. Therefore, it can be inferred that all of humanity’s creative nature is given to them by God.

Music: A Subset of Art

Music has previously been defined as including vocal and/or instrumental sounds in a way to produce beauty of form, among other elements. However, the definition of music from dictionary.com includes an additional, important term: art. Music, as stated in this definition, is “an art of sound in time that expresses ideas and emotions in significant forms through the elements of rhythm, melody, harmony, and color”; the use of the term “art” sets it apart from the previously given definition, as well as helping to separate music as its own subset under the larger category of art.¹⁰ Additionally, the Oxford Dictionary defines “the arts” as “the various branches of creative activity, such as painting, music, literature, and dance.”¹¹ Music, as with literature and dance, is a creative process that stems from the creative nature given to man by God. Therefore, music should be categorized as a subset of

6. Bennett, Megan, “John Cage,” Sonoma State University, accessed May 2, 2019, http://web.sonoma.edu/users/j/johnsonw/music_300/Cage.Megan%20Bennett.pdf.

7. Varga, Bálint András, “Three Questions for Sixty-Five Composers: John Cage,” University of Rochester, 2011, accessed May 2, 2019, JSTOR DOI: 10.7722.

8. Oxford Dictionary, “Definition of Art,” Oxford University Press, 2019, accessed April 27, 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/art>.

9. Holman Christian Standard Bible, *Psalms 19:1*.

10. Dictionary.com, “Definition of Music,” Dictionary.com, LLC, 2019, accessed April 27, 2019, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/music>.

art rather than another category on the same level as art.

Bad Music versus Foolish Music

In the grand spectrum of music terminology, “good music” and “bad music” do not exist; they are simply based on the opinion and standards of the listener. For example, if a parent were to hear their five-year old child singing along to a song on the radio, they would likely tell their child their singing sounded great, even if the child was out of tune, off rhythm, and in the wrong octave. If this same parent were to hear the singer perform the song live, the parent would likely also tell the singer they sounded great. If a college vocal professor were to hear both singers and give an evaluation, the child would score much lower than the professional singer based on a different set of standards. These evaluative-style results may change fifty times between fifty different listeners, based on what each listener is listening for and evaluating on; therefore, “good” and “bad” music are not relative in evaluating music. However, there is a difference between “bad music” and “foolish music”. Foolish music is that which is created for no purpose by those who do nothing. During a woe to the complacent inhabitants of Israel, the prophet Amos states that the people “improvise songs to the sound of the harp and invent their own musical instruments like David”, labeling it as foolish because the people are lazy and unmotivated in what they are doing; in other words, it has no purpose.¹² The music of Arnold Schoenberg is an excellent example to examine in regards to the difference between bad music and foolish music.

Schoenberg, his Music, and their Correlation

Schoenberg’s compositions caused many tremors in the world of music during his life and continue to do so in the present day. Embracing a style called “emancipation of the dissonance” (referring to the comprehensibility of dissonance), he wrote works based on “treat[ing] dissonances like consonances and renounc[ing] a tonal center”; such compositions received extreme pushback and hostility from audiences.¹³ As he continued to compose atonal pieces, he also continued to receive hostility, and pride began to appear in his life. He would not allow his pieces to be premiered in Vienna simply because the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra had never played his pieces, and he wrote Wilhelm Furtwängler, an up-and-coming conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic (and future guest conductor for Vienna), directly. “I would not let a new work have its first performance in Vienna”, he stated, because he was the “only composer of any reputation at all whom the [Vienna] Philharmonic [had] not yet performed”.¹⁴ He also remarked, in 1910, that every talented composer would be writing the same way he was.¹⁵ In his later years, however, Schoenberg

11. Oxford Dictionary, “Definition of Art.”

12. Holman Christian Standard Bible, *Amos 6:5*.

13. Schonberg, Harold, *The Lives of the Great Composers*, (Ontario, Canada: Penguin Books Canada, 1981), 601.

also became stubborn, unwilling to admit that people did not like his music. “I am quite conscious of the fact that a full understanding of my works cannot be expected before some decades”, he wrote in 1947. “The minds of the musicians, and of the audiences, have to mature ere they can comprehend my music.”¹⁶ Although the correlation between his growing pride and stubbornness and his increasingly atonal and abstract music is not a proven fact, it is a theory that will hopefully be given attention and researched in the near future.

Although Schoenberg’s music was disliked and even hated by many people, it is still correctly categorized as music because it contains the elements required of music, such as rhythm and expression of emotion. However, if he had written dissonant and abstract music because he did not want to try to make it sound better, or was too lazy to do so, it would be considered foolish music. Similarly, Schoenberg, though disliked and even hated by many people, was still human because he fulfilled the requirements to be considered a human. The basis of a “good/bad” human vs a “foolish” human is also the same. A “good/bad” person is based on another’s opinion; although many people consider Adolf Hitler to be a bad person, those that supported him in his genocide of the Jewish people believed he was good and doing the correct thing. A foolish person, by contrast, is one that is too lazy or unmotivated to do thorough, complete work, even if the end result would not be what others expect.

Music as Worship

Religious music, especially contemporary Christian music, is often associated with worship in churches, and it is true that this genre of music is often written specifically for the purpose of worship. However, all music is a form of worship. In the area of the arts, both the creator and the audience will give credit and praise to someone or something for the creation. It is up to the creator to determine to whom the praise will be given, either to them or to God. In his book *Words on Worship*, Charles Billingsley further emphasizes this point: “[People] were created to worship, so [they will] always seek to worship something”; this applies to music as much as anything else.¹⁷ Humans, especially Christians, should direct the praise that comes from others to God because He allowed them to create a work with the creative nature that He instilled in them.

Conclusion: The Purpose of Music

The purpose of music, and art as a whole, is worship. All music is a form of worship,

14. Schoenberg, *The Lives of the Great Composers*, 602.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Billingsley, Charles, *Words on Worship* (Franklin, TN: Worthy Publishing Group, 2016), 98.

18. Federer, William J., *America’s God and Country: Encyclopedia of Quotations* (St. Louis, MO: Amerisearch, Inc., 1994), 31.

whether directed to God or to something or someone else. Bach emphasized this point when he said that “the aim and final end of all music should be none other than the glory of God and the refreshment of the soul.”¹⁸ The purpose of music, art, and everything humans do should be to worship and bring glory to God and God alone.

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