

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art

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Baugh, "Prolegomena to Any Aesthetics of Rock Music" and Davies, "Rock vs. Classical Music"

Baugh

*Q: "Does rock music have standards of its own, which uniquely apply to it, or that apply to it in an especially appropriate way?" (498)

--Baugh answers "yes". He claims that aesthetic standards rooted in the European concert hall tradition will invariably miss the mark when it comes to rock music.

*"...I would say that traditional musical aesthetics is concerned with form and composition, whereas rock is concerned with the *matter* of music...by "matter" I mean the way music feels to the listener, or the way that it affects the listener's body." (498)

--Important material elements of rock music: "making a tone sound a certain way", loudness, and rhythm.

--Notice Baugh's emphasis on how rock music affects the body, rather than the mind.

"These material or "visceral" properties of rock are registered in the body core, in the gut, and in the muscles and sinews of the arms and legs, rather than in any intellectual faculty of judgment, which is why traditional aesthetics of music either neglects them or derides them as having no musical value." (499)

--In giving value to this aspect of rock music, Baugh contrasts himself, vividly, with Kant. Baugh traces this preoccupation with form through to Hanslick and others.

--Response: But music criticism does take into account material elements, such as timbre and performance. But Baugh argues that these considerations are always secondary.

--The emphasis on form leads to underestimations (in terms of aesthetic worth) of rock music. If taken seriously, these inappropriate standards can lead to disasters like "art rock".

*So, what are the correct standards for rock music? We have already seen that they will emphasize material properties. Specifically, the prized properties include:

--Rhythm:

"Rock music, from its origins in blues and country and folk traditions, is for dancing. It's got a back-beat, you can't lose it." (501)

“A bad rock song is one that tries and fails to inspire the body to dance.” (501)

The timing here cannot be captured by any formula or reasoned principle

--The expressiveness of the performance—be it by a voice or lead guitar.

“Some of the best rock vocalists, from Muddy Waters to Elvis to Lennon to Joplin, are technically quite bad singers. The standards have to do with the amount of feeling conveyed, and with the nuances of feeling expressed.” (502)

--Loudness

Davies

*There are not different aesthetic standards for rock and classical music.

I.

*Davies summarizes the debate between Young and Baugh. Young responded to Baugh by arguing that classical music prizes the same standards for performance as does rock music.

II.

*Davies challenges the form/expression distinction that Baugh emphasizes.

“I cannot imagine how one could listen to music without concerning oneself with form, with the structuring of sound...The perceptual experience that would require thought and special effort is that of hearing one’s native music or language merely as strings of unrelated sounds.” (507)

“The expressive character of music often depends on its structure, and we might understand a piece’s form as much in terms of its expressive progress as in terms of textbook models.” (507)

--Also, there is a cognitive component to emotions, so it is a mistake to associate only the formal properties with our intellectual aspect.

--And, classical music isn’t enjoyed simply for its formal properties.

*Is Baugh’s argument that what is distinctive about rock music is not what we hear, but how it affects our body at a more primitive level (e.g., dance)?

--“Is “A Day in the Life” more “in touch” with the dance tradition to which it is heir than is Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony?” (509)

--Dancing isn't so "primitive", in the sense of being at a low cognitive-behavioral level.

--All music is capable of the same visceral responses as we experience with rock.

III.

*Even if rock music cannot be fully notated, this does not mean it is any more free.

*Performances are more valuable when the musical piece is "thin" (few indicated details), less valuable when the musical piece is "thick" (lots of indicated details). E.g., the Beatles' "With a Little Help from my Friends" is a thin song. (511)

--Think of Walton's standard-variable property distinction.

IV.

*Baugh characterized classical music as more mechanical than rock music, but Davies disputes this claim (calling Baugh "uninformed").

--Plus, practice and virtuosity are equally prized and prevalent in the 2 traditions.

V.

*Conclusion:

"I think that properties as specific as the ones Baugh points to fail to capture a difference between rock and classical music construed as broad kinds, for they apply only to much more fine-grained types. And if there are differences between the broad categories, I suspect they are rather trivial. At the relevant level of generality, I doubt that one will find contrasts deep or distinctive enough to provide the basis for an aesthetics." (515)