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# Musical morality

PETER KIVY

## (1) The Bad and the Beautiful

In an altogether chilling scene in the movie version of *Schindler's List*, German soldiers have discovered an apartment where Jews are hidden: some in closets, some in attics, some even in spaces between walls, and between ceilings and floors. While these soldiers are in the process of shooting the terrified people hiding there, one of their number spies a piano and sits down to play. "Bach?" asks a comrade. "No, Mozart" another soldier replies. (It is obviously Bach.)<sup>1</sup>

The point of the scene is all too clear. The knowledge, love, and appreciation of the most sublime musical works of Western civilization can apparently exist along side of, indeed as an accompaniment to the cruelest, most barbaric acts imaginable. Love of Bach does not engender love of humanity, or of the good. Or, put another way, the music of Bach is not a moral force in the world. A lover of Bach is no more likely to be a morally upright human being than a lover of chess or baseball. As a recent writer has eloquently put the point: "The question of music's [moral] ambivalence is always a disturbing one; the question of Beethoven in Auschwitz is terrifying"; and again: "musical language is either amoral or it expresses a notion of morality that includes tyrants—which is the same thing."<sup>2</sup> To instance a specific case in point, "SS leader Reinhard Heydrich," otherwise known as Hangman Heydrich, "who was instrumental in organizing the Final Solution...played the violin and could be deeply stirred by a Schubert sonata."<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly enough, another Holocaust narrative, also, by the way, like *Schindler's List*, a historical narrative, not a fictional one, might be seen to

1. The movie is based on Thomas Keneally's book, originally published as *Schindler's Ark* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982).
2. Esteban Buch, *Beethoven's Ninth: A Political History*, trans. Richard Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 219 and 266.
3. Joachim Fest, *Inside Hitler's Bunker: The Last Days of the Third Reich*, trans. Margot Bettauer Dembo (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), p. 35.

make exactly the opposite point.<sup>4</sup> It is the remarkable memoir, *The Pianist*, by Wladyslaw Szpilman, brought to the screen by Roman Polanski. In the climactic scene, both of the book and of the movie, Szpilman, a Jewish pianist and composer, is discovered by a German officer, close to the end of the war, after having hidden in Warsaw through the entire German occupation. For reasons that will become apparent in a moment, I am not going to reveal to you what transpires by describing the scene in Polanski's version, or quoting from Szpilman's book. Rather, I will quote from the advertising blurb on the back cover. Here is what it says:

On September 23, 1939, Wladyslaw Szpilman played Chopin's Nocturne in C-sharp minor live on the radio as shells exploded outside—so loudly that he couldn't hear his piano. It was the last live music broadcast from Warsaw: that day, a German bomb hit the station, and Polish Radio went off the air. Though he lost his entire family, Szpilman survived in hiding. In the end his life was saved by a German officer who heard him play the same Chopin nocturne on a piano found among the rubble.<sup>5</sup>

Now I assume we are supposed to infer from the way the scene is described that there is a causal connection between the German officer hearing the Chopin nocturne and his saving the pianist's life. We are supposed to argue *post hoc, propter hoc* to the morally healing powers of great music. But the fact is that the advertising blurb is a total misrepresentation of what transpired, if, that is, it is intended to imply that Chopin's Nocturne in C-sharp minor had the moral effect of deflecting a vicious Nazi killer of Jews from his intended purpose. For the German officer in question, Captain Wilm Hosenfeld, we know from the diaries he kept, was already suspicious of the National Socialists as early as 1939, and by the time Wladyslaw Szpilman crossed his path, in 1945, was a committed anti-Nazi. It did not require Chopin's Nocturne in C-sharp minor to prevent him from killing the pianist. He had no such intention in the first place.

I think I know why the writer of the blurb misrepresented the book in this way. Advertising blurbs, after all, are intended to make prospective buyers into *buyers*; and the way to do that is to make them think that the book in hand will tell them what they *want* to be told. We *do* want to be told—*want* to believe—that great music such as that of Bach, Mozart, and Chopin has power

4. There has, by the way, been some question raised about the historical accuracy of *Schindler's List*, both the book and, by consequence, the movie. But that is beside the point.

5. Wladyslaw Szpilman, *The Pianist*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Picador, 1999), back cover of the paperback.

for the good. We do, at least some of us, have a strong intuition that you can't love Bach, Mozart, and Chopin, and love genocide too. Yet there *is* that scene in *Schindler's List*—and, alas, it rings true too. So which vision, then, is the true one? Is it the benign vision of music's morally uplifting powers, or the cynical one of music and sadistic cruelty in perfect moral harmony?

My own intuitions, sad to say, are towards the cynical rather than the benign vision. And so it is the cynical vision that I am going to defend in these remarks. But I do hope that at some time in the future someone will convince me that I am wrong. For I do love Bach, Mozart, and Chopin, and who, after all, does not want to think the best of those one loves?

## (2) Preliminary Distinctions

So far I think the question being raised has remained too vague to be dealt with in a convincing way. A reasonable next step must be, then, to try to make it clear enough for meaningful analysis and discussion.

The question, as previously posed, is whether the music of such great composers as Bach, Mozart, and Chopin is a “moral force” in the world: a moral force, that is to say, for the good. And I will begin by stipulating that the music about which this question is raised is pure instrumental music: music without a text or dramatic setting; what the nineteenth century came to call “absolute music,” and what I like to call “music alone.”

The reason I want to confine myself to such music is that once words and dramatic representation come into the picture, the question ceases to be one of *music's moral* force but of the moral force of artworks about which there is much less doubt. There is no question that if you think, for example, dramatic works can exert moral force, then you are surely going to think that music drama or opera can. That, I presume, is why the Viennese aristocracy was so wary of Mozart's and Da Ponte's plan to make an opera of Beaumarchais' *Marriage of Figaro*, with all of its revolutionary overtones. They had no such problem with Mozart's piano concertos or symphonies, even though *they* were written in the same musical “language” as the operas.

But once we understand that it is absolute music, music alone, whose moral force we are questioning, we still are in need of some clarification with regard to the concept of “moral force” itself. What *is* that? What *is* it we are asking whether or not music has?

I would like to distinguish three ways in which we can construe the concept of moral force, although I make no claim that these three ways exhaust the possibilities. And I shall raise the question, with regard to each of them, as to whether absolute music possesses moral force.

One way in which something can possess moral force is to possess the power to convey or impart moral insights and theoretical knowledge. Prime examples are philosophical texts like the *Nicomachean Ethics* or Kant's *Grundlegung*. I shall call this *epistemic* moral force.

A second way in which something might possess moral force is to possess the power to make people act in a moral way: to do the right thing. Good *parenting* can do this. Moral indoctrination can. Even behavior-altering drugs. Nor need one necessarily be aware that one is being so influenced. I shall call this *behavioral* moral force.

Finally, we may construe moral force as the power to, so to say, build moral character; to make someone, as it were, a better human being, either in the more obvious moral dimensions, or in any other way that might be broadly conceived as part of the moral. I shall call this *character-building* moral force. Any one of the things mentioned above that possesses moral force, either in the epistemic sense or in the behavioral sense can also possess it in the character-building sense.

I need now only point out, before getting on with the question of music's possible moral force, that the three concepts of moral force that I have just distinguished are, obviously, closely intertwined with one another.

Thus, the epistemic force of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, or Kant's *Grundlegung*, might well be thought of as imparting to those texts behavioral and character-building moral force as well: which is to say, if I read and am convinced of the moral theories put forth in one of these texts, these moral convictions may result in my behaving in a more morally upright manner than heretofore, or result in the moral improvement of my character. As well, the building up of my moral character, no matter how it is achieved, will, presumably, have a beneficial effect on my moral behavior, and, furthermore, the improvement of my moral behavior, no matter how *it* is achieved, may, if it becomes a permanent aspect of my person, constitute, *ipso facto*, an improvement in my moral character.

These complications, however, we may safely put aside. For our purposes the three concepts of moral force can be treated as completely separate. Our question is, simply, does music, that is to say, music alone, absolute music,

possess moral force in any of these three senses. And to that question I now turn, beginning with epistemic moral force.

### (3) Music and Moral Knowledge

There is a very general argument that would, at a stroke, scotch the idea of music's possessing epistemic moral force.

Consider the examples that immediately come to mind when one thinks of moral force in the epistemic sense: philosophical treatises, principally, as well as religious and moral tracts, ancient moral codes, and, of course, the foundational documents of the world's religions: the Bible, the Koran, and so on. These are the kinds of works whose purpose is the imparting of moral knowledge, whether in the form of theory and analysis, or moral teaching and exhortations of a more practical cast.

Now there is a view, widely held in the philosophy of art, that works of art are unable to, and, by consequence, not in the business of conveying moral insights. Nor is it a recent view, having been embraced by numerous philosophers and critical theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, epitomized by Oscar Wilde's well known remark that "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all."

Literary fiction is, no doubt, the best candidate for an art form one of whose purposes is, at least sometimes, the conveying of moral knowledge. But, so the skeptical argument goes, even serious novels and plays, by the great literary artists of the Western tradition, fail the test. For even if one can extract from them moral theses and precepts, these alone do not make for knowledge of any real consequence. What makes such works as the *Nicomachean Ethics*, or the *Grundlegung* important sources of moral knowledge is not merely the moral precepts and theses that they put forth; it is the arguments provided in their support, and the systematic theoretical framework of which they form a part. None of this, however, so the skeptics claim, is in evidence in literary works of art. They may, indeed, at times, express moral precepts and theses. However that cannot, alone, make them sources of moral knowledge in any important way, lacking, as they do, the necessary analysis and argumentation. Whatever the business of literary artworks, then, the skeptic insists, it cannot be the exerting of epistemic moral force. And what goes for literature goes, *a fortiori*, for the other arts.

The argument, then, against the possibility of music's possessing moral force in the epistemic sense is short and sweet:

- (1) No artworks possess epistemic moral force.
  - (2) Works of absolute music are artworks.
  - (3) Therefore, no works of absolute music possess epistemic moral force.
- Q.E.D.

Well it seems like a nice enough argument. But I do not think it will wash for the simple reason that I do not share the moral skeptic's claim that literary works of art are not sources of important knowledge: do not possess epistemic moral force. I am a defender, along with a few others in the philosophy of art, of the view that *some* works of literary fiction *are* capable of conveying important moral knowledge: do indeed possess epistemic moral force as part of their *raison d'être* qua artworks.<sup>6</sup> Thus the general argument cuts no ice with me because I believe the major premise is false. Nevertheless I do believe that the conclusion is true. Showing that, however, requires a different argument. It is not far to seek.

Recall again our prime examples of works with epistemic moral force: the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Kant's *Grundlegung*, the great documents of the world religions. Clearly these texts are complicated systems of sentences, expressing, among others, moral propositions, and supporting arguments for them in a more or less systematic fashion, depending on the text in question. Literary works, like novels and plays, are also texts comprised of large numbers of sentences. The difference is, with regard to moral content, that literary works express moral propositions, if they express them at all, *indirectly*. As Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen describe the view I am espousing, although it is a view they vigorously oppose, "literature at the 'literary level' is for the most part fictive, i.e....characteristically its content is fictional and its mode of presentation is not that of fact-stating. But...at a different level literary works do, perhaps must, imply or suggest general propositions about human life which have to be assumed as true or false"<sup>7</sup> — moral propositions, of course, being one of the principal kinds.

Now the point is that the crucial feature held in common by philosophical texts, religious texts, and, if you accept the view, literary texts, which enables

6. See, for example, Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Chapter 5.

7. Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 321.

them to possess epistemic moral force, is that they all are capable of expressing complex propositions, extensively, and in a systematic way. Therein lies their epistemic moral force. And if that is true, it bodes ill for the epistemic moral force of absolute music, for the obvious reason that absolute music is either totally impotent to express propositions of any kind; or, if it can express propositions at all, can do so only at the most primitive, banal level. You would get more propositional content out of a third-grade reader than out of the first eight of Beethoven's symphonies. (I omit the Ninth for obvious reasons.)

It seems to me a no-brainer that absolute music *cannot* express propositions, even indirectly, as some claim literary fiction can. It seems to me absurd to even try to provide an argument for this contention. For if an argument is meant to go from the more certain to the less, it is difficult for me to find anything I am more certain about than that absolute music does not, because it cannot, express propositions. The best I can do is to present, for your consideration, two of the propositions that, after considerable exegetical labor, have been extracted from great works of the absolute music canon, and ask you to consider with an open mind whether anything amounting to moral knowledge worthy of the name can be claimed for them.

Jerrold Levinson, who is certainly one of the leading philosophers of art of our times, and a prolific writer on musical subjects, has, with great difficulty, in an essay called "Truth in Music," extracted a proposition from Mozart's G-minor Symphony (K.550) to the effect that in the experience of a single individual happiness *could* naturally follow unhappiness. This is a special case of what Levinson takes to be a general rule of musical exegesis that if a musical work is expressive of two different emotions in successive passages, it is saying that in the experience of a single individual the second emotion could naturally succeed the first.<sup>8</sup>

In an even more elaborate job of work, this time of the music-historical kind, the musicologist David P. Schroeder has extracted the following message from Haydn's 83rd Symphony: "opposition is inevitable and the highest form of unity is not the one that eliminates conflict": it is the message of "tolerance over dogmatism"; and, Schroeder goes on to assert: "It is precisely this message that can be heard in many of Haydn's late symphonies."<sup>9</sup> (That this is the sum total of moral knowledge conveyed by a large group of the greatest

8. Jerrold Levinson, "Truth in Music," in Levinson, *Music, Art and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 298.

9. David P. Schroeder, *Haydn and the Enlightenment: The Late Symphonies and their Audience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 88.

works in the absolute music canon, if true, would be, it hardly needs pointing out, a pretty conclusive argument against the notion that absolute music has as one of its major tasks the moral enlightenment of humanity.)

My own view is that neither author has succeeded in showing absolute music capable of expressing propositions. But even if we give them their propositions, what have we got? Hardly the stuff to make moral theories with; hardly the stuff to impart epistemic moral force of any significant kind to works of absolute music. Even when they are not banalities, they are isolated moral precepts with neither rational argument nor critical analysis behind them. How could there be? How could absolute music *do* that. And without such backing, their epistemic moral force is nil.<sup>10</sup>

Let's face it. That absolute music is capable of expressing arguments, making moral generalizations, constructing moral theories, is simply too bizarre a view to be entertained even for a fleeting moment. But not to worry, the defender of music's moral force is bound to reply. Who was ever silly enough to attribute *epistemic* moral force to absolute music anyway? That's just a red herring. It is the *other* two kinds of moral force, the *behavioral* and the *character-building* that are the viable candidates for musical morality.

Fair enough. So let's have a look at the remaining candidates.

#### (4) Music and Moral Behavior

The history of musical thought, from antiquity, is littered with claims regarding music's power to influence human behavior, as well as abundant attempts to explain how it's done. If I had the time, it would be a waste of time to canvass them. I would have to start with Orpheus.

In any event, I do *not* have the time. So I will confine myself to two accounts of how absolute music might influence human *moral* behavior: what I shall call the *emotive* account and the *recognition* account.

The oldest philosophical question about music that still survives in the literature is that of its supposed intimate relation to the human emotions. As any reader of the *Republic* knows, Plato thought that "music," as the translators

10. This is a conclusion, by the way, that I suspect Levinson would endorse, in spite of his belief in the ability of absolute music to express propositions. For the judgment he himself passes on the propositions he thinks absolute music can express is essentially a negative one, to the effect that they don't much matter, one way or the other, to the artistic value of the works that express them.

render the Greek word, could arouse emotional states in the listener: what I call the “garden-variety” emotions, like love, fear, happiness, sadness, and a few others. He was, as you will recall, very concerned about this because the arousal of such emotions might, he feared, prove harmful to the citizenry.

As a matter of fact, we know little, if anything, really, about what the “music” Plato talked about was like; how it sounded. But we certainly know enough to conclude that he was very likely talking about sung music with a text, not anything even remotely like absolute music in the modern Western tradition. In any event, Plato’s (and Aristotle’s) belief in the power of music to arouse the garden-variety emotions re-emerged, with a vengeance, at the end of the sixteenth century, has remained a presence ever since, and was extended, not without difficulty, to absolute music as well, by the end of the Enlightenment.

But why should this be relevant to the topic at hand? Well, clearly, because the garden-variety emotions are prime motivators of actions. So if absolute music can arouse the garden-variety emotions, it can, thereby, initiate behavior; and if it can arouse emotions to initiate *moral* behavior, it has, thereby, behavioral moral force.

Has anyone ever really espoused this emotive account of music’s behavioral moral force? Only rarely, at least in my reading experience; but there are instances. Thus, for example, the eighteenth-century British theorist and composer, Charles Avison, wrote: “...I think we may venture to assert that it is the peculiar quality of music to raise the *sociable* and *happy* passions...,”<sup>11</sup> the implication, I think, being that the *sociable* passions are ones that motivate social, co-operative behavior—surely a moral plus in Avison’s mind.

As, well, I have before me now a curious book that I picked up in a rather scuzzy second hand book store, by the Reverend H.R. Howeis, M.A., called *Music and Morals*. It must have been extremely popular in Victorian England, for my copy is of the fifteenth edition, published in 1888. In it the good Reverend, with more enthusiasm than argument, avers that “if, as we have maintained, music has the power of actually creating these mental atmospheres [i.e. the emotions], what vast capacities for good or evil must music possess”.<sup>12</sup> And, it becomes clear, these “vast capacities for good or evil” are to be cashed out, on his view, in terms of *behavior*. For he adds: “Everything, it may be said, music

11. Charles Avison, *An Essay on Musical Expression* (3rd ed.; London, 1775), p. 4.

12. H.R. Howeis, *Music and Morals* (15th ed.; London: W.H. Allen, 1888), p. 48.

included, which excites an emotion not destined to culminate in action, has a weakening, enervating effect upon character.”<sup>13</sup>

Without pursuing the matter any further, I think we can make quick work of the emotive account. It has two fatal flaws; and if the first one won't do it in the second will.

To start with, my own view is that absolute music *cannot* arouse the garden-variety emotions. According to one very popular theory of the emotions, sometimes called the *cognitive* theory, the garden-variety emotions are *typically* aroused by the forming of beliefs appropriate to the emotions, which emotions take intentional objects, and then eventuate in some appropriate mode of behavior. Thus, I become afraid by coming to the belief that I am in danger of life and limb, as when I spy a full grown lion advancing towards me. My fear takes an intentional object, namely, the lion, and initiates the appropriate action: standing my ground, aiming my rifle, and shooting the beast, if I am Ernest Hemingway; running like hell if I am a terrified philosopher.

The all too obvious point of the story is that absolute music simply does not have the resources to do this sort of thing. How could it? What beliefs could music elicit in us to make us afraid, or angry, or sad? What would the intentional objects of these emotions be? And what would be the appropriate actions?

The theory of the emotions that I have evoked above is not, needless to say, the only one abroad. And it would be beyond the scope of this paper to try to canvass them all. But there is one other, at the cutting edge right now, called by Jenefer Robinson the *affective appraisal* theory, which she has, as a matter of fact, employed to the end of showing how absolute music might arouse the garden-variety emotions. A brief look at Robinson's attempt would perhaps help to further elaborate my point.

According to Robinson a passage of music might arouse a garden-variety emotion in the following way. (1) The passage, as I hear it, occasions in me a state of excitement or arousal. (2) I subsequently become puzzled about what garden-variety emotion was experienced when I heard the passage, even though *I wasn't experiencing any*. (3) Consequent upon the puzzlement the personal associations I bring along with me cause me to label the state of arousal or excitement felt when listening to the passage of music with the name of a garden-variety emotion, say, “fear.” (4) The labeling of the arousal

13. Ibid., p. 49.

or excitement experienced when I heard the passage *causes* me *now*—finally, one is tempted to say—to become *afraid*.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever the real possibility of this process producing a garden-variety emotion in the listener—and step (4) is problematic, to say the least—it hardly seems a case of the *music's* producing the emotion. What *it* does, *if* it does it, is to stimulate the listener to produce a garden-variety emotion in her self, some time after the event. Surely, though, the claim we are investigating, that music possesses moral force through emotive arousal, is the claim that musical masterpieces possess the power, of themselves, in their own character as art works, to directly arouse garden-variety emotions and, thereby, alter moral behavior (for the better). On Robinson's account, however, music simply provides emotive excitement or arousal (which I do indeed agree that it does, since I think absolute music can be deeply moving).<sup>15</sup> The rest is hostage to fortune. So there does not seem to me to be any basis here on which to build a theory of *music's* moral force through arousal of the garden-variety emotions. And that is the point at issue.

My general conclusion, then, about this line of thought, is that absolute music simply does not possess the materials necessary to arouse the garden-variety emotions in listeners, in any artistically relevant way. Some very good philosophers do not agree with me on this, and have postulated some very ingenious ways to explain how music might, the above objections notwithstanding, arouse the garden-variety emotions. Two of the best are my good friends, Jerrold Levinson and Stephen Davies. But—and here is the second fatal objection to the emotive account of moral force in music—*both* of them are forced to concede that the emotions aroused by music *do not have any motivational force whatever*. Thus Davies admits that when music arouses the garden-variety emotions, “Not only does the [emotive] response lack many beliefs which, standardly, would lead to action, it also lacks the beliefs that give intensity to those feelings.”<sup>16</sup> And, in a similar vein, Levinson is forced to admit that “weakening of the cognitive component in emotional response to music generally results in inhibition of most characteristic behaviors and in the significant lessening of behavioral tendencies.”<sup>17</sup>

14. See Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp. 400–412.

15. On this see, Peter Kivy, *Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), Chapter 8.

16. Stephen Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 307.

17. Jerrold Levinson, “Music and Negative Emotions,” in *Music, Art and Metaphysics*, p. 313.

It is scarcely surprising that Davies and Levinson are forced to concede the motivational impotence of the garden-variety emotions they believe music can arouse. For not only is there lacking in the musical experience just those things that render emotions motivational: appropriate beliefs, and intentional objects for the emotions to take. It is, as well, *a plain fact* that musical listeners do not do the things they ordinarily would if they were made *motivationally* sad, fearful, angry, and the like, by music. They do not fight, or flee, or vent their anger by thrashing the conductor.

Thus, of the two current views on offer, that music is impotent to arouse the garden-variety emotions, and that it can arouse the garden-variety emotions, but in a benign form in which they cannot motivate action, *both* are fatal to what I have been calling the *emotive* account of absolute music's moral force, in the behavioral sense. That, then, leaves us with what I called the *recognition* account; and to that I now turn.

Suppose there were some feature of absolute music that we *recognized* in it when we listened attentively, and with understanding; and that recognizing this feature resulted in our moral behavior improving. This would constitute a moral force in the music of a behavior-enhancing kind: just what we are looking for.

Now we must be careful here not to choose features that absolute music cannot possess, like propositions and arguments—the features we recognize in moral treatises, and which might well have a positive effect on our moral behavior. It must be a feature we could all agree absolute music can possess. What could such a feature be? Certainly “harmoniousness” is a reasonable candidate. And the claim would then be that the recognition of this aesthetic feature, in the music that possesses it, will motivate the listener to seek harmony in her interactions with other people, which is to say, try to get along with them, be tolerant of their points of view, and so on: in other words, to, in those respects, behave in a more morally commendable manner than heretofore.

Well, it is a very nice idea. The problem is: *there is absolutely no evidence that listening to music possessing harmoniousness makes people behave in the way stated, or improve their behavior in any other way*. Indeed, if there is any evidence, one way or the other, it is against the proposal rather than in its favor, which is exactly the point of the scene in *Schindler's List* that I discussed earlier.

Here it might be objected that we must not make too much of the *Schindler's List* phenomenon. After all, one might well imagine, instead of the German soldier spying a piano, his spying, rather, a copy of Kant's *Grundlegung*, and, being of a scholarly disposition, sitting down to read it while his comrades proceed with their gruesome work. But surely, the objection goes, this is not evidence against the contention that the *Grundlegung* possesses moral force! If it doesn't, what does?

But we must be careful not to confuse the two kinds of moral force at issue here. The *Schindler's List* scene, as altered above, is, to be sure, evidence against the moral force of the *Grundlegung* in the *behavioral* sense, not, however, in the *epistemic* sense. And it is the latter, not the former, that the objector must have in mind. For it is no news that moral knowledge frequently fails to motivate, or at least, to *fully* motivate. (As Horace says, "The better path I gaze at and approve; the worse I follow.") To not put too fine a point on it, moral philosophers, as a group, show no evidence of being more morally upright than philosophers of science or philosophers of art.

But absolute music is another matter entirely; for we have already given up the idea that it can possess epistemic moral force at all. We are now working on the idea that it *may* possess behavioral moral force on what I have been calling the *recognition* account. There is no evidence that it does; and thought experiments like the scene in *Schindler's List*, as well as plain old empirical evidence like the music-loving Austrians' participation in the Holocaust, suggests that it does not. So we are right back where we started.

This leaves us, within the parameters I have set for myself, one remaining option: what I called the *character-building* sense of moral force. I will conclude with some remarks on that.

## (5) Music and Character

In a strange little volume called *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*, the British scientist, science popularizer, and amateur musician, J.W.N. Sullivan, wrote, in 1927: "The function of the kind of music we have been discussing is to communicate valuable spiritual states testifying to the depth of the artist's nature and to the quality of his experience of life."<sup>18</sup> And in our encounter with such music, of which Beethoven's is, for the author, the highest achievement,

18. J.W.N. Sullivan, *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), p. 36.

Sullivan avers that “We do feel, in our most valued musical experiences, that we are making contact with a great spirit, and not simply with a prodigious musical faculty.”<sup>19</sup>

Now if something like this is true, then one might argue that, at least in some sense or other, great music uplifts us; makes us, for the period of the listening experience, feel a kind of exaltation. Whether the feeling is the result of the composer’s really being, as Sullivan puts it, “a great spirit” and not just someone with a “prodigious musical faculty,” doesn’t really matter. It is the feeling *that* we are in such a presence that does the work, whether or not we are. And surely, even though this experience has no lasting beneficial effect on our characters (and there is no evidence that it does) it would not be wrong to say that during the experience, at least, we are better people; our characters are, *during* that experience, themselves made better. Furthermore, the sense in which, during the experience of great absolute music, we are better people, with improved characters, might fairly be construed as, at least broadly speaking, a “moral” sense of “better” and “improved.” In the ancient sense of morals being about living well, and being self-fulfilled, during our all too brief encounters with great music perhaps we music lovers are, indeed, experiencing a heightened state of moral consciousness.

The claim is just vague enough to possibly be true. That might sound like damning with faint praise, but it was not so intended. The claim is vague because the experience it attempts to depict is one that, although many people have had it, is complex enough, and subtle enough to defy our ordinary linguistic powers. I suppose that is what poets are for. And Sullivan was close to the mark when he wrote that “The musical critic who wishes to describe these experiences is faced with precisely the same task as the literary critic who wishes to describe the significance of a poem and, like the literary critic, he is likely to achieve but a stammering success.”<sup>20</sup>

So here, at least, and at last, is a sense in which I am prepared to acquiesce in the moral force of absolute music, skeptic though I am. In the circumscribed way described above, absolute music can have moral force—moral force of the character-building variety.

That having been said, there are, I think, two good reasons for not making too much of this conclusion, and one good reason not to make too little. Let’s hear the bad news first.

19. Ibid., p. 21.

20. Ibid., p. 32.

First off, if you were looking for a way in which absolute music might have some *lasting* moral influence for the good—and I place emphasis on “lasting”—in the way either of imparting moral insight, facilitating moral behavior or improving moral character, you will have come away empty. Absolute music, I have argued, is impotent in all three respects.

Second, if you were looking to be told that absolute music has some *unique* thing to contribute to the moral life, you will come away empty. For the uplifting, character-enhancing effect of absolute music, of which I have been speaking, and which Sullivan describes as an experience in which “We do feel...that we are making contact with a great spirit...,” is by no means an experience exclusive to absolute music. All great works of art provide such uplifting, character-enhancing experiences to those susceptible. And so too, we have ample testimony, does the contemplation of elegant mathematical proofs, elegant scientific theories, elegant scientific experiments, for those capable of understanding them. Nor does the list stop here. Masterful games of chess, for example, seem to impart the kind of experience I am talking about to Stephen Davies, who says that they “illustrate to a jaw-dropping degree the inexhaustible fecundity, flexibility, insight, vitality, subtlety, complexity, and analytical far-reachingness of which the mind is capable.”<sup>21</sup> It is the same kind of experience, by the way, that Davies says he has when listening to Beethoven’s *Eroica* Symphony.

Thus absolute music shares with many other human activities the propensity to produce, in human beings, a kind of ecstasy that might seem appropriate to describe as character-enhancing, consciousness-raising, and, therefore, in some vague, perhaps attenuated sense, morally improving, *while it lasts*. But being just one of many such activities, among them, after all, what most but a few initiates would describe as a “mere game,” absolute music seems to lose that special, magical connection to morality that goes back, one suspects, to its Pythagorean and Orphic roots. If that bothers you, then you have just received my second piece of bad news about the relation of absolute music to the moral life, in the character-building sense.

So what’s the good news? Simply that absolute music *does* have the effect that it does, of character-uplifting, consciousness-expanding described above; and to that extent, it can, as well, be described as morally uplifting. There is no evidence that this ecstatic, character-uplifting experience has any lasting effect at all on moral behavior or moral character in the long haul. Nor is it

21. Stephen Davies, “Profundity in Music,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 42 (2002), p. 351.

some mysterious, Orphic or Pythagorean quality that music alone possesses. (It is not the harmony of the spheres.) But never mind that. Music *does* possess it. And *while you* are experiencing its effect, *you* are the better for it, and so is the world. So we should forget about what absolute music can't be and cannot do, and thank God, or evolution for what it *can*.

But who can say whether that is the last word on the matter of music and morality? Certainly not I; so I will walk to and fro in the world, like Diogenes with his lantern, on my quest for the moral in music. And who knows? Perhaps I may, in my wanderings, yet find a moral point to counterpoint.<sup>22</sup>

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22. The present paper is a revised version of a paper presented at the Ninth East-West Philosophers' Conference, 6 June, 2005, East-West Center, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii.