

EDUARD HANSLICK: “*THE BEAUTIFUL IN MUSIC*” – AN AESTHETICS OF THE ABSOLUTE MUSIC

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SUMMARY. Around the middle of the 19th century, musical critic and professor of Vienna University, Eduard Hanslick, was going to publish a polemical treatise about musical aesthetics entitled *The beautiful in music*, proclaiming the necessity of a substantial reappraisal of this discipline. Despite the remarkable notoriety gained by Hanslick's treatise, his initiative seems to be neither new, nor original, as the approach of his treatises' central idea – the concept of *absolute music* – had already entered numerous debates and discussions launched a century before, giving rather a particular view than a systematic clarification of it. In the center of the hanslickian debates are situated, on the one hand, the negation of traditional aesthetic views, which designated as the object of music the emotions, affects, morale, character and programme music, and on the other the construction of an aesthetic system based on the immanence of musical structure through a quasi-exclusive concentration on the concept of form, both in creation and reception. In spite of its scientific pragmatism, Hanslick's treatise denotes the continuous presence of an undeclared philosophical substratum, becoming basically the aesthetic foundation of instrumental music, considered by its author the superior expression of this art.

Keywords: Eduard Hanslick, absolute music, musical beauty, aesthetical formalism, music proper, content, structure, theme.

Around the middle of the 19th century, musical critic and professor of Vienna University, Eduard Hanslick, was going to publish a polemical treatise about musical aesthetics entitled *The beautiful in music*, proclaiming the necessity of a substantial reappraisal of this discipline. About a century before, Baumgarten had made a similar plea in his *Aesthetica*, sketching the bases and scientific criteria of general aesthetics.

The remarkable notoriety gained by Hanslick's treatise, published no less than eight times during his lifetime, as well as the ample debates which have arisen since the first edition, suggest a significant turning-point in the rich and diversified history of music aesthetics, with large echoes in the further discussions of the 20th century. Despite these considerations, Hanslick's initiative seems to be neither new, nor original, as the approach of his treatises' central idea – the concept of *absolute music* – had already entered numerous

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debates and discussions launched a century before, giving rather a particular view than a systematic clarification of it. However, Hanslick's undertaking sets off a great turning-point in the history of music aesthetics, both by the scientific pragmatism of his approach, and especially by setting these debates from a mostly philosophic field into a musical one.

Before analyzing the main elements of this treatise, we have to make a brief incursion into the history of the concept.

Albeit in its becoming – during the 19th century – the concept of *absolute music* achieved the connotation of a timeless meta-category, with an auto-proclaimed right of delimiting a certain segment of music, mainly the instrumental one, as the “music proper”, from a historical view appears as a component of aesthetic dichotomies existing since antiquity.

It is enough to evoke the antique quarrels between the canonic and harmonics, or the modern ones between authors of antiquity and moderns (*prima* and *seconda prattica*), the 18th century debates upon the primacy of harmony or melody between Rameau and Rousseau, or the rationalist and empirical perspectives of the aesthetic phenomenon, including the musical one.

Similar dichotomies were set in the Middle Ages regarding the ideal of beauty, through the cult of the Holy Virgin (transcendental beauty – Gregorian chant) and the one of Eve (terrestrial beauty – secular music). Finally, the 19th-century art reflects another significant socio-aesthetic correlation of romantic and realistic aesthetics.

In this sense of aesthetic dichotomies the hermeneutical system of ETA Hoffmann¹, one of the main promoters of the absolute music ideal took shape. The base of this system was published in his review about Beethoven's 5th Symphony, in 1805, by contrasting the aesthetic categories of “musical” and “figurative”, which were to generate several dichotomies: absolute music v. character music (which depicts “certain emotions”), respectively the music yearning for the infinite v. music of the affects:

Ex. 1

ancient	modern
profane	Christian
natural	artificial
figurative	musical
rhythm-melody	harmony
vocal	instrumental
„character music“	„absolute music“

The Aesthetic Dichotomies of ETA Hoffman's Hermeneutical System

¹ Cf. Dalhaus, Carl, *The Idea of Absolute Music* (translated by Roger Lustig), The University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 49-51.

Although such oppositions would seem to be arbitrary, as they mix up aesthetic categories with the ones of the history of philosophy, these represented, more or less tacitly, a significant reference for the shaping of the metaphysics of instrumental music.

Generally it is arguable that the absolute music has no universal definition, only a history of its becoming. However, speaking about a history of the absolute is a paradox. Still, the absolute music couldn't become more than a concept in the history of music aesthetics. As musicologist, Daniel Chua asserts: „Absolutes only have histories when they self-destruct to reveal their false identity. This means that absolute music can only have a history when it is no longer absolute music.”²

Along this history, which we might consider a tortuous one, there are emerging idiosyncratic senses rather than proper definitions: „absolute music does not have a fixed meaning, but is subject to the mutations of those who speak about it. And since its dialogue was played out as a heated argument in the nineteenth century, the history of absolute music is not the elaboration of a *single* idea, but a clamour of contradictory discourses, each vying for power in the construction of its meaning. Thus absolute music has a decentred and fragmented identity that can only be elucidated as a constellation of discursive ideas. Its history does not add up to the totality that it claims for itself.”³

The use of this concept in different – often contradictory – contexts hadn't encouraged the establishing of a common view, thus even among its advocates there is no consensus. Wagner, who introduced it in the aesthetic and philosophical debates, had been using it contradictorily, thus providing one of the main subjects in his polemic with Nietzsche. Furthermore, the philosophical or particularly musical premises of these approaches had diversified the horizons of comprehension regarding absolute music. We can invoke, in this sense, the metaphysical aesthetics of Schopenhauer, respectively the formalist one of Hanslick.

All these more or less circumstantial considerations, result in a single problem, which points at the very essence of the phenomenon, namely: the essentially negative sense of the definition. That is to say, absolute music does not define itself through what it is, but delimiting itself from what it is not. Its status was contested from the very beginning by the apparition of an opposing category that of the extra-musical.

Eventually, we can identify three basic and interdependent reference points in this context, representing as many levels of analysis: historical-aesthetic, socio-aesthetic and philosophical-aesthetic.

² Chua, Daniel K.L., *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 3.

³ Chua, Daniel K.L., *op. cit.*, p. 6.

1. Historically speaking, the concept of absolute music delimits the ancient syncretic arts from that segment of music generically called instrumental or symphonic.⁴ In this sense, absolute means in fact the autonomy of musical expression from the text or poetic idea and dance. Moreover, an expropriating tendency of the term musical art is noticeable here, favouring instrumental music. Being reckoned as the music proper, it becomes, in this sense, the only authentic representative of this art.⁵

In justifying the supremacy of the absolute music, the genre of the symphony appears as a basic paradigm. It is no accident that Beethoven is the most invoked composer, though from Hoffmann to Wagner, several commentators recognized in his music the ideal of symphonic thought, which in its sublimity tends to cross over the boundaries of musical expression.

Regarding the relationship between music and text or poetic idea, two extreme views have taken shape. On the one hand, absolute music refuses the poetic content, namely vocal and programme music; on the other hand, it overcomes the poetic expression. From the point of view of romantic philosophy, the poetic term appears as a common substance of the arts, and music becomes in this sense an expression of the essence of being, a poetic art.⁶

2. From a social view, absolute music appears as a negation of the sentimental aesthetics, the moralist bourgeois one, and the character music.⁷ Since in the baroque or classicist aesthetic theories affects were considered necessary and natural components of a musical work, the advocates of absolute music either deny with vehemence the aesthetic significance of the emotions, or reduce their presence to the intimate level of the aesthetic experience.⁸

3. In philosophical terms, absolute corresponds to the metaphysical view of the Romantics about music, which becomes a privileged art. Its language appears in this context as a kind of meta-language, being underlay in the topos of the ineffable: music expresses what words cannot. The indefinite character of the musical language, formerly seen as a defect of instrumental

⁴ In the absolute music's theory, the symphonic term appears as an ideal, similarly to the opera in vocal genre.

⁵ Dahlhaus, Carl, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁶ "Therefore it (music) does not express this or that individual and particular joy, this or that sorrow or pain or horror or exaltation or cheerfulness or peace of mind, but rather joy, sorrow, pain, horror, exaltation, cheerfulness and peace of mind as such in themselves, abstractly ..." in: Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1 (translated and edited by Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, Christopher Janaway), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, p. 289.

⁷ „The empfindsam esthetic, which was a psychology conceived by enthusiasts, was gradually replaced in the late eighteenth century by the romantic esthetic. And where the sentiment sought by Empfindsamkeit was a communal feeling (music accounted for sympathy, a melding of souls), «endless longing» arose from loneliness: from solitary contemplation of a music that was praised as a holy", in: Dahlhaus, Carl, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁸ „If instrumental music had been a «pleasant noise» beneath language to the common sense estheticians of the eighteenth century, then the romantic metaphysics of art declared it a language above language.", *Ibid.*, p. 9.

music, and considered by Hegel as a characteristic in the context of sister arts, was going to become a privilege. In Dahlhaus' view: „Specifically as autonomous, absolute music, dissolved from «limitations» of texts, functions and affections, art attains metaphysical honor as an expression of the «infinite».”⁹

The theories about absolute music had reached their accomplishment precisely in romantic philosophy, which was to provide their metaphysical establishment. Although the debates were mainly concentrating on the aesthetic object, the musical output of the period was unable to provide enough “pure” examples in order to demonstrate the absolute authority of instrumental music. As a consequence, the theoretical approaches passed on to the field of reception.

From the aesthetic act of solitary contemplation, generated by the reception of instrumental music, to its transforming into a kind of religion, there was just a step. Adopting Schleiermacher's view about the religiosity of art, Tieck was to proclaim in his study called *Symphonies*: „For music is certainly the ultimate mystery of faith, the mystique, the completely revealed religion”¹⁰, suggesting that instrumental music (symphonic) would have been the follower by right of church music.¹¹

In a context, where the discourse about this art arose to the level of romantic philosophy, a pragmatic-scientific foundation of the instrumental music, deprived of emotions, affects, morality and banished to the metaphysical dimension, was more than imminent.

Even if the aesthetic vision stated in *The Beautiful in Music (Vom Musikalisch-Schönen)* continued in many aspects the above-mentioned types of discourse, especially regarding the vitriolic attacks on the aesthetics of emotions, Hanslick recognized one of the main breaches of absolute music's edifice: the unclear relationship between language and expression, content and form, aesthetic object and subject. Though, giving up the spiritual and emotional contents consecrated by the aesthetic tradition as the object of musical art, instrumental music was still lacking a new aesthetic model, based exclusively on the immanence of musical structure.

Thus, in Hanslick's aesthetic view two combined and interdependent principles appear:

1. On the one hand there is the introduction of scientific pragmatism in aesthetic research accompanied by a detachment of traditional value systems and speculative metaphysics about beauty. In this sense, Hanslick promotes an objective view of musical art.¹² The application of these premises on the

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹¹ This relationship appears inclusively in the dichotomies of ETA Hoffmann presented above, where instrumental music is meant as a phenomenon of the Christian culture.

¹² „In aesthetics of rhetoric, of sculpture, and painting, no less than in art-criticism – the practical application of the foregoing sciences – the rule has already been laid down that aesthetic investigations must above all, consider the beautiful *object*, and not the receiving *subject*.” in: Hanslick, Eduard, *Beautiful in music. A contribution to the revisal of musical aesthetics* (translated by Gustav Cohen), Novello and Company Ltd., London, 1891, p. 17.

particularity of musical phenomenon, leads to the birth of the so-called formalist aesthetics, establishing the base of further movements, especially phenomenology.

2. On the other hand, this new autonomous aesthetics of music proposed to explore the so-called absolute music, becoming, in fact its aesthetic foundation. Moreover, it intends to promote the idea of musical “purity”, an art freed of text, program and emotions, thus justifying the supremacy of instrumental music, considered “music proper”. In Hanslick’s words: „We have intentionally selected examples from *instrumental music*, for only what is true of the latter is true also of music as such. If we wish to decide the question whether music possesses the character of definiteness, what its nature and properties are, and what its limits and tendencies, no other than instrumental music can be taken into consideration. What *instrumental music* is unable to achieve, lies also beyond the pale of *music proper*; for it alone is pure and self-subsistent music.”¹³

The hanslickian beauty appears in this context as a fundamental aesthetic norm (the only one), which keeps the purity of the musical phenomenon. However, this is not a derivative of an axiological system, but rather an integrating aesthetic component and the supreme guide of basic sonic relationships manifested in the form. Its particularity precisely consists of the constructive and expressive potential of musical art: namely, a beauty, which „is not contingent upon, or in need of any subject introduced from without, but that it consists wholly of sounds artistically combined”.¹⁴

This outlook of musical beauty defined – in the spirit of Kant – as a particular form, having finality without a purpose¹⁵, constitutes in Hanslick’s aesthetic view an analytic perspective, manifested in two separate moments: a negative and a positive one.

The first, negative moment keeps track of a deconstruction of traditional aesthetic views (the philosophic or musical ones), which designated as the object of music the poetic ideal (music with text, character music, programme music) or the emotions (theory of affects).

The second, positive moment follows the construction of an intrinsic notation model to the autonomous music, by a displacing of the emphasis from Hegel’s spiritual definition of beauty to the particularity of the musical form, as a central category.

At the same time, these two moments are materialized through a critique of the aesthetic reception, respectively a plea for the autonomy of creation.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁵ „The beautiful, strictly speaking, *aims at nothing*, since it is nothing but a *form*, which, though available for many purposes according to its *nature* has, as such, no aim beyond itself.” In: *Ibid.*, p. 18.

The first, negative moment basically follows the deprivation of aesthetic functions those components or theories, which may compromise the purity of the musical phenomenon, both at the level of creation and reception: the emotions, the relationship of musical language and logos, and the one of the mimetic theory and musical mathematics.

Due to its aesthetic objectivism, the hanslickian ideal of receiving the absolute music becomes (visibly influenced by the aesthetics of Kant and the one of Baumgarten) an act of contemplation, disinterested¹⁶, but simultaneously conscious, concerning not the emotions¹⁷ but fantasy and aesthetic judgment.¹⁸

Thus, the outer limits of aesthetic reception are designated by two extremes: the purely logical judgment and pathological pleasure.¹⁹ The aesthetic pleasure appears in this context as a satisfaction of the spirit, which follows (but does not analyze)²⁰ the particularity of tonally moving forms²¹, interacting rapidly with them by repeated feed-backs, based on the correlation of the receiver's fantasy and the response of musical discourse to his expectations.²²

¹⁶ "Now, the most essential condition to the aesthetic enjoyment of music is that of listening to a composition for *its own sake*, no matter what it is or what construction it may bear." In: *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁷ „For, in reality, there is no *causal nexus* between a musical composition and the feelings it may excite, as the latter vary with our experience and impressibility [...] It is manifest, therefore, that the effect of music on the emotions does not possess the attributes of inevitableness, exclusiveness, and uniformity..." In: *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

¹⁸ „Our imagination, it is true, does not merely *contemplate* the beautiful, but it contemplates it with *intelligence*, the object being, as it were, mentally inspected and criticised. [...] The word «Anschauung» (viewing, contemplating) is no longer applied to visual processes only, but also to the functions of the other senses. It is, in fact, eminently suited to describe the act of attentive hearing which is nothing but a mental inspection of a succession of musical images."; And continues in the spirit of Kant: „In the pure act of listening, we enjoy the music alone, and do not think of importing into it any extraneous matter." In: *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁹ "This morbid sensitiveness, in our opinion, is in direct opposition to the *voluntary* and pure act of contemplation which alone is the true and artistic method of listening." In: *Ibid.*, p. 134.

²⁰ "But the kind of mental activity alluded to is quite peculiar to *music*, because its products, instead of being fixed and presented to the mind at once in their completeness, develop gradually and thus do not permit the listener to linger at any point, or to interrupt his train of thoughts. It demands, in fact, the keenest *watching* and the most untiring *attention*." In: *Ibid.*, p. 136.

²¹ "His attention is so greatly absorbed by the particular form and character of the composition, by that which gives it the stamp of individuality among a dozen pieces of similar complexion, that he pays but little heed to the question whether the expression of the same or different is aimed at." In: *Ibid.*, p. 124.; "In point of strength, pitch, velocity, and rhythm, sounds present to the ear a *figure*, bearing that degree of analogy to certain visual impressions which sensations of various kinds bear to one another." In: *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²² "The most important factor in the mental process which accompanies the act of listening to music, and which converts it into a source of pleasure, is frequently overlooked. We here refer to the intellectual satisfaction which the listener derives from continually following and anticipating the composer's intentions – now, to see his expectations fulfilled, and now, to find himself agreeably mistaken. It is a matter of course that this intellectual flux and reflux, this perpetual giving and receiving takes place unconsciously, and with the rapidity of lightning-flashes." In: *Ibid.*, p. 135.

This activity is called by Hanslick “*a pondering of the imagination*”.²³

On the other hand, the creative act is seen as objective, formative²⁴, the labour of spirit in the sensuous material²⁵, which in music’s case in a spiritual one.²⁶

The idea of a composition has a purely musical nature²⁷ elaborated in sonorous relationships through the free activity of fantasy. The force and particularity of the creative spirit put its hall-mark on the work as a character²⁸, which is neither extra-musical, nor does it belong to the composer, being a result of the particular materials and procedures involving certain aesthetic determinations. In this sense, style appears as a “perfect technique”, assuring the works coherence and organic nature from the particular perspective of the creative spirit.²⁹

In order to elaborate a model of the autonomous musical language, Hanslick focuses, in the second moment of his investigations, on the concept of form. His definition of it, as a bearer of the specifically musical beauty, is based on Hegel’s distinction between the idea and its sensuous materialization³⁰, a model he interpreted differently however:

²³ “Only *that* music can yield truly aesthetic enjoyment which prompts and rewards the act of thus closely following the composer’s thoughts, and which with perfect justice may be called a *pondering of the imagination*.” In: *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

²⁴ “The function of the composer is a constructive one within its own sphere, analogous to that of the sculptor. Like him, the composer must not allow his hands to be tied by anything alien to his material, since he, too, aims giving an objective existence to his (musical) ideal, and at casting it into a pure form.” In: *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

²⁵ „The act of composing is a mental working on material capable of receiving the forms which the mind intends to give.” In: *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²⁶ „More ethereal and subtle than the material of any other art, sound adapts itself with great facility to any idea the composer may have in his mind.” In: *Ibid.*

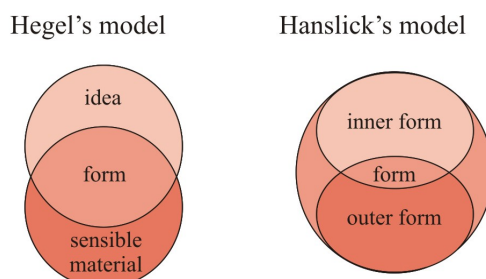
²⁷ “The object of every art is to clothe in some material form an idea which has originated in the artist’s imagination. In music this idea is an acoustic one; it cannot be expressed in words and subsequently translated into sounds.” In: *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁸ “Now, as the union of sounds [...] is not effected by mechanical stringing them together, but by acts of a free imagination, the intellectual force and idiosyncrasy of the particular mind will give to every composition its *individual character*.” In: *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

²⁹ “We are inclined to understand style in the art of music, regarded from the point o view of music’s specifically musical determinations, to be consummate technique as it shows itself in the expression of creative ideas ...” In: *Ibid.*, p. 104.

³⁰ „[...] the content of art is the Idea, while its form is the configuration of sensuous material” in: Hegel, Wilhelm Friedrich, *Lecture on Fine Art* (translated by T. M. Knox), vol. I, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, p. 70.

Ex. 2



The Hanslickian Interpretation of Hegel's Main Aesthetic Model

Since Hegel's aesthetics was conceived in the systematic spirit of the arts, and music had been interpreted in correlation with the other dynamic branches (poetry and dance), the premises of Hanslick's view were exactly following the abolition of those extra-musical elements, which were consecrated in the aesthetic tradition as the object, or "content" of music.

On a first impulse, these two views regarding the particular relationship of form and content, could be seen as similar, since Hegel, in elaborating his aesthetics concludes that music cannot have an identical content to the other arts.³¹ However, in his view, the lack of a determined objectuality is a quality of music, a result of its systemic position: that of being capable of carrying a certain exterior or interior content through the artistic shaping of emotions.³²

In this sense however, Hanslick's view appears as the opposite of the hegelian aesthetics. Thus his premises – as we have already demonstrated – categorically deny emotions as objects of music (which in Hegel's case appear exactly as the objects of instrumental music), and the thesis according to which music is a free manifestation of subjectivity as well.³³

³¹ "This object-free inwardness in respect of music's content and mode of expression constitutes its formal aspect. It does have a content too but not in the sense that the visual arts and poetry have one; for what it lacks is giving to itself an objective configuration whether in the forms of actual external phenomena or in the objectivity of spiritual views and ideas." In: *Ibid.*, vol. II., p. 892.

³² Hanslick suggests that the hegelian assertion concerning the object-free inwardness of music it's senseless: „...all musical theorists tacitly accept, and base their arguments on the postulate, that music has the power of representing definite emotions – yet their better judgment has kept them from openly avowing it. The conspicuous absence of *definite ideas* in music troubled their minds and induced them to lay down the somewhat modified principle that the object of music was to awaken and represent «indefinite», not definite emotions. But this property does not enable music «to represent indefinite feelings», for to «represent» something «indefinite» is a contradiction in terms." Hanslick, Eduard, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-54.

³³ "Unable, as we were, to endorse Hegel's opinion respecting the want of intellectual merit in music, it seems to us a still more glaring error on his part to assert that the sole function of music is the expressing of an «inner non-individuality»." In: *Ibid.*, p. 173.

If absolute music cannot have as its object extra-musical elements or emotions, its object has to be found at the level of the musical phenomenon. The famous hanslickian assertion, namely that „music consists of tonal sequences, tonal forms; these have no other content than themselves”³⁴ suggests that in music a content outside form cannot exist, so the hegelian model is not equivalent to the relationship of musical idea and sonorous material.³⁵ That is to say, in music we cannot differentiate a content intended for elaboration and the elaborated material.

However, the lack of content³⁶ doesn't mean a sterile structure³⁷, but the inseparability of content and form³⁸, as a specific quality of this art. If instrumental music has no extra-musical content, this can only be an intrinsic one, namely the form, or rather inner form: „The forms created by sound are not empty; not the envelope enclosing a vacuum, but a well, replete with the living creation of inventive genius”.³⁹

Hence, form is an idea as far as it is an inner form. After all, Hanslick substitutes the hegelian model with a sole central category, invested with two properties. The expression „music consists of tonal sequences, tonal forms” designated by Hanslick as the proper “object” of music, suggests exactly that bivalence of the form, where “tonal sequences” represent the phenomenal component, and “tonal forms” the content moment:

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

³⁵ „An enquiry into the «contents» of musical compositions raises in such people's minds the conception of an «object» (subject-matter, topic), which latter, being the idea, the ideal element, they represent to themselves as almost antithetical to the «material part», the musical notes. Music has, indeed, no contents as thus understood; no subject in the sense that the subject to be treated is something extraneous to the musical notes” In: *Ibid.*, p. 162.

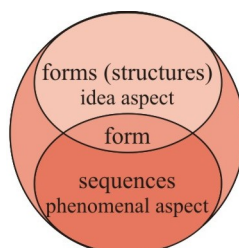
³⁶ “The stigma that music has no subject is, therefore, one unmerited. Music has a subject – i.e., a musical subject, which is no less a vital spark of the divine fire than the beautiful of any other art.” In: *Ibid.*, pp. 173-174.

³⁷ “Thus, in order to make our case for musical beauty, we have not excluded ideal content, but, on the contrary, have insisted on it. For we acknowledge no beauty without its full share of ideality. Basically what we have done is to transfer the beauty of music to tonal forms. This already implies that the ideal content of music is the most intimate relationship with these forms.” In: *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁸ “The term *subject* (substance) can, properly speaking, be applied to an art-product only, if we regard it as the correlative of *form*. The terms «form» and «substance» supplement each other, and one cannot be thought of except in relation to the other. Wherever the «form» appears mentally inseparable from the «substance», there can be no question of an independent «substance» (subject). Now, in music, substance and form, the subject and its working out, the image and the realised conception are mysteriously blended in one undecomposable whole. This complete fusion of substance and form is exclusively characteristic of music, and presents a sharp contrast to poetry, painting and sculpture, inasmuch as these arts are capable of representing the same idea and the same event in different forms.” In: *Ibid.*, p. 166-167.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

Ex. 3



Hanslick's Model of Absolute Music

This particular view of form reflects after all the symbiosis of those two definitive elements conceived by romantic aesthetics regarding the absolute music: form is, on the one hand a particularly musical one, being in this sense absolute; on the other, it is more than a sonorous phenomenon, namely an essence, exteriorized spirit.

Considering all these premises, it is quite easy to infer that essential component, which is employed by Hanslick as an example, in order to demonstrate the functioning of form. This is, naturally, the theme (subject), well-known as the basic element of the edifice of instrumental music, characterized by him as follows: *the principal theme* represents „the true topic of subject of the entire composition”.⁴⁰ The opposite of thematic thought would be in this sense the improvisation⁴¹, namely a discourse lacking any “autonomous tonal form” (i.e. the theme).

After all, the theme appears both as an indivisible unit from an aesthetic point of view⁴², and as a potential, an energy of the exteriorized spirit, manifested through the articulation of the work as a whole.

The following passage entirely illuminates Hanslick's thoughts about the relationship between theme and form, which emphasizes their dual nature: „What then is to be called the subject? The groups of sounds?

Undoubtedly; but they have a form already. And what is the *form*? The groups of sounds again; but they are a *replete* form.”⁴³

Thus, the organic nature resulting from the thematic work is nothing else but the reflection of inseparability of content and form. In other words,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

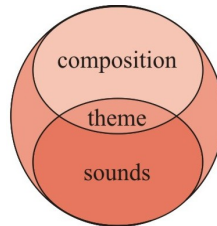
⁴¹ “Accordingly, we will call perhaps «contentless» that most spontaneous kind of preluding in which the player, relaxing more than working, launches forth into chords, arpeggios, and rosalias, without allowing an autonomous tonal configuration to come distinctly to the fore. Such free preludes are neither recognizable nor distinguishable as individuals; we might say that they leave (in the wider sense) no content because they have no theme.” In: *Ibid.*

⁴² „... and by the theme, the musical microcosm, we should always be able to test the alleged subject underlying the music as such” In: *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 167-168.

the theme is a microcosm, an exteriorization of the spirit in sounds, namely a form in the sense that it organizes them. At the same time, it is also a material, as it becomes a component of the macrocosmic level of the work:

Ex. 4



The Central Role of the Theme in Hanslick's Model

As a final critique of the hegelian view, Hanslick resumes briefly the essence of his aesthetic edifice, emphasizing the difference between content and consistence: „Yet, only by steadfastly denying the existence of any other «subject» in music, is it possible to save its «true subject» The indefinite emotions which at best underlie the other kind of subject, do not explain any spiritual force. The latter can only be attributed to the definite beauty of musical form, as the result of the untrammelled working of the human mind on material susceptible of intellectual manipulation.”⁴⁴

Hanslick's conclusions fully reflect the ambiguity of his attitude toward the metaphysics of instrumental music, elaborated by the romantic philosophy, adopted however, by him tacitly. Even adopting a more moderate discourse that of scientific pragmatism, lacking of metaphysical excursions and sublime passages, Hanslick's work denotes the continuous presence of an undeclared philosophical substratum, which rises to surface however, from time to time, as some fleeting flashes. The gradual omission of the last passage of his treatise from the later editions is edifying in this sense, being entirely cited here instead of conclusions: „This spiritual content thus combines, in the soul of the listener, the beautiful in music with all other great and beautiful ideas. He does not experience music merely as bare and absolute through its own beauty, but simultaneously as a sounding image of the great movements in the universe. Through deep and secret relationships to nature the meaning of tones is heightened far beyond the tones themselves, and allows us always to feel the infinite even as we listen to the work of human talent. Just as the elements of music-sound, tone, rhythm, strength, weakness – are found in the entire universe, so man rediscovers in music the entire universe.”⁴⁵

(Translated into English by Fodor Attila)

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁴⁵ Dahlhaus, Carl, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

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