

## What Makes “Good Music” Good?

By  
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Recently I was asked to review a book by John Winsor, titled, *Breaking the Sound Barrier*, which I was happy to do since I think it's a fine book with lots of interesting ideas and solid observations, and the topic – the need for a literary mainstream music – is one which interest me greatly. In his book he proposed that there can be an objective basis for asserting that some music is better than other and he proposed a fascinating basis, which I won't presume to synopsise here; buy his book and read it. But that started me thinking about this matter of evaluating music and defining some as better or worse, and that this has always been a troublesome thing. Other arts disciplines share this difficulty, of course, and while some aspects of aesthetics and criticism may apply to many art forms, others are quite specific to the uniqueness of sound occurring over time.

Although I'm sure many disagree, I wholeheartedly believe that some music is – in ways that can be more-or-less universally and objectively considered – good or bad. There is precedence for this in nature – some smells, for example, almost universally are considered bad and others good. And while the middle ground may be occupied by an array of differences that allow for preferences and disagreement, there still seem to be tendencies for widespread agreement in such things. And Anthropologists are discovering that there is broad similarity across many cultures and ethnicities, about what is considered physical beauty or handsomeness among we humans. That doesn't mean, of course, that the same is necessarily true when it comes to artifacts or objects of art created by humans. But music consists of sound, and certainly there are some sounds that are almost universally disliked – a crying baby, for example, or the sound of fingernails being scraped across a blackboard. So since our sensitivity to sound seems to be subject to some universality when it comes to what is considered good or bad, it follows that music should also be subject – at least to some degree – to universal standards.

There is a widespread notion these days, fostered in our current social climate that disdains value judgements, that all music is good and differences are just matters of cultural bias or personal preference. But, critical evaluation is different from personal taste and preference. Many things in life are this way: We may be quite fond of someone, yet recognize their faults, faults that are universally acknowledged as undesirable – extreme rudeness, for example; someone may treat us well, but be unacceptably discourteous to others. We are conflicted in such cases, so we distinguish our intellectual, judgmental awareness from our personal feelings, feelings that may not be entirely influenced by intellect. And in a similar way, sometimes we are attracted to music for a variety of emotional reasons: nostalgia for the past, perhaps an association some music has with a personally significant time or place, while recognizing that the music – apart from the unique meaning it has for us – has comparatively little value, or at least less value, to others. We all are subject to such influences and most of us are able to distinguish these two distinct ways of responding to music. Many people do not, however. Many listeners are only concerned with what they like and do not question the why of it, and

couldn't be less concerned with what might be objectively considered good or bad. All that matters is that they like it. And that's fine and understandable. The troublesome thing is when what one likes, based entirely on personal, individual attraction, preference, predisposition, . . . whatever, is considered what is "good" in the objective. And this is exactly how many people approach music. We all have experienced this, understand it, accept it – may even approve of it. But if we were to acknowledge, or at least concede purely for purposes of discussion, that there can be some objective criteria applied to music to justify – on bases other than our personal preferences - that some is better and some worse, what should they be? John Winsor's ideas were quite well thought-out and compelling. But I suspect they may not be easily grasped by some of the very people who most commonly confuse personal taste with qualitative judgement.

Since I'm not as high-minded as John Winsor and spend much of my time railing against pop music and the untoward influence of the broadcast media and entertainment industry, I probably should have an objective basis to justify such strong opinions about the relative worthlessness of most pop music if I'm not to commit the same transgression of confusing personal feelings with evaluative judgement. And, as a practical matter, in conversations with others it's handy to have some criteria, some widely accepted if not universal criteria that can be applied to any music (since certainly there is excellent pop music and poor "classical music") to reference and frame discussions. So I offer some factors we may consider when talking with others about music, particularly with those who are not musicians or do not have significant musical backgrounds, but who sometimes hold strenuously to the notion that what they like is good because they like it.

1. It the piece technically well executed? Regardless of the style, the performance - whether improvised, derived from notation, or electroacoustically produced - should be free of extraneous notes, sounds, effects, nuances of any kind that do not contribute to communication of the musical ideas.
2. Does it exploit a variety of elements of music, i.e. rhythm, harmony, melody, texture/timbre? Although a quality piece of music need not have all elements equally represented (in fact, many if not most fine works do not), a piece that relies solely on any one element is likely to be less than fulfilling.
3. Is the chief attraction not the music but the words? If the answer is yes, then the piece probably should be considered more as a theater piece or as poetry, than music. For music is the most abstract of arts, and although the marriage of text and music can be transcendent, the best does not need verbal associations to enhance it.
4. Are the elements of the work highly integrated so that each supports the other's function? Melody, for example, cannot exist without at least some degree of rhythm; rhythm, however, can exist without melody, as can harmony without either rhythm or melody. But it seems that most truly satisfying music exploits the elements in ways that cause the product of them to be greater than the sum of the elements, disparately.

5. Does the piece appeal on a variety of levels – intellectual, emotional, spiritual? A piece can be strong enough in any one of these areas to justify being called good, but the best music somehow seems to appeal on many levels.
6. Is there a feeling of “musicality” about it? That is, does the piece invoke a desire for body movement that corresponds to the gestures in sound? Musicality is distinctly human and inexorably connected to physical movement in ways that are imbedded in our psyches from the first expressive sounds uttered by our ancient ancestors to experiences as recent as our last rehearsal.
7. Is there satisfying formal organization to the way the gestures are presented and developed? Since music occurs over time and for practical reasons, if for no other, music has to have a beginning and end, it seems to be our nature to expect some kind of sequence and development of the ideas that we find satisfying as anticipation and memory blend to create a mental image of form.
8. Is there a good balance between familiarity and variety, appropriate for the length of the piece? Clearly, very extended pieces will need to introduce more variety than very short ones; likewise the task of maintaining coherence within greater diversity is more difficult and expected in longer pieces.
9. After having been listened to many times, does the piece still have appeal, appeal that is based on some new revelations rather than solely on comfortable familiarity? Complexity in and of itself is not especially valuable, but exceptional music seems to have many facets, and holds up well and continues to interest even after many listenings.
10. Do you feel positively stimulated, better, richer, fuller, or improved in some way for having heard the piece? This may seem a lot to expect, but truly great pieces (which, or course most music, even very fine music, will not be) often have a beneficial effect on careful listeners. Like the nutrition axiom “we are what we eat,” (which, although obviously not literal, makes the point that our physical health is affected by our diet) in the arts we are what we consume, and what we habitually listen to affects our spirits. The best music makes us better by stimulating our minds and touching our hearts, and helps us feel better about ourselves and the world.

This is surely not a comprehensive list, nor is intended to be; I wouldn't be that presumptuous. There have been volumes published on aesthetic criticism in music and other arts, and doubtless, many dissertations too. I'm sure other authors have different criteria and many readers of this little piece will have strikingly different views also. But it's a brief, “quick and dirty” list offered as a starting point for thought and discussion.