

Experience and Musical Meaning as a Possibility for *Flourishing*

A Dialogue Between Roger Scruton and Robert S. Hatten

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Abstract

The relationship between music, emotion, and flourishing reveals aesthetic experience as a path to human development. This work brings into dialogue Roger Scruton's phenomenological approach and Robert S. Hatten's semiotic perspective. For Scruton, music creates an intentional auditory world where sounds are perceived as expressive forms, and emotion emerges as embodied knowledge shaped by aesthetic listening. In contrast, Hatten emphasizes gesture, topics, and tropes as carriers of culturally and historically situated meaning. While Scruton focuses on subjective experience, Hatten highlights the role of stylistic context in shaping musical meaning. Together, these perspectives show that musical experience integrates emotion, perception, and cultural understanding. This convergence allows music to be understood as a form of embodied thought and a means of self-understanding, contributing to both personal and cultural flourishing. The relationship between music, emotion and flourishing reveals the aesthetic experience as a pathway to human development.

Keywords: Music, Emotion, Flourishing, Scruton, Hatten, Phenomenology, Semiotics.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Following a historical overview of musical aesthetics, Fubini¹ examines the relationship between philosophical tradition and musical thought. Without denying this link, he notes that there are currently significant differences in this relationship. For Fubini, this change is due to the fact that musical thought is no longer linked to a philosophical tradition. Thus, according to this author, due to a crisis in systematic philosophical thought, reflection on music has shifted from having a philosophical origin with a clearly recognisable historical thread to being the result of reflection by musicians, music theorists, critics, etc. Consequently, practical experience has become the sphere in which issues relating to the perception and understanding of music, its meaning and its language are addressed. These and other topics historically approached from the perspective of musical aesthetics are now viewed from a broader perspective that incorporates interpretations from other fields. The future of these reflections also depends on the culture in which we live,² as well as the various musical or artistic research projects that continue to delve deeper into the experience of music itself.

Currently, musical works are being questioned in terms of the function attributed to them, so that their meaning is increasingly taking on a central role. This meaning may account for the functions attributed to music, although it will depend on context, culture and individual experience. It is not surprising, in this sense, that its analysis is carried out from various perspectives, not only that of the philosophy of music, although it cannot be determined whether this constitutes a cause-and-effect relationship in one sense or another.

Harnoncourt³ argues that this reflects a shift in the contemporary individual's attitude towards music, as its meaning is diminished. It has moved from expressing the ineffable to being defined by its function or purpose.

There are numerous contributions from the philosophy of music, the psychology of music, musicology, ethnomusicology, musical semiotics, etc. However, what is most revealing is the dialogue that can take place between them, as expressed in the writings of their leading figures.

The expressive nature of music has meant that, in its creation, performance, perception, reception and interpretation, the role of emotions, affections and feelings has been of great importance.

In this vein, our aim is to analyse how the proposals of R. Scruton and R. S. Hatten, philosopher and musicologist respectively, are structured around the notions of emotion, expression, meaning and musical understanding. Both authors develop theoretical approaches that converge in some respects and differ in oth-

¹Cf. E. FUBINI, *Estética de la música*, A. Machado Libros, Madrid 2001.

²*Ibidem*.

³Cf. N. HARNONCOURT, *La música como discurso sonoro*, Acantilado, Barcelona 2006.

ers, highlighting the value of meaning and musical experience. In line with the concept of *flourishing*, their approaches demonstrate the depth and formative potential of art and, in particular, of music. To understand and contextualise their proposals, we draw on findings regarding the role of emotions in the meaning of music from the field of music psychology, and on the background which, in our view, situates these authors within the field of musical aesthetics.

2 EMOTIONS AND *FLOURISHING* IN MUSIC: THE PERSPECTIVE FROM POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Bowman,⁴ referring to music education, highlights the importance of music as a special contribution to personal development.

It is also stated that music, and therefore music education, is crucial for *flourishing*, just as it was for the concept of eudaimonia in ancient Greece. In this way, music also contributed to the realisation of human potential, virtue and self-actualisation.⁵

Pawelsky, drawing on the positive humanities movement, asserts that these disciplines aim to explore the relationships between culture and human *flourishing*, which he also identifies as eudaimonic happiness. He argues that, since the Renaissance, the humanities, including music, have been viewed as fields of study capable of leading to wisdom and virtue, clarifying the nature of happiness and its relationship with virtue, and providing a solid guide for people's lives.⁶

In the same vein, Lamont,⁷ when considering how music can contribute to human *flourishing*, also draws on theories of well-being and emotion, demonstrating how music is associated with well-being at different stages of life and how culture and society play an important role in this.

The concept of well-being is understood in many different ways, based on the classical notions of hedonic well-being and eudaimonic well-being. The former refers to the well-being that results from the satisfaction or pleasure derived from certain experiences. The latter encompasses a concept rooted in an idea of

⁴Cf. W. BOWMAN, *Educating Musically*, in *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, ed. by R. Colwell, C. Richardson, Oxford University Press, New York 2002, pp. 63-84.

⁵Cf. S. ASCENSO *et al.*, *Promoting Well-Being Through Group Drumming with Mental Health Service Users and Their Carers*, «International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being», 13/1484219 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2018.1484219>.

⁶Cf. J. O. PAWELSKI, *The Positive Humanities: Culture and Human Flourishing*, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Positive Humanities*, ed. by M. A. White, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2022, pp. 17-42.

⁷Cf. A. LAMONT, *Music and Flourishing*, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Positive Humanities*, cit., pp. 319-334.

profound happiness, focused on the realisation of human potential, virtue and self-actualisation.⁸

To these two approaches are subsequently added Ryff's model⁹ and Keyes's model,¹⁰ which account for the construct of well-being, explained through three dimensions: social, psychological and emotional well-being.

From the perspective of positive psychology and the PERMA conceptual framework,¹¹ *flourishing* is conceptualised in terms of five dimensions: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement. From this perspective, both musical practice and listening to music are experiences with high potential for promoting psychological well-being. This is demonstrated by scientific evidence.

Firstly, musical practice—instrumental performance and singing—is associated with the generation of positive emotions and intense affective states, such as joy, calm and euphoria.¹² It also fosters experiences of flow or deep engagement, characterised by a loss of self-awareness,¹³ which has been linked to higher levels of motivation and performance.¹⁴ In relational terms, musical practice contributes to the development of individual and collective musical identity, as well as to the strengthening of social bonds.¹⁵ Although the dimension of meaning has

⁸Cf. S. ASCENSO *et al.*, *Promoting Well-Being Through Group Drumming with Mental Health Service Users and Their Carers*, cit.

⁹Cf. C. D. RYFF, B. H. SINGER, *Know Thyself and Become What You Are: A Eudaimonic Approach to Psychological Well-Being*, «Journal of Happiness Studies», 9/1 (2008), pp. 13-39, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-006-9019-0>.

¹⁰Cf. C. L. M. KEYES, *Social Well-Being*, «Social Psychology Quarterly», 61 (1998), pp. 121-140, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2787065>.

¹¹Cf. M. SELIGMAN, *Flourish: A visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*, Free Press, New York 2011.

¹²Cf. G. KREUTZ *et al.*, *Effects of Choir Singing*, «Journal of Behavioral Medicine», 27/6 (2004), pp. 623-635, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-004-0006-9>; E. VALENTINE, C. EVANS, *Effects of Singing on Mood*, «British Journal of Medical Psychology», 74/1 (2001), pp. 115-120, <https://doi.org/10.1348/000711201160849>; A. GABRIELSSON, *Strong Experiences With Music*, in *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications*, ed. by P. N. Juslin, J. A. Sloboda, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, pp. 547-574.

¹³Cf. L. A. CUSTODERO, *Observable Indicators of Flow Experience*, «Music Education Research», 7/2 (2005), pp. 185-209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613800500169431>; A. GABRIELSSON, S. L. WIK, *Strong Experiences Related to Music*, «Musicae Scientiae», 7/2 (2003), pp. 157-217, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1029864903007002>.

¹⁴Cf. J. AUSTIN, J. RENWICK, G. E. MCPHERSON, *Developing Motivation*, in *The Child as Musician: A Handbook of Musical Development*, ed. by G. E. McPherson, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, pp. 213-238; G. E. MCPHERSON, J. W. DAVIDSON, *Playing an Instrument*, in *The Child as Musician*, cit., pp. 331-352; S. O'NEILL, *Flow Theory and Musical Performance*, «Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education», 141 (1999), pp. 129-134.

¹⁵Cf. A. LAMONT, *Musical Identities and the School Environment*, in *Musical Identities*, ed. by R. A. R. MacDonald, D. J. Hargreaves, D. Miell, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002; R. FAULKNER, J. DAVIDSON, *Men's Vocal Behaviour and the Construction of Self*, «Musicae Scientiae», 8/2 (2004),

received less empirical attention, some studies suggest that music can facilitate experiences of transcendence and spirituality,¹⁶ as well as a general improvement in quality of life.¹⁷ As for achievement, whilst it has been less explored in relation to well-being, recent research has identified its presence in the musical well-being of professional and amateur musicians,¹⁸ highlighting the role of passion as an underlying factor.¹⁹

On the other hand, listening to music, although traditionally considered a more passive activity, can also contribute significantly to *flourishing*. Neuroscientific evidence shows that listening to music activates brain systems related to reward, emotion and motivation²⁰, generating intense physiological and emotional responses.²¹ Furthermore, music can induce specific moods and act as a tool for emotional regulation,²² with enjoyment being one of the main motivations for its consumption.²³ In terms of engagement, attentive listening can generate

pp. 231-255, <https://doi.org/10.1177/102986490400800206>; E. RUDDOCK, S. LEONG, *I am Unmusical*, «International Journal of Music Education», 23/1 (2005), pp. 9-22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761405050927>.

¹⁶Cf. T. HAYS, V. MINICHELLO, *Older People's Experience of Spirituality Through Music*, «Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging», 18/1 (2005), pp. 83-96, https://doi.org/10.1300/J496v18n01_06.

¹⁷Cf. S. CLIFT *et al.*, *Choral Singing and Psychological Wellbeing*, «Journal of Applied Arts & Health», 1/1 (2010), pp. 19-34, <https://doi.org/10.1386/jaah.1.1.19/1>; J. K. JOHNSON *et al.*, *A Community Choir Intervention*, «The Journals of Gerontology: Series B», 75/3 (2020), pp. 549-559, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gby132>.

¹⁸Cf. S. ASCENSO, A. WILLIAMON, R. PERKINS, *Understanding the Wellbeing of Professional Musicians Through the Lens of Positive Psychology*, «Psychology of Music», 45/1 (2017), pp. 65-81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735616646864>; A. LAMONT, N. A. RANAWEERA, *Knit One, Play One*, «Applied Research in Quality of Life», 15 (2020), pp. 1353-1374, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-019-09734-z>.

¹⁹Cf. A. BONNEVILLE-ROUSSY, R. J. VALLERAND, *Passion at the Heart of Musicians' Well-Being*, «Psychology of Music», 48/2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735618797180>.

²⁰Cf. A. J. BLOOD, R. J. ZATORRE, *Intensely Pleasurable Responses to Music Correlate with Activity in Brain Regions Implicated in Reward and Emotion*, «Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences», 98/20 (2001), pp. 11818-11823, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.191355898>; J. PANKSEPP, G. BERNATZKY, *Emotional Sounds and the Brain: The Neuro-Affective Foundations of Musical Appreciation*, «Behavioural Processes», 60/2 (2002), pp. 133-155, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0376-6357\(02\)00080-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0376-6357(02)00080-3).

²¹Cf. A. GABRIELSSON, *Emotions in Strong Experiences with Music*, in *Music and Emotion*, ed. by P. N. Juslin, J. A. Sloboda, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, pp. 431-449, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192631886.003.0019>.

²²Cf. S. SWAMINATHAN, E. G. SCHELLENBERG, *Emotion Research in Music Psychology*, «Emotion Review», 7/2 (2015), pp. 189-197, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073914558282>; R. WESTERMANN *et al.*, *Relative Effectiveness and Validity of Mood Induction Procedures: A Meta-Analysis*, «European Journal of Social Psychology», 26/4 (1996), pp. 557-580, [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-0992\(199607\)26:4<557::AID-EJSP769>3.0.CO;2-4](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-0992(199607)26:4<557::AID-EJSP769>3.0.CO;2-4).

²³Cf. J. M. GROARKE, M. J. HOGAN, *Enhancing Wellbeing*, «Psychology of Music», 44/4 (2016), pp. 769-791, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735615591844>; A. LAMONT, R. WEBB, *Short- and Long-Term Musical Preferences: What Makes a Favourite Piece of Music?*, «Psychology of Music», 38/2 (2010), pp. 222-241, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735609339471>.

states similar to flow,²⁴ characterised by concentration and a transformation of subjective experience.²⁵ Furthermore, music facilitates the construction of social relationships and cultural identity,²⁶ as well as meaningful experiences linked to collective or spiritual contexts.²⁷

Juslin also draws on the psychology of music to develop the BRECVEMA (Brain stem reflexes, Rhythmic entrainment, Evaluative conditioning, Contagion, Visual imagery, Episodic memory, Music expectancy, and Aesthetic Judgment) model, which identifies multiple mechanisms through which music induces emotions.²⁸ Of particular importance is the last of these mechanisms—aesthetic judgment—since it reflects the intention to link aesthetic emotions with everyday emotions, thereby explaining emotions derived from the evaluation of the beauty, originality, complexity, or excellence of a musical work.

However, the musical experience also encompasses negative emotions.²⁹ An example of this is performance anxiety, which affects a significant proportion of musicians,³⁰ manifesting itself in physiological and cognitive symptoms.³¹ Similarly, listening to sad music, whilst inducing sadness, can simultaneously generate pleasure, comfort and emotional regulation.³²

²⁴Cf. M. CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, *Flow: The Classic Work on How to Achieve Happiness*, Rider, London 2002.

²⁵Cf. T. DENORA, *Music in Everyday Life*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000; J. A. SLOBODA, S. A. O'NEILL, A. IVALDI, *Functions of Music in Everyday Life*, «Musicae Scientiae», 5/1 (2001), pp. 9-32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/102986490100500102>.

²⁶Cf. P. J. RENTFROW, S. D. GOSLING, *Message in a Ballad: The Role of Music Preferences in Interpersonal Perception*, «Psychological Science», 17/3 (2006), pp. 236-242, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01691.x>; M. TARRANT, A. C. NORTH, D. J. HARGREAVES, *Youth Identity and Music*, in *Musical Identities*, cit., pp. 134-150.

²⁷Cf. J. A. SLOBODA, *Music and Worship: A Psychologist's Perspective*, in *Creative Chords: Studies in Music, Theology and Christian Formation*, ed. by T. Hone, M. Savage, J. Astley, Gracewing, Leominster 2002, pp. 110-125.

²⁸Cf. P. N. JUSLIN, D. VÄSTFJÄLL, *Emotional Responses to Music: The Need to Consider Underlying Mechanisms*, «Behavioral and Brain Sciences», 31/5 (2008), pp. 559-621, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X08005293>; P. N. JUSLIN, *From Everyday Emotions to Aesthetic Emotions*, «Physics of Life Reviews», 10 (2013), pp. 235-266, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.plrev.2013.05.008>; P. N. JUSLIN et al., *Prevalence of Emotions, Mechanisms, and Motives in Music Listening: A Comparison of Individualist and Collectivist Cultures*, «Psychomusicology: Music, Mind, and Brain», 26/4 (2016), pp. 293-326, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pmu0000161>.

²⁹Cf. T. LOMAS, I. IVTZAN, *Second Wave Positive Psychology: Exploring the Positive–Negative Dialectics of Wellbeing*, «Journal of Happiness Studies», 17 (2016), pp. 1753-1768, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-015-9668-y>.

³⁰Cf. D. T. KENNY, A. ASHER, *Life Expectancy in Musicians*, «Medical Problems of Performing Artists», 31/1 (2016), pp. 37-44, <https://doi.org/10.21091/mppa.2016.1007>.

³¹Cf. P. N. JUSLIN, D. VÄSTFJÄLL, *Emotional Responses to Music*, cit.

³²Cf. T. EEROLA et al., *Being Moved by Unfamiliar Sad Music*, «Frontiers in Psychology», 7 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01176>; J. K. VUOSKOSKI, T. EEROLA, *The Pleasure Evoked by Sad Music is Mediated by Feelings of Being Moved*, «Frontiers in Psychology», 8 (2017), <https://doi.org/>

In short, music acts as a complex phenomenon that affects the dimensions of well-being. Taken together, the evidence presented suggests that music possesses a unique potential to promote *flourishing*, by articulating emotional, cognitive, social and meaningful processes over time.

It is not simply a matter of determining whether music promotes well-being, but rather of understanding how the musical experience contributes to life and flourishing.³³ The latter thus shifts the focus towards a broader understanding than simply well-being, where the value of the musical experience takes on greater significance as it depends on processes of personal interpretation.³⁴

3 UNDERSTANDING MEANING

The range of contributions on the relationship between music and *flourishing* is very varied, but there is no doubt that in all of them the emotional experience plays a significant role in the interpretative process of music leading to the aesthetic experience. It is within this that the understanding of the musical work and the personal response to it take place.³⁵

Music as a reality is directly linked to one's own experience. Its understanding can only be achieved through personal experiences. However, it is very difficult to reach a consensus on what musical understanding is, given the different historical perspectives.

Hallam and Papageorgi³⁶ point out, however, that there are two distinct levels of understanding of the musical experience. On the one hand, understanding as musical cognition, and on the other, aesthetic understanding.

At a cognitive level, understanding the meaning of music is understood as the processes that enable us to receive, process and interpret musical information. In other words, music goes beyond the mere perception of sounds because

10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00439; W. E. HANSER *et al.*, *Consolation Through Music*, «Musicae Scientiae», 20/1 (2016), pp. 122-137, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1029864915620264>.

³³Cf. M. REYBROUCK, T. EEROLA, *Musical Enjoyment and Reward: From Hedonic Pleasure to Eudaimonic Listening*, «Behavioral Sciences», 12/5 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs12050154>; D. ELLIOTT, M. SILVERMAN, *Music, Personhood, and Eudaimonia: Implications for Educative and Ethical Music Education*, «The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa», 10/2 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v10i2.99>.

³⁴Cf. A. LAMONT, *Music and Flourishing*, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Positive Humanities*, cit.; R. PERKINS *et al.*, *How Participatory Music Engagement Supports Mental Well-being: A Meta-Ethnography*, «Qualitative Health Research», 30/12 (2020), pp. 1924-1940, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732320944142>.

³⁵Cf. F. M. BERENSON, *La Música y las Emociones*, in *La Realidad Musical*, ed. by J. Cruz Cruz, EUNSA, Pamplona 1998, pp. 23-37.

³⁶Cf. S. HALLAM, I. PAPAGEORGI, *Conceptions of Musical Understanding*, «Research Studies in Music Education», 38/2 (2016), pp. 133-154, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X16671037>.

it engages with our basic neurobiology. We find music exciting, relaxing, etc., always depending on our musical background, previous experiences, the type of music, our personality, the performance, etc. In this sense, it can induce changes in behaviour. A distinction should be made between the perception of expression in music³⁷—I recognise an emotion without being affected by it—and, on the other hand, the response to this perception—which would be the feeling that this emotion has evoked in me—. If we focus exclusively on perceived emotional expression, there are many empirical studies indicating that listeners are good at recognising basic emotional expressions, but the level of agreement between them can vary greatly in terms of nuances. These will depend on other factors such as the musical structure of the piece and the musician's or singer's own performance.

On an aesthetic level, in addition to mere perception, active personal engagement is required. A reflective involvement is necessary to formulate a response that goes beyond emotion.

Gabrielsson and Juslin³⁸ state that, in general, works on musical aesthetics or musical semiotics make little reference to empirical studies and, conversely, there are also few references to musical aesthetics in studies of empirical music psychology. One explanation may be that proposed by these researchers, referring to the fact that musical training is not required for the mere perception of the emotional expression of music. This leads us to believe that other, more general mechanisms are involved in the perception of emotions.

However, aesthetic experience goes beyond affective and emotional responses. Is the expression of emotion, then, the meaning of music and the key to its understanding?

From the listener's perspective, it is generally argued that musical understanding depends on the individual, their engagement with music, and the cultural context in which they find themselves.³⁹ Yet from the perspective of music itself, its capacity to express emotions has been debated since antiquity.

4 BACKGROUND

To understand what music means beyond how it is made, and how it relates to the human experience, we can refer to two fundamental positions in the history of music, which seem to explain the origin of current viewpoints. While during

³⁷Cf. A. GABRIELSSON, P. N. JUSLIN, *Emotional Expression in Music*, in *Handbook of Affective Sciences*, ed. by R. J. Davidson, H. H. Goldsmith, K. R. Scherer, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, pp. 503-534.

³⁸*Ibidem*.

³⁹Cf. S. HALLAM, I. PAPAGEORGI, *Conceptions of Musical Understanding*, cit.; W. E. HANSER *et al.*, *Consolation through Music*, cit., pp. 122-137.

the Enlightenment the nature of music was defined by imitation, in the Romantic period music found its focus in expression.

On the one hand, there is the school of musical formalism, which regards music as an autonomous structure, without external elements to define it. This school rejects the theory of meaning based on emotions. It is argued that music is the pure contemplation of forms and sounds, and thus does not imply any personal engagement beyond this contemplation.

It emerged in the aesthetics and music theory of the 19th-20th centuries, as a result of Hanslick's formalist thinking.⁴⁰ The sound material is an end in itself, and this premise would govern the compositions and musical thinking of composers such as Stravinsky, already in the 20th century.⁴¹

Music as an autonomous language of feelings had found its place in Romanticism, as corroborated by the numerous treatises of the philosophers of this period, but with musical formalism there is a return to the criteria of asemanticity of rationalism.

Formalism asserts that music should be understood primarily through its internal form: melody, rhythm, harmony, counterpoint, thematic development... rejecting the possibility that it can express feelings or tell stories, although it can evoke them. What is essential is the beauty of the relationships between sounds and their autonomous logic.

On the other hand, musical structuralism views music as a language, with signs and conventions. There is therefore a semantic dimension to the elements of this language. Consequently, there is an engagement with the aesthetic experience that stems from an understanding of this language. This movement emerged in the 20th century, influenced by Saussure's linguistics and the structuralism prevalent in the humanities in general.

Music is viewed as a system of signs where each element acquires meaning within a network of relationships. Thus, what is important are the relationships that exist within the signs of the music itself, and the relationships with referential elements external to it. For example, a musical motif takes on meaning in relation to a tonal system, or how a specific musical style can function as a cultural code. In this way, the musical work possesses a system of meaning shared across musical genres, styles and conventions, taking shape as a cultural system.

The main difference between formalists and structuralists therefore lies in where each school of thought locates the meaning of music. For the former, it lies in the pure sound form that gives it the characteristic of an autonomous art form; for the latter, it lies in the relationships established by musical language,

⁴⁰Cf. E. HANSLICK, *De lo bello en la música*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid 2002.

⁴¹Cf. E. FUBINI, *Estética de la música*, cit.

understood as a set of interconnected musical signs referring to an extra-musical meaning.

5 R. SCRUTON AND R. S. HATTEN

To address the notions of emotion, expression, meaning and musical understanding, we turn to the views of Scruton and Hatten. Both highlight the important role of emotions in personal musical understanding and interpretation.

For Scruton,⁴² musical aesthetics cannot explain the notion of musical understanding. To explain this assertion, he relates musical understanding to the content of music. That is to say, for him, what is understood in music is its own content. This content was not regarded as such until the 18th century, when the idea that music was capable of expressing feelings became widely accepted. Therefore, what is understood when listening to music is its content. But... what is the content of music? It is difficult to decipher because it is an abstract art. It is not its most basic constituent elements (rhythm, melody and harmony), since for Scruton these can only be explained through metaphors; that is to say, we understand them because we can refer to concepts external to music itself. For this author, this invalidates current trends based on musical semantics and semiotics, among which is, amongst others, Hatten's approach.

The musical sign can create a certain syntactic structure, but in itself, it has no meaning of its own. It must always be placed in relation to a field of reference. In other words, the musical sign itself correlates with feelings and attitudes, so that music expresses because its system of signs symbolises something extra-musical.⁴³ Consequently, any relationship with a field of reference external to the musical sign itself will be conditioned by musical competence, and this, in turn, by culture.

But for Scruton, expression is not the same as understanding music. To grasp this idea, one must refer to his concept of intentional understanding, which allows us to interpret something because it already possesses meaning and purpose in itself. In the case of music, Scruton argues that it involves a type of understanding that is somewhat different from intentional understanding, constituting a special case. In the case of music, to understand this meaning or purpose, I require a certain intellectual capacity, education and expectations—as already indicated by L. Meyer's theories on the meaning of music in relation to previous musical experiences—...in short, musical understanding as intentional understanding is linked to culture and context.

⁴²Cf. R. SCRUTON, *La experiencia estética*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México 1987; *The Aesthetic Understanding*, St. Augustine's Press, South Bend 1998; *Understanding Music*, Continuum, London 2009.

⁴³Cf. IDEM, *La experiencia estética*, cit.

Marrades⁴⁴ questions the relationship Scruton establishes between the idea of musical understanding and expression. He asserts that everything depends on what is meant by expression and presents three distinct ways of defining it. According to Romantic theories, expression is the manifestation of feelings or moods, but if this is the case, he wonders how one moves from emotional content to a form that expresses it. According to this idea, what music expresses is made to depend on what the composer feels, but Marrades⁴⁵ considers this to be a mistake, since it is not essential that a musical work expressing an emotion or feeling be composed by someone who is also feeling the same thing. Another way of understanding expression is that which associates it with the evocation of the listener's mental states; that is, music is sad if it makes me feel sad. This definition would be typical of the formalists, but it does not seem correct either, as the listener may recognise an emotion in the music without feeling it at the same time. In the third and final possible definition of expression, a relationship of similarity is established between what we feel and what is heard musically, where it is understood that there is something in common between the expression and what is expressed. But then why are there pieces that are formally different yet can make us feel the same emotion? Marrades⁴⁶ asserts that this similarity is not universal and does indeed depend on culture. He therefore argues that expressiveness depends on the listener's ability to project, in their imagination and onto what they hear, that which forms part of their prior experience. Following this consideration, he acknowledges that the intentional object that is music is distinct from the physical object that is sound, as Scruton asserts. Thus, if the listener is familiar with the contextual and cultural framework of the composer, they will be better able to understand the music they hear because the metaphors conveyed will be more appropriate than those which the music tells or suggests to each of us individually.

The musical sounds we perceive, which form a system of signs and their syntax, do not explain our understanding of music, but rather indicate, through analogies with real feelings, where they wish to lead us. In other words, a musical tone (not a sound) does not move when it shifts to another tone; rather, the listener can explain this using the metaphor of movement. Only in this way can we describe it. The perception of musical movement, for Scruton, entails a commitment of interest, a transfer of concepts as occurs in metaphor, and can become a voluntary act.

Thus, the emotion we hear is not embodied in the music itself, but is embodied

⁴⁴Cf. J. MARRADES, *Música y significado*, «Teorema: Revista internacional de filosofía», 19/1 (2000), pp. 5-25.

⁴⁵*Ibidem*.

⁴⁶*Ibidem*.

in our intentional understanding of it. Therefore, the emotion we hear belongs to the intentional realm.

Levinson⁴⁷ argues against this concept of Scruton's and maintains that music is not an intentional state, even though its purpose is for us to have our own experience of it, but rather an objective cultural phenomenon. To understand it, one must grasp its tonal properties through intentional states, but it is not an experience derived solely from culture. For Levinson, it is a public category of sound phenomenon, although its defining features are partly material and partly cultural. He does not, therefore, exclude the real and non-intentional role of emotions in the creation of musical meaning.

Marrades argues in this regard that the theories of Cooke and Langer, in the mid-20th century, although differing in many respects, also agree in understanding the meaning of music as something referential, within a representational theory.⁴⁸

Peter Kivy⁴⁹ reaches similar conclusions when he points out that language is the element that does not fit into the music-language-cognition relationship. For him, the connection between music and language is purely analogical. They share similarities due to their cultural determinants—for example, music understood as the language of emotions—but he nevertheless asserts that while there are concepts in music, there is no content. These concepts can be described using our language, but they do not strictly speaking have their own semantic content. In this sense, he differs from Scruton, who argues that interpreting a musical work—from the listener's perspective—means understanding it; for Kivy, however, what matters most is not that, but rather perceiving musical events—understood as signs and their syntax—as musical descriptions. Thus, he asserts that what matters is the cognitive process, both conscious—listening to what is happening musically—and self-conscious—listening to what is happening and thinking about it. If there is cognition, there is content, but not semantic or representational content, only strictly musical content. According to Kivy, these are the processes that enable the enjoyment and appreciation of music.

However, for Scruton:

Understanding expression is but one part of the complex activity of understanding music, an activity whose aim is not the comprehension of particular mental states, but rather the interpretation and enjoyment of music.⁵⁰

Hatten agrees with Scruton that musical understanding is more than mere

⁴⁷Cf. J. LEVINSON, *Review of the Aesthetics of Music*, «The Philosophical Review», 109/4 (2000), pp. 608-614, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-109-4-608>.

⁴⁸Cf. J. MARRADES, *Música y significado*, cit.

⁴⁹Cf. P. KIVY, *Music, Language, and Cognition: And Other Essays in the Aesthetics of Music*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 214-232.

⁵⁰Cf. R. SCRUTON, *The Aesthetic Understanding*, cit., p. 63.

recognition and decoding. For Hatten,⁵¹ the musical work provides the instructions for recreating an auditory experience, after which each listener would discover their own meaning. The composer presents a perceptible experience within the various limitations of signs, musical instruments, and performances... but it is also received through different cultural approaches by listeners, which implies a wide variety of nuances in the inferred meanings.

In his thinking, he develops the semiotics of musical gesture. These can be understood as synthetic entities with an emergent affective meaning, even before their incorporation into a musical style and their subsequent positioning within a hierarchy of stylistic correlations.⁵² Gestures, topics and tropes function within the musical work as carriers of culturally encoded meaning. Through gesture, music conveys emotion and agency, the latter understood as the sensation of a will or character acting within the music.

Hatten, in his theory of virtual agency,⁵³ develops his entire concept around the listener's interpretation and understanding. For Hatten, this involves an imaginatively interactive engagement⁵⁴ in which the listener commits to and engages with an imagined, rather than real, virtual agency. It concerns an imaginary figure who guides our understanding through the gestures, tropes and motifs found in music. These serve as a semiotic tool enabling the listener to grasp musical meaning by connecting the sound structure with the human experience of effort and motion. Music thus mimics bodily behaviours linked to emotions, and we interpret these gestures emotionally.

He introduces the concept of interactive participation, which requires the listener to be willing to interpret imaginatively in accordance with the virtual agency, but also to interpret cognitively as a developing complex of emotions and thoughts. What Hatten identifies as imaginatively interactive participation is what he understands by listener engagement, that is, how the listener engages with an inferred virtual agency. In addition to being virtual and imagined, not real, this agency requires a willingness to engage cognitively with the unfolding of emotions and thoughts.⁵⁵

For Hatten,⁵⁶ if music can be perceived as an expression of emotions, it is because listeners infer one or more virtual agents that express the emotional tra-

⁵¹Cf. R. S. HATTEN, *Grounding Interpretation*, «American Journal of Semiotics», 13/1 (1996), pp. 25-56.

⁵²Idem, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2004.

⁵³Cf. R. S. HATTEN, *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2018.

⁵⁴Cf. R. S. HATTEN et al., *A Conversation with Robert Hatten about a Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music*, «Musica Theorica», 5/2 (2020), pp. 48-73, <https://doi.org/10.52930/mt.v5i2.165>.

⁵⁵*Ibidem*.

⁵⁶Cf. J. ROBINSON, R. S. HATTEN, *Emotions in Music*, «Music Theory Spectrum», 34/2 (2012), pp. 71-106, <https://doi.org/10.1525/MTS.2012.34.2.71>.

jectory of the music. The emotions we experience are not necessarily at the same level of expression as those present in the music, but they are intrinsically related. In this sense, contributions from the psychology of music corroborate this close relationship.

For Hatten, music has expressive meaning because it is conveyed through musical gestures. When these gestures are understood, emotion arises. The process of generating this emotion begins when a meaningful situation is detected, so that the gestures act as signs. These embodied movements, which are gestures, can be perceived as movements of thoughts and feelings; that is, they are often mentalised automatically, so verifying this empirically would introduce many biases into the research. But for this author, four transformative and successive experiences occur in the process, in which embodied movements are perceived as mentalised movements: virtualisation, in which we hear the movement as action; embodiment, when we hear characteristic gestures and intentional movements in which it is already possible to infer a virtual agent; fictionalisation, in which we hear one or more virtual agents as virtual actors; and internalisation, when we move from embodiment to mentalisation and infer virtual subjectivity as a continuous consciousness.⁵⁷

However, Hatten also points out that music can evoke aesthetically justified emotions through affective evaluations, beyond the interpretation of these signs. Specifically, he identifies three ways in which this occurs.

The first of these refers to the wonder or emotion we may feel upon realising the beauty of a piece. The emotions generated are not due to the cultural background implicit in the interpretation of gestures, but to the direct understanding of the musical style, even if we are not familiar with it.

Secondly, Hatten, aligning here with Meyer's theories,⁵⁸ asserts that knowledge of a musical style generates expectations in listeners regarding the development of the work. These expectations play a central role in the emotional experience. Musical emotions arise when these expectations, based on stylistic norms, are temporarily thwarted or ultimately fulfilled. Thus, phenomena such as unexpected harmonic shifts or a delay in tonal resolution can provoke surprise, bewilderment or relief in the listener who understands the musical language. It is here that Hatten draws on the work of music psychologists Juslin and Sloboda,⁵⁹ who assert that emotional systems are predisposed to react to frustrated expectations. Similarly, Meyer argues that the appropriate emotional response to these events

⁵⁷Cf. R. S. HATTEN *et al.*, *A Conversation with Robert Hatten about a Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music*, cit.

⁵⁸Cf. L. B. MEYER, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1956.

⁵⁹Cf. J. A. SLOBODA, P. N. JUSLIN, *At the interface between the inner and outer world*, in *Handbook of Music and Emotion*, cit., pp. 89-90.

constitutes a form of musical understanding, even in the absence of explicit theoretical knowledge.

And, thirdly, emotion may arise through the association of motifs appearing in the musical work with what they refer to—for example, a military march or a lullaby. In this case, the emotion would not refer to the music itself but to what it represents.

For Scruton, musical emotion takes place in the imagination; it is not found in the music itself. It would be something we can imagine through association with other fields of reference, but not because musical signs are in themselves capable of creating meaning. Consequently, musical emotion will depend on our cultural learning and our understanding.⁶⁰

Whereas for Scruton, in his phenomenological approach, musical emotion is the experience of perceived intentional movement, for Hatten, in his semiotic approach, it is culturally interpreted expressive meaning.

Roger Scruton's phenomenological stance would fall within the formalist tradition, arguing that musical meaning is neither representational nor semantic in the way that language is. He further contends that this comparison with language has greatly hindered musical understanding. For Scruton, meaning arises from the perceptual experience of sound structures—tonal movement, tension, resolution, internal organisation—but the listener situates this experience within the imagination. For this reason, meaning is not possessed by these structures or the sounds themselves, but by musical tones, which are in turn a product of the culture in which one is immersed. This idea rejects semiotic or structuralist approaches that interpret music as a system of signs with meaning comparable to language. Scruton speaks of meaning in terms of intentional experience and the comprehension of forms, but considers that emotion is inherent in this experience of form, without being present in the musical form itself. Thus, music does not represent emotions; we merely interpret them within our intentional experience.

Robert S. Hatten's semiotic approach falls within the structuralist-semiotic tradition (or, within music theory, the poststructuralist tradition). Hatten understands music as a system of culturally encoded signs. He analyses meaning through musical gestures, tropes and figures of speech, influenced by semiotics and structuralist approaches. For him, music communicates expressiveness and meaning through stylistic conventions and interpretable structures. Emotion, therefore, is an expressive content that is indeed present in the music itself, albeit interpretable. Music does represent emotions through its signs and the agency of those signs. In any case, we agree with Hatten⁶¹ when

⁶⁰Cf. R. SCRUTON, *La experiencia estética*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México 1987.

⁶¹Cf. J. ROBINSON, R. S. HATTEN, *Emotions in Music*, cit.

he states that regardless of how we experience emotions when listening to music, these can enhance our musical understanding.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The issues reviewed in this text allow us to affirm that musical experience and meaning constitute a significant pathway to *flourishing*, insofar as music articulates emotional, cognitive, cultural and aesthetic dimensions that directly influence human development. From both the psychology of music and musical aesthetics, it is evident that musical experience is not reduced to mere sensory perception, but involves complex processes of interpretation and understanding that contribute to well-being and the construction of meaning.

Within this framework, the dialogue between the proposals of Roger Scruton and Robert S. Hatten proves particularly illuminating for understanding how the notions of emotion, expression, meaning and musical understanding are configured. Although both authors agree on highlighting the central role of the listener's experience and the importance of the emotional dimension, they diverge on the location of musical meaning. Scruton, from a phenomenological perspective, situates meaning in the listener's intentional experience, understanding emotion as a product of culturally mediated imagination, rather than as content inherent to the music. For his part, Hatten, from a semiotic perspective, argues that music possesses its own expressive capacity, articulated through gestures (musical configurations perceived as intentional expressive movements), tropes (musical elements that have a specific meaning according to the conventions of the time), and figures of speech (two or more tropes that, when combined, take on a new meaning). Gestures, tropes, and figures of speech constitute a culturally encoded system of meaning.

This tension between a non-representational conception of meaning (Scruton) and a semiotic and expressive conception (Hatten) should not be understood as an irreconcilable opposition, but rather as two complementary perspectives that enrich our understanding of music. Whilst Scruton emphasises the interpretative dimension and cultural mediation in the musical experience, Hatten offers analytical tools to explain how music can communicate and structure expressive meanings. Both perspectives ultimately agree in recognising that musical understanding goes beyond mere structural decoding, involving the listener's imaginative and emotional engagement.

Scruton's anti-realist stance (1997) denies that music possesses inherent emotional properties. Instead, he argues that emotional qualities in music are projected by listeners through imaginative engagement. He criticises realist and semiotic positions for erroneously attributing emotions to the music itself,

rather than to the listener's interpretative act. Imagination is fundamental to Scruton's explanation.

In relation to the aim of this study, it can be concluded that the notions of emotion, expression, meaning and musical understanding are articulated by both authors around the listener's experience, albeit with different theoretical foundations. Emotion emerges as a key element that not only accompanies but also shapes the process of understanding, whether as an intentional experience (Scruton) or as a result of the interpretation of musical signs (Hatten). Likewise, musical expression is presented as a bridge between sound structure and human experience, enabling the construction of meaning within specific cultural contexts.

Finally, in line with the concept of *flourishing*, music reveals itself as a privileged sphere for personal development and well-being, by integrating emotion, cognition, meaning and relationship. The musical experience, understood through this theoretical dialogue, not only enables aesthetic understanding but also contributes to the realisation of human potential, reinforcing its formative value and its relevance in individual and collective life.

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