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Ontology

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1. Ontology

Ontology of music asks whether there are musical works and, if so, what they're like: for example, what ontological category or categories they belong to, how they're individuated, and where they're located in time. Let's assume for now that there are musical works. (We'll come back briefly to this assumption later.) In particular, let's assume that Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 29 in B flat major, Opus 106—the *Hammerklavier Sonata*—exists. First, there are questions about its ontological category: for example, is the *Hammerklavier* a type? Or an event? Or something else? Second, there are questions about its individuation: for example, is the *Hammerklavier* distinguished from other musical works entirely by how it sounds? Or is it distinguished from other musical works in part by the historical context in which it was composed or by the instrument that Beethoven specified it is to be performed on? And, third, there are questions about its temporal location: for example, did the *Hammerklavier* come into existence when Beethoven composed it, in 1817-1818, or did it always exist?

1.1. Ontological category

The dominant view in the ontology of music is *the type theory*, according to which the *Hammerklavier* is a type (Wollheim 1980; Levinson 1980, 1990a; Currie 1989; S. Davies 2001; Dodd 2007, 2008; cf. Kivy 1983, 1987, 1988; Wolterstorff 1980).

Philosophers often distinguish *types* and *tokens*. The best way to get a grip on the distinction is to consider some examples. Here's one. How many letters are there in this inscription of the word 'Canada'? On the one hand, there are six letter tokens: the 'C', the first 'a', the 'n', the second 'a', the 'd', and the third 'a'. But, on the other hand, there are four letter types: 'C', 'a', 'n', and 'd'; it's just that one of those letter types—'a'—has three tokens in that inscription of the word. Here's another example. You're in the express checkout lane at the supermarket. The sign says "10 items or fewer." You have 12 cans of Campbell's tomato soup in your basket. Are you in the wrong lane? On the one hand, if the sign means 10 item tokens, then you are, because you have 12 cans in your basket. But, on the other hand, if the sign means 10 item types, then you aren't, because the 12 cans in your basket are all of the same type. Although most type theorists think that at least some of the *Hammerklavier*'s performances are among its tokens, some think that only compositional actions are (Currie 1989).

But not everyone is a type theorist. Some who reject the type theory think that the *Hammerklavier* is a set, either of correct performances (Goodman 1976) or of possible and exemplary performances (Effingham ms.). The main difference between sets and types is that only the former are *extensional*: necessarily, two sets are identical if and only if they have the same members; but it's possible for two distinct types to have the same tokens. For example, if everyone who is a Canadian is a hockey player and vice versa, then the set of Canucks is identical to the set of hockey players, but the types *Canuck* and *hockey player* might still be distinct.

Others who reject the type theory think that the *Hammerklavier* is an event, something that occurs in space and time: in particular, Beethoven's compositional activity (D. Davies 2004). Still others think that it's a mereological sum of events, in this case of performances: something that each of those performances is a part of and every part of which has a part in common with one of those performances (Alward 2004). And still others think that it's a *sui generis* non-physical object, which is distinct from but nonetheless intimately connected to performances and recordings, copies of the score, and mental representations (Rohrbaugh 2003, ms.); or to a type whose tokens are sound events (Evnine 2009).

Some defend their view on the grounds that it identifies the *Hammerklavier* with something ontologically respectable that is already in their ontology: for example, a type (Dodd 2007) or a set (Effingham ms.). And some defend their view on the grounds that it best explains some feature or features of the *Hammerklavier*. For example, type theorists might say that their view best explains its *repeatability*, how it can have multiple performances: each of the *Hammerklavier*'s performances is a token of it (Dodd 2007, 2008). And those who think that the *Hammerklavier* is a *sui generis* non-physical object might say that their view best explains its *temporality* (how it can come into and go out of existence), its *modal flexibility* (how it could have been different than it actually is), and its *temporal flexibility* (how it can change over time). Types might be temporal (see Section 1.3), but type theorists generally deny that they're modally or temporally flexible (Dodd 2007); whereas *sui generis* non-physical objects might well be temporal, modally flexible, and temporally flexible (Rohrbaugh 2003, ms.).

There are two common responses to these inferences to the best explanation. The first is to offer an alternative explanation. The second is to deny that the feature in question needs explaining, because the *Hammerklavier* doesn't really have it. Those who opt for this second route usually either deny that we have the intuition that the *Hammerklavier* has the feature in question or explain the intuition away: explain why, even though the *Hammerklavier* lacks that feature, it nonetheless seems to have it. Some who reject the type theory opt for the first route with respect to its repeatability. Indeed, they think that the *Hammerklavier*'s repeatability is not best explained by the kind of entity that it is (Rohrbaugh 2003, ms.). Some type theorists opt for the first route with respect to its temporality (Levinson 1980, 1990a); whereas others opt for the second route with respect to its temporality, modal flexibility, and temporal flexibility (Dodd 2007, 2008). Perhaps the *Hammerklavier* isn't temporal after all (see Section 1.3), and even some who reject the type theory admit that it might not be temporally flexible (Rohrbaugh ms.). But the *Hammerklavier* does seem to be modally flexible: it does seem that in composing the *Hammerklavier* Beethoven could have called for a different note here or there, in which case the range of the *Hammerklavier*'s correct performances would have been slightly different. Those who think that the *Hammerklavier* is a modally inflexible type have attempted to explain this intuition away by saying that that type is vague (Dodd 2007). But, although appealing to vague types might explain how Beethoven could have composed the same musical work even if he had called for a different note here or there, it doesn't explain how in that case the range of the *Hammerklavier*'s correct performances would have been slightly different, since vague types don't vary at all across possible worlds (Rohrbaugh ms.). So type theorists still need to explain, or explain away, the *Hammerklavier*'s modal flexibility.

1.2. Individuation

As it happens, Beethoven composed the *Hammerklavier* in 1817-1818 and no one else composed a sound-alike musical work—a musical work that sounds exactly like the *Hammerklavier*—a hundred years later. But that's a historical accident. Suppose that Beethoven composed the *Hammerklavier* in 1817-1818 and that someone else composed a sound-alike musical work, the *1918 Hammerklavier*, a hundred years later. How many musical works are there that sound exactly like the *Hammerklavier*: one or two? The dominant view is *contextualism*, according to which the answer is two, since it's necessary that the *Hammerklavier* is distinguished from other musical works, not just by how it sounds, but also by the historical context in which it was composed, where that context includes at least who it was composed by and when it was composed; and the *Hammerklavier* and the *1918 Hammerklavier* were composed in different historical contexts (Levinson 1980, 1990a; Currie 1989; S. Davies 2001). But some reject contextualism in favor of *sonicism*, according to which the answer is one, since it's necessary that the *Hammerklavier* is distinguished from other musical works only by how it sounds; and the *Hammerklavier* and the *1918 Hammerklavier* are sound-alikes (Kivy 1987, Dodd 2007).

As it also happens, Beethoven specified that the *Hammerklavier* is to be performed on piano (on "hammer-keyboard" or "*Hammerklavier*"), and no one else composed a sound-alike musical work and specified that it is to be performed on Perfect Timbral Synthesizer (PTS), an electronic keyboard that can duplicate the timbre of any actual instrument. But that, too, is a historical accident. Suppose that Beethoven composed the *Hammerklavier* and specified that it is to be performed on piano and that someone else composed a sound-alike musical work, the *PTS Klavier*, and specified that it is to be performed on PTS. How many musical works are there that sound exactly like the *Hammerklavier*: one or two? The dominant view is *instrumentalism*, according to which the answer is two, since it's necessary that the *Hammerklavier* is distinguished from other musical works, not just by how it sounds, but also by the instrument that its composer specified that it is to be performed on; and the composers of the *Hammerklavier* and the *PTS Klavier* specified that they are to be performed on different instruments (Levinson 1980, 1990a; S. Davies 2001). But sonicists would say that the answer is one, since the *Hammerklavier* and the *PTS Klavier* are sound-alikes (Kivy 1988, Dodd 2007).

Contextualists argue that the *Hammerklavier* and the *1918 Hammerklavier* differ in their aesthetic and artistic properties. For example, the *Hammerklavier* is exciting and original in ways that the *1918 Hammerklavier* is not. So, by Leibniz's Law, they must be distinct (Levinson 1980, 1990a; Currie 1989). Sonicists reply that the *Hammerklavier* and the *1918 Hammerklavier* have the same aesthetic and artistic properties. There are various ways for sonicists to say that. For example, sonicists might say that the *Hammerklavier* is exciting in exactly the ways that the *1918 Hammerklavier* is and that, although Beethoven and his compositional actions might be more original than the 1918 composer and her compositional actions, neither the *Hammerklavier* nor the *1918 Hammerklavier* is itself original (Dodd 2007).

Instrumentalists can offer a parallel argument: "The *Hammerklavier* and the *PTS Klavier* differ in their aesthetic properties. For example, the *Hammerklavier* is thundering in ways that the *PTS Klavier* is not. So, by Leibniz's Law, they must be distinct" (D. Davies 2009). Sonicists can offer a parallel reply: "The *Hammerklavier* and the *PTS Klavier* have the same aesthetic properties. For example, the *Hammerklavier* is thundering in exactly the ways that the *PTS Klavier* is." But this reply is not available to those sonicists (like Dodd) who think that the *Hammerklavier*'s thunderingness depends on its performances being correctly heard as performed on piano, since it might come to be that performances of the *PTS Klavier* are correctly heard as performed on PTS (D. Davies 2009).

1.3. Temporal location

The *Hammerklavier* was composed in 1817-1818. Did it come into existence then? Opinion is pretty evenly divided. Some say yes (Levinson 1980, 1990a; Rohrbaugh 2003, ms.); others say no, either because the *Hammerklavier* is not located in time or because it's located at all times (Dodd 2007). (Not being located in time and being located at all times are not often distinguished in the literature.) The conjunction of the type theory and the claim that the *Hammerklavier* and other musical works don't come into existence is known as *musical Platonism*. One reason for asserting that the *Hammerklavier* came into existence in 1817-1818 is that, in composing it, Beethoven created it; and, in creating it, he brought it into existence (Levinson 1980, 1990a). Of those who deny that the *Hammerklavier* came into existence in 1817-1818, some say that Beethoven created it without bringing it into existence (Deutsch 1991); whereas others say that he composed it without creating it and, instead, creatively discovered or selected it (Kivy 1983, 1987; Dodd 2007). One reason for denying that the *Hammerklavier* came into existence in 1817-1818 is that it might be hard to square its coming into existence with the type theory, since types are often thought to exist at all times or outside of time (Dodd 2007). Of those who assert that the *Hammerklavier* came into existence in 1817-1818, some say that types can come into existence (Levinson 1980, 1990a), whereas others say that the *Hammerklavier* is not a type (Rohrbaugh 2003, ms.).

Eventually, perhaps millions of years from now, all traces—including all performances, recordings, and memories—of the *Hammerklavier* will have disappeared. Will it go out of existence then? Those who deny that the *Hammerklavier* came into existence in 1817-1818 deny that it will go out of existence in the distant future (Dodd 2007). Of those who assert that the *Hammerklavier* came into existence in 1817-1818, some are ambivalent about whether it will go out of existence in the distant future (Levinson 1990a), whereas others assert that it will (Rohrbaugh 2003, ms.). The question of whether the

Hammerklavier will go out of existence in the distant future has received less attention in the literature than has the question of whether it came into existence in 1817-1818 (but see Trivedi 2008), presumably because only the latter question is connected to questions about composition and creativity.

Suppose that the *Hammerklavier* is located at more than one time. There are various views about how the *Hammerklavier* might do that. According to *endurantism*, the *Hammerklavier* occupies multiple times, just as bi-located saints are said to simultaneously be in multiple places or multiply instantiated Aristotelian universals are said to simultaneously be where their instances are (Rohrbaugh 2003, ms.). By contrast, according to *perdurantism*, a distinct temporal part of the *Hammerklavier* occupies each instant at which it exists, just as a distinct spatial part of a road occupies each point at which it exists (Alward 2004). There are more exotic options (perhaps the *Hammerklavier* exists at only an instant but has temporal counterparts that exist at other instants, or perhaps the *Hammerklavier* occupies an extended interval of time without occupying any of its sub-intervals), but they haven't been endorsed in print. For whatever reason, the question of how the *Hammerklavier* is located in time has received less attention in the literature than has the question of where it is located in time.

2. Meta-ontology

Suppose that the goal of a given ontology of music is to handle those intuitions of ours that are relevant. For instance, in considering whether musical works can be created, one might appeal to the commonly held belief that musical works are created and conclude that musical Platonism must be rejected in favor of a theory according to which musical works are the sorts of things that can be created (cf. Levinson 1980, 1990a). In this case, an ontological issue is settled solely by a direct appeal to our intuitions concerning ontological matters. That is, for the purposes of this little exercise, the only relevant intuitions are ontological intuitions concerning whether musical works can be created.

However, this basic approach faces a few problems. Even it does lead to results in a few cases, like the one concerning creatability, most people don't have enough ontological intuitions to generate a fully fleshed-out ontology of music. Furthermore, those that they do have rarely are the product of careful consideration and often are not very strongly held. At this point, although there might be several candidate theories, we simply don't have enough data points to pick a winner. We can augment our list of data by bringing into consideration issues that can be plausibly considered to be relevant and about which non-metaphysicians have strongly held opinions. In other words, we can hold that the goal of an ontology of music is to handle our relevant intuitions concerning critical practice, where critical practice consists of what musicians, music audiences, music critics, and music theorists say and perhaps do (D. Davies 2004, 2009; Rohrbaugh 2005; Stecker forthcoming). For instance, consider the claim that the aesthetic or artistic properties that we would attribute to the *Hammerklavier* differ from those we would to the *1918 Hammerklavier*. It would seem then that, since sound-alike musical works can differ in their properties, sonicism must be false and contextualism must be true. In this case, our non-ontological intuitions concerning critical practice can be used to adjudicate between rival ontologies of musical works.

But, of course, things are not that simple. Sonicists can deny that the differences in aesthetic or artistic properties under discussion in the *Hammerklavier* case should be construed as a case of two works that have different properties. One way to do this would be to regard the case as an example of one work that bears different relations to different audiences—in this case, an audience from 1818 versus an audience from 1918 (cf. Kivy 1987). Similarly, although a musical Platonist would have to agree that, strictly speaking, musical works fail to be creatable, she would add that acts of composition occur in time and have a beginning. According to the musical Platonist, when we say "Musical works are created," we might mean that a given works is indicated or conceived for the first time on a certain date (cf. Kivy 1983, 1987; Dodd 2007).

Each of these cases relies on a technique known as paraphrase. For instance, a philosopher might believe that, strictly speaking, only sensory ideas exist. Nevertheless, she wishes to preserve certain claims like "My piano is in the corner of the room" by capturing the sentence in the language of ideas. According to her theory, although we are wrong at a fundamental level, we still utter true sentences under her construal or paraphrase of them. Furthermore, our basic error might not in require us to change our speech or behavior at the "piano" level. However, if paraphrase is permissible and (nearly) always available, then ontological issues might not be decidable. If the sonicist and the musical Platonist can provide friendly paraphrases in what seem to be problem cases for their views, then we don't seem to have a way of adjudicating between those views and their rivals. If we are to proceed further, we need to bring in this constraint: if our practice seems to attribute an aesthetic or artistic property to a musical work, then our best ontology of music is one according to which the musical work in question directly possesses the property in question (Levinson 1980, 1990a). Musical Platonism loses on the creatability question, because it paraphrases claims about a work's being created as claims about the occurrence of an action of composition; sonicism loses the *Hammerklavier* case because it paraphrases claims about the aesthetic or artistic difference between the *Hammerklavier* and the *1918 Hammerklavier* as claims about different relations that hold between their common sound structure and audiences at different times. Another methodological wrinkle stems from the fact that, if one's theory seems not to fit the data supplied by critical practice, one can modify one's data set for ostensibly independently motivated reasons. For instance, if a writer supports some sort of musical empiricism, according to which all of a work's aesthetic properties are in some sense readily hearable, then that writer can simply reject the claim that the *Hammerklavier* and the *1918 Hammerklavier* could differ in their aesthetic properties, since they're sound-alikes (Dodd 2007). Of course, in the absence of persuasive arguments for empiricism, opponents can maintain that a theory's inability to handle our apparent aesthetic judgments about this case should count as a flaw.

The possibility remains that no ontology of music can save all of our current intuitions concerning critical practice, no matter how much creative paraphrasing we employ. Or, perhaps, all of the intuitions can be saved only by an extremely cumbersome and unwieldy theory. In these circumstances it might be best to consider theories that sacrifice a few of our intuitions for the sake of an ontological theory that preserves the rest of them in a theoretically virtuous way. Our best final theory and the particular claims concerning critical practice it generates might conflict in important ways, both about basic ontology and about our understanding of critical practice, with the position that we originally took. This methodology is akin to reflective equilibrium in philosophical ethics. Suppose that our initially held ethical theories and intuitions about particular cases are in conflict. We resolve the conflict by revising our theory and tailoring our beliefs about particular cases (to the smallest extent possible) so that we eventually arrive at a coherent and powerful ethical theory. However, at the outset, everything is up for grabs, at least in principle. Some writers (for example, Levinson, Rohrbaugh, and D. Davies) have posited that musical works are new or unexpected things. Some of these writers identify works with things that have long been in our general ontologies. For instance, Davies asserts that musical works, and indeed all artworks, are performances. As such they form a species of event tokens. Other writers, such as Levinson and Rohrbaugh, devise new things—types that come into existence or *sui generis* non-physical objects—that are tailor-made to play the role we accord to musical works. Each of these theorists identifies musical works with new or unexpected things, because the old, familiar candidates for being a musical work cannot do the job of preserving all or even most of the things we want to say about musical works.

But not everyone sees the need for reflective equilibrium. Some take critical practice to be sacrosanct, because, if the term ‘musical work’ refers at all, it must refer to something that conforms completely to actual critical practice (Thomasson 2005, 2006). But, on this view, there’s no guarantee that our term ‘musical work’ will refer to anything at all, unless we start with an ontology so plenitudinous that we’re guaranteed to refer to something no matter what critical practice is. Others see no need to take into account general theoretical or metaphysical claims beyond critical practice, since they see ontology of music as solely being in the business of describing how we think about musical works (Kania 2008a). But ontology of music isn’t solely in the business of describing how we think about musical works; it’s also in the business of describing how musical works are. Others think that preserving critical practice is so easy that no reflective equilibrium is required, since they see ontology of music as solely being in the business of preserving the truth of certain sentences and they think that those sentences can be made true even if there are, strictly speaking, no musical works (Cameron 2008). But, even if our critical practice is coherent and there’s a way of simultaneously making true all of the sentences that correspond to it (and at this point there’s no guarantee that that’s possible), there’s more to preserving critical practice than preserving the truth of any sentences; and, in any case, insofar as we care about the truth of sentences about musical works we think that those sentences are made true by the existence of musical works (Stecker forthcoming).

Some doubt the usefulness of the ontology of music altogether, because to be useful an ontological theory about the *Hammerklavier*, for example, would have to tell us ahead of time what would count as a performance of that musical work, but there's no way of knowing what would count as a performance of the *Hammerklavier* before hearing all possible performances of it (Ridley 2003). These anti-ontological concerns can be side-stepped, because the usefulness of the ontology of music doesn't depend on its telling us ahead of time what would count as a performance of what (cf. Kania 2008b). But they can be profitably viewed as a starting point for an examination of the issue of grounding, which in the ontology of music largely concerns the relation between claims about musical works and claims about their performances. Is the *Hammerklavier* thundering in virtue of the thundering nature of its performances, or are the performances thundering in virtue of the thundering nature of the musical work? In other words, are the aesthetic or expressive properties of the musical work grounded in the properties of its performances, are the aesthetic or expressive properties of its performances grounded in the properties of the musical work, or neither? This is an ontological question; as such, it should be distinguished from a methodological question, which is also of interest: how should we go about finding out which aesthetic or expressive properties the *Hammerklavier* has? For instance, should we ascertain that the *Hammerklavier* is thundering via a close examination of the score or by an imaginative engagement with possible performances? Although there is renewed interest in grounding among metaphysicians (Schaffer 2009), philosophers of music have not begun to address the issue.

Critics and musicians frequently distinguish the properties of performances from the properties of musical works. If ontologists of music were to consider grounding, they would be able to address issues of greater importance to musical practice than that of pigeon-holing musical works in some ontological category or other. Until now, ontologists of music have been very active at the theoretical level, but they have tended to simply accept what is said by other participants in the musical community. Perhaps this is due to assumptions they might have made about the limited role of, and possibilities inherent in, the philosophy of art. However, the issue of grounding might make it possible for ontologists of music to sometimes play a part in guiding practice, which would be a very good thing.

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