Stephen Davies, Philosophy, University of Auckland

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# "Attributing Significance to Unobvious Musical Relationships"

Musical analysts rightly do not confine themselves to descriptions of the surface structure of musical works or to noting the obvious relationships within works. They maintain that the emergent features of musical works—their expressiveness, unity, and so forth— are generated from the notes constituting the work. In so far as such emergent features are uniquely achieved in individual works, they cannot usually be explained in terms of surface structures and obvious relationships that may be common to a large number of works. Inevitably, then, such features are explained as arising from unobvious structures and relationships. Accordingly, analysts have searched the musical 'background' of works in the quest for expressiveness-conferring relationships. But the claim that unobvious structures and relationships give rise to such musically significant features as expressiveness and unity faces a number of crucial objections. If it is possible that such relationships might hold between different works, how could we avoid saying that the different works are mutually expressive or mutually unified? Can we attribute such a special significance to relationships that composers might not have intended to create? How can listeners correctly predicate such features of music if they are unaware of the relationships that confer these features on the work?

Some analysts, in attempting to deal with the above difficulties, have developed elaborate theories of musical expressiveness, unity, and so forth that allow for their approach to musical analysis.[1] I am not concerned here to review their theories; some such theories appear to be crude, inadequate, and importantly misleading. It is frequently claimed that the analyses reveal musical 'facts' that confirm the theories, whereas what counts as a significantly relevant 'fact' is determined by the conceptual structure of the theory and is in no sense independent of the theory. (This kind of point has been much emphasized by philosophers of science; see e.g. Kuhn 1970.) The analyses offered are best seen as illustrations of the theory rather than as evidence for it. Ultimately, the test for such theories involves considering whether or not they are convincing illustrations of the musical basis of the features in question.

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[1] I have in mind such writers as H. Schenker, R. Reti, H. Keller, A. Walker, L. B. Meyer, and D. Cooke.

In what follows I argue that the difficulties mentioned above in attributing significance to unobvious or hidden musical structures and relationships can be met satisfactorily. I confine the discussion to the case of musical unity but, as I have already suggested, I believe the argument may be generalized to justify the analyst's search for the musical basis of other emergent features. The issues raised by the above questions are conceptual rather than technical; the legitimacy of an entire approach to analysis is in doubt, not the adequacy of any particular analysis. So, my method is both general and theoretical. It is the difficulty in attributing significance to unobvious relationships, rather than the technical procedures and problems in demonstrating such relationships, that is investigated here.

## I

It might be claimed that, because of the nature of musical style, or even through the limitations imposed by a general system such as tonality, modality, or dodecaphony, it is inevitable that certain kinds of relationship will maintain within a work. These relationships cannot be unity-conferring within the work because qualitatively and quantitatively similar relationships will be common to other works. Since these various works are not unified with respect to each other, though they share many unobvious relationships, the relationships cannot provide the unity of individual works. The unavoidable ubiquity of such relationships deprives them of the sort of special significance they must have if they are to be unity-conferring.

This objection does not note merely that one work may quote from another, or that, say, the main themes of disparate works may closely resemble each other. It strikes at the heart of the analytical approach under review by denying that the sorts of unobvious relationships that are said to be unity-conferring could fulfill such an important function. This is not only a denial of the adequacy of particular analyses (though it could be applied in such contexts), it also attacks the theoretical foundation of such analyses. The objector might accept that a particular work is unified, but is denying that that unity is conferred on the work by the sorts of relationships exposed through analysis. He denies this by claiming that the same relationships could be shown to hold between disparate works that we would never claim to be mutually unified. Thus, though it may be true that individual composers may have distinctive 'fingerprints' and that some works composed as sets might be mutually unified, such points do not succeed in meeting the objection.

Two lines of reply to the objection are apparently available. One might deny that unity-conferring relationships of the kind described do hold between disparate works. Or, one might say that the fact that such relationships may be demonstrated to hold between disparate works does not commit one to the claim that they are mutually unified, so there need be no inconsistency in holding that such relationships might be unity-conferring within an individual work without being unity-conferring between disparate works.

There is some force to the objection. Clearly, we would be unimpressed by an analysis that identified as unity-conferring relationships that pervaded to an equal degree

many other musical works, some of which would not be normally regarded as unified. It is reasonable to expect that unity-conferring relationships are sufficiently complex and distinctive that they occur with similar pervasiveness in only a few other, if any other, works. That is, to be convincing, the analysis must identify as unity-conferring relationships that meet a criterion of distinctiveness. This point would be readily conceded by most analysts. But it is important to note that this criterion need not be specifiable. The kinds of relationship identified as unity-conferring are usually of the type described by Wittgenstein (1968: 31-2) as 'family resemblances'. That is to say, one part of the work shares some relationship with other parts of the work, a different relationship with yet other parts of the work, and so on for all or most parts of the work. There is an unbroken web of unobvious relationships between all or most parts of the work, though there is no element or set of elements common to all parts of the work. Hence, there are no relationships necessary or sufficient to guarantee musical unity within a work and, hence, no specifiable criterion for the successful analysis of the musical basis of a work's unity. (The analyst is committed neither to maintaining that the surface variety of the work is generated from a single musical idea nor to claiming that the surface contrasts are 'really' reformulations of a single musical idea. The importance of avoiding a reductionist account of the analytical procedure will be discussed presently.) The criteria settling the convincingness of any particular analysis are open-ended and there can be no rules guaranteeing the success of any particular analysis. What follows from this is that the analyst must exercise sensitivity and fine judgment in deciding that the relationships he is able to discover are complex and pervasive enough to justify the claim that they give rise to the work's unity. This is not to say that his judgment is subjective; it will be assessed by those who listen to the work in the light of his analysis. And, in the absence of a specifiable criterion, though it will not be easy to settle disputes about the convincingness or otherwise of some analyses, we need not admit that, in principle, such disputes are indeterminable. The analyst is not licensed to justify a poor analysis, obviously, by noting that his analysis must account for the work's unity since the work is unified and since these are the only relationships he can find in it.

In so far as the judgment of analysts is usually sound and in so far as the relationships they identify as unity-conferring are sufficiently complex and pervasive to ensure their distinctiveness, the first approach to the objection does much to remove its force. However, such claims would only remove the objection entirely if it could be shown that the relationships said to be unity-conferring must be unique to the work in question in their complexity and pervasiveness. But there is no way of guaranteeing the truth of this extravagant claim. Even if no other work shares the same relationships to the same degree at the moment (and how could one be sure of that?), there is no way of guaranteeing that a work composed tomorrow will not share the same relationships with the analyzed work. In that case, the approach so far adopted does not successfully meet the objection that two disparate works we would not regard as mutually unified could have in common the same unity-conferring features.

At this stage I turn to the second, more radical, line of reply to the objection. The objection confidently (and rightly) asserts that there are works we would not consider mutually unified, whatever the degree of relationships common to them both. But surely

this does not suggest that we should follow the objection in concluding that internal relationships have no function in giving rise to musical unity. Rather, we should conclude that there is a point to be made here about the grammar of the word 'unity' and not about the conditions under which unity is conferred. 'Unity' specifies an internal and not an external relationship and our reluctance to talk of the unity of disparate works reflects this fact without in any way reflecting on the conditions giving rise to unity within works (or sets of works). The fact that my brother stands to me in the same genetic relationship as my sister does not suggest that I should call him my sister (or that I should cease distinguishing between sisters and brothers). Another illustration: though the members of a family may display a family resemblance in that they variously share prominent ears, a recessive chin, and buckteeth, it does not follow that we would be prepared to regard any person displaying these features as a member of their family. In recognizing that prominent ears are an element in the creation of a family resemblance, one does not go on to say that anyone with prominent ears is a member of the same family. Prominent ears give rise to family resemblances but only within an independently specifiable family. Similarly, unobvious musical relationship may give rise to musical unity, but only within particular works that can be specified independently as particular works (perhaps by reference to the composer, the time of composition, and so forth). Thus, the fact that pieces independently identifiable as disparate works are not regarded as mutually unified though they share in common various musical relationships need not count against the claim that, within those works, those same musical relationships are unity-conferring.

The objection under consideration is best dismissed as confusing an important point about the grammar of the word 'unity' with a quite different point about the conditions under which unity might be generated within particular works. This is the claim made above. The first attempt at dismissing this objection was importantly unsatisfactory in that it conceded too much to the objection. Rather than exposing the conceptual confusion lying at the heart of the objection, it tried (unsuccessfully) to meet the objection by arguing that, in practice, the objection would find no application.

Notice how, in meeting the objection considered above, it was important to recognize that though musical unity may be generated by unobvious musical relationships, the unity and the relationships generating it are distinguished. Any reductionist account of musical unity—that is, one maintaining that to say that a work is unified is merely to report that certain kinds of relationships hold within the work—would be unable to meet the objection considered above. It is only by distinguishing the unity from the relationships from which it arises that one could maintain that unity arises within a particular work from the work's interrelated themes or whatever, while denying that that work is unified with respect to a disparate work in which the same relationships are equally pervasive. As I will make clear later, reductionism would also lead to other difficulties. The irreducibility of unity is apparent from the fact that a person may notice all the relationships generating a work's unity while failing to recognize that the work is unified. The unity may depend on the unobvious relationships between the work's parts, but is no more reducible to those relationships than is a gestalt reducible to the dots from which it emerges.

The objection considered so far claims that the sorts of relationships said to be unity-conferring are too ubiquitous to fulfill such a function adequately. Against this it has been acknowledged that the relationships said to be unity-conferring should be both distinctive and pervasive enough that only a small number of works would have such relationships in common. This view invites perhaps an opposite objection; namely, that a work may be unified though it cannot be demonstrated to possess enough of the sorts of relationships the analyst claims to be unity-conferring. Now, if the analyst believes that such relationships are a necessary condition for unity, a work such as the one described would be fatal for his theory. However, the analyst need only be committed to the claim that relationships of the kind described provide a sufficient condition for musical unity. This claim, though refuted by disunified works possessing the appropriate kinds of distinctive and pervasive relationships, is not challenged by unified works apparently lacking the appropriate kinds of unity-conferring relationships.

## II

I turn now to an objection that considers the composer's role in the creation of the work's unity. The objection allows that we might readily attach significance to unobvious relationships where it is known that those relationships were intentionally contrived or created by the composer, but it goes on to note that the relationships said to be unity-conferring are perhaps intentionally created only rarely. But if the relationships are not intended, they arise by chance, in which case we are forced to the unacceptable conclusion that the factors generating musical unity (and hence the unity itself) are beyond the composer's control.

A number of different replies might be tried. One might argue that all unity-conferring relationships are consciously intended by the composer. But this view seems simply false. As many unified works have been written by uncalculating, intuitive composers as by those who painstakingly mould their material for use. Or, one might argue that not all unconsciously performed acts are unintentional. The composer may work on her material unconsciously as a result of the skill she has acquired at her trade, in the way a competent car driver changes gears unconsciously. But whereas it is true that skills, once learned, may be applied unthinkingly, it is by no means clear that this point meets the objection. Though actions may become unthinking as they become habitual, it is always possible to make such actions conscious at will. Though many aspects of composition might be unconsciously performed in this way (orchestration, for example), there is reason to doubt that the creation of unity-conferring relationships is an acquired skill that has become habitual to all intuitive composers. It seems reasonable to suppose that many composers create such relationships unconsciously in a rather stronger sense than the reply allows. Many composers may not be able to make the process by which such relationships are created conscious, however much they try to do so. The creation of relationships is, for such composers, unconscious and not merely unthinking. Or, one might argue that the unifying process takes place in the composer's unconscious, so that, though she cannot make this process conscious, the process is controlled by psychic forces in her unconscious mind and to that extent is unconsciously intended. But this view commits one to a theory, such as the Freudian one, about the structure of the psyche

in a way that tells us (if anything) more about the composer's psychology than about the procedure by which the unity of her composition is generated. It might be rightly suspected that the notion of unconscious intention poses more problems than it solves.

All of these replies to the objection, even were they freed of the difficulties already raised, are inadequate in that they concede too readily the force of the objection. They are attempts to meet the objection by showing that the creation of the relationships is intended, if not consciously then in some unconscious fashion. But it will be more effective to challenge the objection on the grounds that it attaches too much importance to the composer's intentions in suggesting that what is unintended is random and beyond the composer's control. A first, obvious, point: It is always possible that a person fails to fulfill her intentions. Presumably, most composers intend to write unified works, and many of them fail to do so. Moreover, even if the composer intends to make her work unified as a result of consciously producing unobvious relationships throughout the work, there is no guarantee of success. It is by no means unknown for a composer to compose out of existence a relationship when, instead, she was trying to create an unobvious relationship. Conscious intentions may become so self-conscious as to defeat their aims. Clearly, then, the composer's intentions do not determine the properties or features that her work possesses, even though, more often than not, her intentions are realized.

Now, it is not the case that everything that is unintended is random in the sense of being beyond the agent's control. Unintended actions cannot be reduced merely to movements of one's body. We should distinguish between the intentionality apparent in social artifacts and the agent's intentions. The products of actions, including works of art, display intentionality in their organization usually, even if they do not display the agent's conscious intentions.[2] These two notions are conflated in the objection under consideration. It may well be the case that we are only prepared to talk of the unity of musical works because those works evidence intentionality and, hence, are clearly not random concatenations of sound. But from this it does not follow, as the objection supposes it does, that we only appreciate what is consciously intended in the work. Consider this case: A person speaks his mother tongue; his grasp of the semantics of his language is unconscious rather than unthinking; and he may be quite unable to describe the process that invests his use of the language with its semantic content. As philosophers are well aware, there are enormous difficulties in making explicit the semantic dimension of language, though native speakers have no difficulty in using and understanding

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[2] My use of the term 'intentionality' is unusual. I do not mean 'intension', as in the directedness of mental attitudes with propositional content toward objects, events, or states of affairs, and I do not mean 'intentionality', as in the goals, purposes, or designs of an agent. As I intend the term, it refers to an appearance of rationality and coherence that is internal to the order and shape of the music. It arises in part from the fact that music making is a social practice governed by rules and conventions. The music's intentionality is apparent in the organization of its materials—as a function of the music's structure, tonality, syntax, and so on—whether that organization is engineered deliberately or not by the work's composer. The composer may harness the music's intentionality, but does not create it.

utterances in their language. It would be quite misleading to say that the speaker intends to give his use of the language its semantic dimension (though it is appropriate to say that he intends to communicate something by a particular utterance). What would it be not to intend to mean something by the use of one's native language? (If one cannot not intend X, it makes little sense to say that one can intend X.) Language in general is meaningful because its use is intentional and not because all utterances convey the meanings they were intended to communicate. The meaningfulness of language in general does not result directly from utterers' intentions on occasions of utterance, but nor is language therefore random or spontaneous. The utterances that constitute a language are meaningful because they display intentionality rather than because they display intentions. If I say 'Tom Piper pecked a pickle', my utterance is meaningful whether or not it conveys the meaning I intended it to convey, and it is not deprived of meaning or significance if, in fact, it was something else I wished to say or if, indeed, I was not even conscious of uttering the words. From this discussion it is apparent that not all complicated human products derive their significance as a result of conscious planning or design. Though music is not a semantic system, it does display intentionality, and it is our awareness of this feature of music, rather than a belief that musical relationships are always consciously contrived, that licenses us to attribute significance to unobvious musical relationships. Even if composers are unaware of the musical processes unifying their works and are incapable of making such processes conscious, there need be no difficulty in claiming that such processes are capable of bearing the significance the analyst attributes to them.

The objection and the replies originally proposed perhaps rest on a tendency to think that if we can answer the question 'From where does the unity come?' we should also be able to answer the question 'From where do the unity-conferring properties come?'. But there is no reason to suppose that the second question can be given an answer in anything like the way that the first question can. It may be that the composer chooses among the possibilities that occur to her the continuation that feels right. That is to say, the composer might simply select from the fully formed musical ideas that come to her, without any prior manipulation or transformation of material already used, and without knowing exactly why she prefers one continuation to another. The unobvious relationships responsible for musical unity might be planned but, equally, they may be present already within some of the musical ideas from which she selects the continuation used. The intentionality apparent in the resulting composition might derive as much from a composer's exercise of choice as from her manipulative generation of material. The objection rejected above mistakenly supposes that musical analysis is significant only in so far as it exposes musical factors taken into account by the composer in the selection of her material, and then rightly suggests that the relationships identified by analysts as unity-conferring might not have been considered by the composer in her selection of continuations within her work. I have argued, however, that the analyst's attribution of significance need not be so restricted and could be thought to be so restricted only by those who mistakenly see musical analysis as an attempted answer to the second question asked above.

## III

I turn now to an objection concerning the listener's status. How can a listener respond positively to a work's unity when he is unaware of the relationships supplying that unity? How can the listener appreciate the significance of the unity-conferring relationships, as evidenced by his appreciation of the work's unity, though he remains unaware of those relationships?

Two unconvincing lines of reply are the following: One might claim that only those who hear the unity-conferring relationships are truly capable of attributing unity to musical works correctly. It is a consequence of such a view that only a very few listeners are competent to predicate unity of musical works and, given that unity is value-conferring, appreciate the value of different musical works. Such a consequence will strike few as acceptable. Or, one might argue that though the listener may not be aware of the relationships, he recognizes and appreciates them unconsciously. Now, whereas one might wish to say that a person hears the ticking of a clock while he is oblivious of the sound as he concentrates on some other activity, it is not clear that such a notion of unconscious perception is adequate to meet the objection. We do not listen to everything we are hearing, so we are often not aware of hearing things. But the listener in question is one who does listen to the music and concentrates hard on listening to it and who, nevertheless, is unaware of the unobvious relationships within the work that are said to be unity-conferring. To claim that such a listener is hearing the relationships unconsciously surely is to beg the question against the objection by assuming, rather than by demonstrating, that the relationships can bear the significance the analyst attaches to them.

Again, I would argue the replies offered above concede too much to the objection. They attempt to meet the objection by suggesting that the listener is able to hear the work's unity because he is aware, unconsciously if not consciously, of the unity-conferring relationships. A stronger attack on the objection would accept that the listener is unaware of the unity-conferring relationships but go on to deny that this debars him from recognizing and appreciating the work's unity. Such a reply to the objection is possible, provided one makes no attempt to reduce the musical property of unity merely to the possession of the appropriate relationships. The reductionist must deny that someone who is aware of the unity is unaware of the relationships, but the non-reductionist need not deny this. One may appreciate the unity without recognizing the process by which the unity is generated (just as one may perceive what is pictured in a newspaper photograph without being aware that the photograph is composed entirely of dots). Because the non-reductionist accepts the distinction between the unity and the relationships, though maintaining that the unity is an emergent feature of the relationships, he can accommodate equally well the cases where the listener hears the relationships but does not appreciate the unity and where the listener appreciates the unity but remains unaware of the relationships. The objection mistakenly conjoins an awareness of effects with an awareness of their causes, suggesting that an awareness of the one but not the other undermines the claim that the two are causally related. Clearly, such an objection could count only against a reductionist.

The objection under consideration overstates an important point the analyst must be prepared to acknowledge. It is this: The relationships exposed by analysis could have the significance claimed for them only if they were audible relationships. But here 'audible' does not mean 'recognized by those who correctly perceive the work's unity'; it means, instead, 'capable of being heard'. The analyst who sees in the score relationships that cannot be heard by anyone will not convince us that he has exposed the source of a work's unity. But the analyst whose analysis allows us to hear relationships of which we were previously unaware may well convince us. A convincing analysis, then, does not draw our attention merely to obvious, readily perceived relationships. It describes relationships many listeners would not have previously noticed but that, once attention is drawn to them, can be heard. This is not to say that the analysis makes unobvious relationships suddenly become obvious to the attentive listener (though this may happen). Skill and practice may be required in the appreciation of analyses. But it is to say that those with the appropriate skill should be able to perceive the relationships after those relationships are described in analyses. And if as a result of hearing the relationships the listener is prepared to agree to the analyst's claim that those relationships provide the concrete basis of the work's unity, the listener must also be prepared to accept that other listeners with the appropriate skill who hear the relationships, yet who deny that those relationships have the significance claimed for them, are mistaken. Those who claim significance for the relationships uncovered in their analyses are committed then to this: The relationships should be audible in the work for those with appropriate listening experience after they have considered the analysis and, on hearing them, most such listeners should accept that those relationships have the significance claimed for them and that others who deny this are mistaken.

## IV

I have argued against the three most common and powerful objections to the view that the analysis of unobvious musical relationships may explain the musical basis for the correct predication of emergent features, such as unity and expressiveness, to musical works. I have suggested that these objections can be met, provided that reductionist accounts of such features are avoided and provided that the analyst accepts certain commitments as to the distinctiveness and audibility of the relationships for which he claims significance. The proposed answers to the objections in no way excuse inadequate analyses, and they do not necessarily support the theories analysts may espouse on the basis of their analyses. These answers make such theorizing possible without endorsing any particular theory that might have been or might be developed.