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Music and The Problem of Knowing

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Abstract

Music is a complex human art form. It involves processes and systems innate in the human organism and developed or designed from experience. Often, the nature and workings of these are taken for granted, ignored or uncritically accepted. So, this attempt is to find out what it really means to know in general and to know music in particular. The nature of the investigation is philosophical since any critical inquiry into the nature of knowledge is fundamentally epistemological. The outcome is a big concern about different claims to knowledge. From facts to theories and from taste to aesthetics, the fallibility, probability or certainty of knowledge must be continually reviewed to avoid the adoption of bogus claims from passions, prejudices, emotions and interests as parts of the knowledge deposit.

Keywords: Music, epistemological foundation, nature of Knowing, Knowledge deposit

INTRODUCTION

Music is difficult to define. A purely human art found in all known cultures of the world, music is understood more in terms of the role it plays in human events from the cradle to the grave. It is said to be organized sound pleasing to the ear. This is a description that can be adopted as a working guide. The manner in which sound is organized relates to the cultural and environmental soundscape. This means that the type of sounds available and the understanding guiding their arrangement are determining factors. However, the issue of what pleases the ears is a big one since the area is fraught

with aesthetic dissensions and bitter disagreements. From person to person and from culture to culture music varies in conception, understanding, composition, performance, instruments and instrumentations, audience behaviour and judgment of musical beauty. Be that as it may, music is a human activity, an artistic outlet for the unspoken and unspeakable passions of the human spirit. No other human activity resembles or replicates making music. The word 'music' is often associated with the nine muses from ancient Greek mythology. The word 'epistemology' equally is



traced to two Greek words, *episteme* (knowledge) and *logos* (study). Epistemology considers the question, nature, validity and task of knowledge. It looks at the foundation, processes and modes of knowledge so as to establish and evaluate the canons through which true knowledge can be differentiated from falsehood. This critical examination which is based on skepticism safeguards our foundation of knowledge through a re-examination of all previous knowledge claims. If this can be done for knowledge in general, then it can be done for music which is part of knowledge. Before raising questions pertaining to music, let us look at a brief philosophical development of the question of knowledge.

A Historical Perspective

Egypt is rightly called the 'cradle of civilization'. This civilization is not limited to geometry and the building of pyramids. This civilization includes the knowledge of philosophy since most of the early Greek philosophers like Plato and Pythagoras were students in the Egyptian Mystery Systems for many years. Other early Greek philosophers include Permenides, Democritus, Socrates and Aristotle.

Permenides was a pioneer thinker who moved away from the search for the ultimate stuff behind everything. He is widely regarded as being the first to

tackle the issue of knowledge through his analysis of one and many, appearance and reality, the world of reason and opinion. For him, "Being, is" while "Non-being is not". "Becoming is absurd". These statements shaped his epistemology.

The **atomists** pushed it further by holding that being is divided into external reality and its appearance. They held that the atoms were invisible and behind every existence. They concluded that true knowledge is impossible whereas opinion remains the second best to knowledge. The more extreme and radical **sophists** upheld appearance as the only reality knowable. They attacked the Permenidean concept of unchanging constant. They ended up with absolute subjectivism. **Socrates** was a contemporary of the sophists, so he lived his life teaching to correct the erroneous philosophies of the sophists. He, therefore, championed the cause of knowledge and its pursuit as the solution to evil in the world. Inventing the educational method called midwifery, he would employ the use of questions and gradually lead his students to the answers they sought, showing that knowledge for him was innate even if the students were unaware of it. **Plato**, a disciple of Socrates advanced the Socratic Method in his academy where mathematics was given pride of place. Whereas the sophists taught that knowledge was made up of only sense perception, thereby



upholding subjectivity, Plato taught objectivity. He divided knowledge into the phenomenal and the noumenal, appearance and reality. He saw knowledge as transphenomenal. The world of ideas or forms is the real world while this visible universe is mere imitation of that real world. Knowledge is nothing but recollection. Knowledge happens when the mind recalls through anamnesis, the ideas it knew while existing in the world of forms before being imprisoned in the body. At the point of entering the body, knowledge is forgotten but recalled through education. He exposed his teachings in his dialogues usually dedicated to Socrates. For Plato, “I suppose that what we call learning will be the recovery of our own knowledge and scarcely we should be right in calling this recollection” (1971:125). Aristotle accepted Plato’s treatment of reality but denied the transcendental character of either “*matter*” or “*form*”. He taught that both were inseparable. He denied platonic dualism a place in knowledge. But this dualism did not go away. In fact it matured into the greatest battle among philosophers as empiricism and rationalism. The empiricists accepted as knowledge that which was based on experience (synthetic knowledge) whereas the rationalists taught that knowledge exists in the mine as innate (a priori knowledge) endowment of being. Immanuel Kant was to mediate in the

running battle by establishing the possibility of a synthetic a priori form of knowledge. This mediation resulted in the denial of metaphysics as a synthetic form of knowledge since Kant preferred to deny knowledge so as to make a room for faith.

The Nature of Knowledge

Aristotle held that all men by nature desire to know. There is need to determine the true nature of knowledge, its essence. To do this, there is need to examine the knowing form and the knowing process. Therefore, the interior and exterior parts of knowledge as well as consciousness and the immateriality of knowledge need be explained.

Knowledge is both an interior and immanent act, yet it has exterior characteristics like realism, idealism etc. The dual nature of knowledge gets clearer, however, when we know the fact that there is no knowledge without an object – at least an intentional object and a subject. In relation to consciousness, sometime, knowledge is juxtaposed with consciousness. This is not in order. Consciousness is only describing a state of greater or lesser awareness in the cognition of being. There cannot be any form of unconscious knowledge, except perhaps in the case of ecstatic revelation that superimposes on the unconscious self. A conscious act then is one’s awareness of being the author of his acts.



In the case of the concept of immateriality, it implies the transcending of the limitation of matter. Knowledge is more immaterial than material. The purest form of human knowledge is immaterial and thus, knowledge becomes universal as it moves away from particular, material objects. Matter is a limiting quality of being. The more immaterial an object is, the more its unlimited nature to be known. Awareness is a property of human knowledge. Man, not only knows; he knows that he knows. This sets him apart from the lower animals. However, this type of knowledge is intuitive.

This general description of knowledge applies to the sciences, theology, physical and biological studies and the arts. So, knowledge in relation to music is both an interior and exterior phenomenon, involving consciousness, pristine immateriality and a sound awareness of that fact.

Forms of Knowledge

Knowledge is both immanent and objective. *Immanent* knowledge refers to the abstraction and possession of some form or perfection with its subject. This exists as the subject's own. *Objective* knowledge deals with the externality of what is known. This knower is always presumed to be external to that which it knows. Therefore, objects are known ontologically distinct from the knower.

Actual knowledge is the immediate product of cognitive activity in man. Conserving and recalling of that which is known is called *habitual* knowledge.

The Problems of Knowledge

Philosophy, no doubt produces questioning minds. Often, these minds produce more questions than the world can ever answer. Some of these questions have been answered while some appear unanswerable. Nevertheless, philosophy is more interested in raising critical questions than in providing perennial answers. A primary consideration in this regard is the question of knowledge. What does it mean? In particular what does it mean to have the knowledge of music? What does music consist in? A composer dreams up words for his music. Other knocks them out from his head not as a given in inspiration or dreamlike ecstasy but as a mechanical carpentry work. Someone else takes a cue from an existing song or poem. The singer sings what is written or composed. Another makes a deep musical analysis of the composition or the singing as a musicologist. The ethnomusicologist looks at the music and culture of non-Western people. The instrumentalist shows knowledge and dexterity in his exploits. The dancer entertains his audience with great moves. So, where lies the knowledge of music? In all of them? Yes. To what extent? This may not be



easily determined. What about the musicians who are well known for their works, albums, performances and who bring a lot of emotional connections and comfort to their different publics? What knowledge of music do they have? What is the nature of the knowledge? Do they really know music or an aspect of the indeterminate art? How pure is the knowledge of music we attribute to these various players in the field? Even in the case of the musicians, the current run of events has made it possible for the often-forgotten studio engineers to do all the work of a band on a sequencer with minimal contribution from the known musician. So where lies the musical knowledge? In the sound engineers or in the singer?

There are problems regarding the reliability of what we claim to know as well as the source of our knowledge. If the source of knowledge is uncertain and untrustworthy, then, the information is highly dubitable. Claims to knowledge have often been plagued with such distortions like illusions, deceptions of perception, mirage, hallucination, colour blindness, error and outright lie. Descartes ascribed two qualities to anything that can be accepted as knowledge – ‘clarity’ and ‘distinctness’. It may even be that the things we claim to know are all lies. But if indeed we cannot trust our perceptions since we cannot perceive the inner essences of things, the

noumena, the thing-in-itself, then the realities we accept come under heavy doubt and cynicism. To put it in another way, does anything exist outside sense data? If we cannot trust what arises from the senses, how can we even trust what arises from the intellect which has not passed through the senses? That is the reason for the scholastic epistemic maxim: *Nihil in intellectu qui non prius erat in sensu* – there is nothing in the intellect which was not first in the senses. The truth is that there are distortions in what we claim to know; that the presence of a sense organ and its object (for instance the ears and sound) does not translate automatically into knowledge. The sense organ could be deformed or deficient in apprehending the object and in relation to music, in making the right aesthetic judgment. This means that consciousness is crucial for our sense information. There is the same controversy when we consider that the intellect is immaterial yet comprehends material objects. How does this happen? Perhaps it is in the nature of immaterial faculties to apprehend material objects. From Zeno’s paradoxes to the skepticism of the sophists, the uncertainty of human knowledge is written plain and large on the pages of history and experience.

CONCLUSION

There are problems surrounding the adequacy of the senses, and outright solution is not possible. This is because to



validate the senses of to probe their adequacy presupposes the existence of a more fundamental source of knowledge than the senses. This is totally absent. The middle term required in every proof is equally lacking. Therefore, sense knowledge cannot receive adequate proof or contradiction since it does not contradict itself. With regard to intellectual knowledge, we shall go with the thomistic position that so long as the faculty apprehends its proper object, it cannot fail. So, it is impossible for our intellect to deceive us unless we understand absolutely nothing about it and its proper objects. The cooperation of the sense organs and the intellect is needed to achieve musical knowledge. The very theoretically cognitive may not be precocious or talented in the psychomotor domain. The talented drummer may be unable to give meaningful explanation or interpretation to what he does. The composer who has a very melodic sense may lack the depth of

harmonic association found in another. This means that musical knowledge does not reside in one group of people or the other. It is the diffusive appearances of essences communicated through varied organs, instruments and persons as expressed in the philosophical phrase of one and many. No musical knowledge is the knowledge, because no music is the music.

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