

KARL POPPER ON MUSIC (Popper's intellectual development and the phenomenology of music)

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Abstract: *Karl. R. Popper is considered critical rationalist of twentieth century and he is best known for his views about Philosophy of Science and Political Philosophy. Being a multidimensional personality and a prolific writer he wrote and commented upon many topics other than Science and Politics. He wrote about History, Art, Music, Science and Mathematics too. According to Popper Music has been a 'dominant theme' in his life. He did not consider Music as his hobby or a way of entertainment or enjoyment only. He inferred many important philosophical ideas (like subjective vs. objective) from the phenomenology, structure and grammar of Music. It is quite interesting to notice that in the tradition of western philosophy Popper was among the very few philosophers (like Nietzsche) who openly admitted the influence of Music on their philosophies and tried to make others understand the relation between their understanding of Music and their intellectual development. In this article, it has been attempted to understand that how music influenced the intellectual and philosophical development of a great philosopher.*

Key Words: The Phenomenology of Music, Dogma and Tradition, Objective and Subjective Theories of Art, World 3, Historicist Ideas.

Phenomenology of Music

In order to understand the above mentioned statement of Popper, it is but necessary to know the phenomenology of Music first. In music we have a limited amount of musical notes. They are basically seven and in totality, twelve. Basic notes of Music are seven but apart from the first and the fifth note, every note has two kinds (which are called major and minor in the language of Music). Philosophically, it is a matter of great wonder that the whole music of the world is nothing but the combination of these twelve notes. Another important thing in music is beat. Again we have different beats which are nothing but a combination of strikes (6, 8, 10, 12, 16, 15) in our culture. The complete twelve notes are called an Octave and this octave are often repeated consistent with the pitch of the singer or the musicians. For human voice the three octaves are enough, for instruments we will use four or five. The phenomenology of Music teaches us or makes us understand the 'intended' and 'un-intended' combinations and Bruce Ellis Benson, in *The Improvisations of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music*, gives a systematic study of phenomenological foundations of music and he explains vividly the distinction between intended and unintended combinations in music. Popper himself explains what he took as a Philosopher from music. He considers his three important ideas which are directly inspired by music.¹

- i. The importance of dogma and traditions.
- ii. His own use of the terms "Objective" and "Subjective"
- iii. Destructive power of historicist ideas.

One can take these important topics one by one and try to understand the connection between Music and the intellectual development of Popper.

The significance of Dogma and Tradition

In his Epistemology Popper clearly explains the status of human knowledge. According to Popper, the advancement of knowledge consist, mainly, in the modification or re-modification of earlier Knowledge.² Popper rejected Continental Rationalism on one hand and British Empiricism on the other. According to popper both of the schools have been much interested to reach at a flawless source of knowledge. He clearly explains that knowledge cannot be produced or developed in vacuum or in a Tabula Rasa state.³ Popper admitted that he realized the importance of the tradition and dogma from Music.

In Music According to Popper, first one has to have some basic notes (seven). The development of flat or sharp notes (major and minor) can be considered a latter development. Different octaves according to the pitch and range of human voice or instrumental use can also be considered as a latter development but the tradition and dogma of basic seven notes cannot be challenged. Popper was fascinated by this and explained that he took the very notion of the importance of dogma or tradition from the phenomenology of music.

Popper's views about 'Objectivity' and 'Subjectivity'

Popper rejected the Modern Philosophical Epistemology on the grounds that it is

¹ Karl R. Popper, *Unended Quest* (London: Routledge, 1992), 55.

² Karl R. Popper, *A Pocket Popper*, ed. David Miller (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1983), 55.

³ Popper, *Unended Quest*, 55.

very subjective and hence irrelevant to the growth of Science and Philosophy.⁴ Modern Philosophical Epistemology starts with Descartes and the conclusion of the Cartesian method is “I think therefore I am.”⁵ According to Popper the word “I” signifies the extreme subjective nature of this epistemology.

On the other hand, Popper doesn't deny the existence of some kind of innate ideas or an intellectual intuition but he doesn't want to offer them the central position in Epistemology as a flawless source of knowledge.⁶ Popper's own use of the term ‘objectivity’ is different from the word ‘objectivity’ in the traditional sense. In order to understand the concept of ‘objectivity’ of Popper, we have to understand popper's concept of ‘World 3’. According to Popper ‘World 1’ is the world of material objects. ‘World 2’ is the world of perception, conception and a disposition to act or react. ‘World 3’ of Popper is actually the outcome of the interaction between ‘World 1’ and ‘World 2’. It is the unintended by product of the actually produced books and arguments.⁷ It is not difficult to understand for a person relating to music that Popper inferred this concept from the phenomenology of it. In music the ‘World 1’ is the physical existence of the notes and strikes on Drum etc. This mechanism of music is material in nature. ‘World 2’ is the composer or the creator of the new music (or new composition). Any new composition which is definitely the outcome of the first two worlds, in reality, is nothing but a combination of new notes and strikes on drum.

According to Popper this composition is really the ‘unintended effect’ of the interaction between the primary two worlds. Within the flow of rhythm and therefore the combination of latest notes, it's almost impossible to mix notes intentionally. If one do so, it will be a dull and non-creative kind of composition. It's ‘objective’ within the sense that it's ‘unintended’ and it's human production within the sense that a material object (instrument) and a subject (composer) must be there as starting agents.

It is not difficult to understand that the whole concept of objectivity in the form of ‘unintended effects’ is actually an idea inspired from the phenomenology of music.

Destructive power of Historicist Ideas

In order to understand what Popper means from Historicism, it is necessary to understand his criticism of the historical views of Hegel and Marx.⁸ According to Popper the views of Hegel and Marx about history assert much that history features a set pattern.⁹ All the events of history, basically, follow a pattern. Hegel considers this movement a dialectical movement and Marx applied this dialectical movement on the socio-economic conditions of any society.¹⁰ Popper denies the very existence of a fixed pattern of history through which we can predict the future events (as in the case of historical determination of Karl Marx). Interestingly Popper claims to infer the negation of historicism through the phenomenology of music.

As mentioned before the basic seven notes of music can be considered as a dogma

⁴ Karl R. Popper, “Knowledge: Subjective versus Objective (1967),” in *A Pocket Popper*, ed. David Miller (Glasgow: Fontana press, 1983), 63.

⁵ René Descartes, *A Discourse on Method*, trans. Laurence J. Lafleur (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1960), 58

⁶ Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 10

⁷ Popper, “Knowledge: Subjective versus Objective (1967),” 69.

⁸ Karl R. Popper, *A Pocket Popper*, ed. David Miller (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1983), 289.

⁹ Karl R. Popper, “Historicism (1936),” in *A Pocket Popper*, ed. David Miller (Glasgow: Fontana press, 1983), 291.

¹⁰ Popper, 304.

or a tradition without which nothing new can be found or formed. On the other hand, when someone claims to fix the possible combinations of the musical notes, it will lead to a mechanical and non-creative sort of musical structure.

Popper's views about Mathematics

Popper inferred many original ideas from the phenomenology of music and from the philosophy of Mathematics as well. In order to explain his 'World 3', and how 'World 3' is autonomous, free and objective, Popper takes the example of mathematics.¹¹ According to Popper the number series of Mathematics is man-made (1, 2, 3...) but the distinction between odd numbers and even numbers and the existence of prime numbers are nothing but an unintended result of it. He justified the existence of odd, even and numbers as: "An unintended and unavoidable consequence of our creation."¹²

We can easily notice the influence of music on Popper after reading and comprehending his views about mathematics.

According to Popper, if in music we have very limited number of notes and strikes and their combinations lead us to the unlimited and unintended results in the form of new possibilities and new combinations, in mathematics.

We have a limited number series from 1 to 9. With the development of digit zero (0) and with their mutual combination, we could get unlimited and countless possibilities. Popper considers odd numbers, even numbers and prime numbers as the unintended results of the number series. They are unintended so objective and free in the philosophy of Karl Popper. When we try to fix the laws of history in order to predict the future events, when we try to fix the basic combinations of music Popper considers it the destructive power of historicism.

Popper's views about Kant's Philosophy

Popper writes about Kant's philosophy "Our intellect does not derive its laws from nature, but imposes its laws upon nature."¹³

The above mentioned statement may be an excellent explanation of Kant's Transcendental Idealism. Popper himself explains how he comprehends the central idea of *Critique of Pure Reason*. He writes "Indeed, a great work of music (like an excellent scientific theory) may be a cosmos imposed upon chaos in its tensions and harmonies inexhaustible even for its creator".¹⁴

Popper was a philosopher who knew both music and philosophy in depth and that is why he has been successful to get many of his original ideas from music. Now it seems necessary to explain his above mentioned statement musically.

¹¹ Popper, "Knowledge: Subjective versus Objective (1967)", 70.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Karl R. Popper, *Unended Quest* (London: Routledge, 1992), 59.

¹⁴ Popper, *Unended Quest*, 59.

Tensions and Harmonies in Music

In music within one octave, we have many notes and each note has its own quality and effect. The chord in music means the harmony between different notes. For example, the first note ('Sa' in our culture) has a harmonic chord with 5th note and the first note of the second octave. Within different notes of music there exists many tensions. In music it is called discord. Popper in his statement actually wants to say that music is very much like a scientific theory. It is a cosmos on the chaos and is very much like the central ideas of the Critique of Pure Reason.

Popper's Rejection of the Expressionist Theory of Music

Before Popper the expressionist theory of music was very much popular. According to this theory music is the self-expression of the musician. Popper denies it and claims that opposite is the case. Music, according to him is not the self-expression of the musician but the moods and emotions of the musician are due to the unintended but creative combinations of it.¹⁵ In this case the personality of the musician becomes a testing body upon which the different, new and unintended combinations affect.¹⁶ Popper considers the expressionist theory as a 'theology without God'.¹⁷ He is of the opinion that in ancient period the artists were considered as persons guided by God's grace. Hegel's concept of Objective Spirit is also in accordance with these sorts of traditional ideas in art. Objective Spirit, sometimes take the personalities of great men as its tools.¹⁸ In this case God inspires the Artists.

In the case of expressionist theories (for example the art theory of Croce and Collingwood) the artists inspires themselves and that is why Popper calls them theologies without God¹⁹ In his 'World 3' and in his Objective theory of Art and Music he rejects not only the Hegel's concept of Objective Spirit but also the subjective, expressionist theories of Art. Actually in his 'World 3' Popper tries to discover the original ontological status of human knowledge. Music is no exception for him. On the other hand, he claims to infer this idea from the phenomenology of Music. If Kant's philosophy, according to him, is a cosmos upon chaos, then same is the case with mathematics and music. He wants to get rid of the Modern Philosophical Epistemology due to its being subjective and hence irrelevant to the growth of philosophy and science and also because of its being theological in nature.²⁰

Conclusion

For many people Music is supposed for enjoyment and entertainment. To the point of view for many musicians, music is for self-satisfaction and earning money. For many philosophers and intellectuals (like Popper) music has always been a mysterious kind which should be explored and understood. Just in case of Popper we've a philosopher within the history of Western philosophy who openly claims that the majority of his

¹⁵ Popper, 67.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Popper, 66.

¹⁸ Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 4th edition (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1945), 37.

¹⁹ Popper, 61.

²⁰ Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 25.

original ideas about Epistemology, Ontology of human knowledge, historicism and therefore the importance of Dogma and Tradition etc. were inferred or inspired from the phenomenology of Music. Popper summarizes his thoughts on philosophy of music in his autobiography *The Unended Quest* and he highlights mysterious aspect of music. This is interesting and highly thought provoking for all the persons related to philosophy. This article is an attempt to know why Popper considers music as a dominant theme in his life.

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