

Can there be a Science of Musical Understanding? Professor Roger Scruton

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The 2011 Conference of the Musical Brain was opened by Professor Michael Trimble who addressed the 'otherness' of music in a quick interactive survey. The majority of the audience admitted that they had cried whilst listening to a piece of music. This emotional reaction occurred less while interacting with literature and even less so while being exposed to the visual arts. Having established a good rapport Professor Trimble moved on to underline the interdisciplinary character of the day consisting of a series of talks followed by an open debate on the role of neuroscience for the Humanities.

The first interlocutor was Professor Roger Scruton whose strong humanistic position became clear in his very first sentence when he addressed himself as a neurosceptic. The title of his talk 'Can there be a science of musical understanding?' proposed not only scepticism but also the readiness for exploration of the need to scientifically analyse the process of listening to music. He went on to articulate his reasoning around why we can use science, specifically neuroscience, to understand how the brain reacts and reads music, but why we cannot use this science to understand the 'aboutness' of music.

An overview of theories and approaches towards the origins of music and its role for human beings followed. Professor Scruton looked closer at adaptation theory and touched briefly on the computational theory of the human brain. He then proceeded to suggest that music could be a by-product of evolution.

The audience was presented with the similarities between music and language, with the emphasis on language being treated as an adaptation (language universals, Chomsky). We use science as a tool to understand the cognitive processes involved in language production and reception, but the knowledge of how the brain works does not explain how we, as humans, understand the language itself. By bringing language into the talk Professor Scruton looked closer into the possibility of 'musical syntax' and the search for a generative grammar of music (Lerdahl & Jackendoff). He claimed that music is not generative while language is.

He also believes that there are no musical semantics. Music does not have any meaning; it is not something other than itself. To express how music is not about anything in particular he playfully suggested: "I can't put it to words, something has happened here but there is some kind of 'aboutness', but it is not a semantic idea." Professor Scruton described this idea as being similar to the meaningfulness of a smile. It is not a semantic sign, but one universally understood.

Music is part of the human experience. We learn about musical sincerity through the relationship we enter into with the musician or composer. Through the ups and downs of the classical piece of music, your emotions travel with the artist and you form a sympathetic understanding of what emotions the piece is trying to convey, though often this is not possible to verbalise. Professor Scruton illustrated this idea by playing several notes of music together on a keyboard. After playing a series of notes which seemed naturally correct, he then played a 'wrong note'. We still do not understand why we have the natural ability to determine 'wrong notes' from those that seem to have the correct continuation, even without musical training, which was a key point in Professor Scruton's argument.

He spoke about analogies between visual and auditory perception. The image consists of pixels and one could argue that an image is nothing more than pixels, the same way a piece of music in theory might be nothing more than a series of individual sounds. Professor Scruton is strongly against 'nothing but-ery' and he warns us of fallacy in reductionism. He finally concluded that the whole body is involved with understanding music, through dance and beats, and that neuroscience could not explain why we enjoy it and how we understand it.

Regarding formal aspects of the presentation Professor Scruton exercised great diction. He had a daunting looking power point presentation but was very skilful in talking the audience through it while maintaining eye contact. The use of the piano to illustrate the points he was making kept the audience involved and interested.

It was a strong and enthusiastic presentation of a neurosceptic viewpoint with a presentation of some aspects of mind theories within a Humanistic tradition. However, although none of the statements made were implausible we do feel that there could have been more detailed explanations of certain theories. Unfortunately, he did not offer the opposing argument in much detail, which would have helped to inform his diverse audience at this point in the conference. Professor Scruton clearly knew his subject well and this was possibly the reason why he was not so open to debate, specifically from those in the audience with a more scientific perspective. However, we would anticipate that answering such questions would definitely have further supported his argument.