



WILEY-
BLACKWELL

Rock versus Classical Music

Author(s): Stephen Davies

Source: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 57, No. 2, Aesthetics and Popular Culture (Spring, 1999), pp. 193-204

Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of The American Society for Aesthetics

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/432312>

Accessed: 21/09/2009 10:09

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=black>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The American Society for Aesthetics and Blackwell Publishing are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Rock versus Classical Music

In this paper I consider the issue whether rock and classical music require different criteria for their appreciation and evaluation. I address this issue through a consideration of Bruce Baugh's "Prolegomena to Any Aesthetics of Rock Music."¹ I consider Baugh's position because it represents a widely held viewpoint. Versions of it are held by unreflective rock fans and professional commentators on the rock scene alike. Ideas central to Baugh's positive account of rock music—for instance, that it has a nonrational, Dionysian appeal that depends on its power and rhythm—are presented by a wide range of rock's defenders, from proto-rock-journalist Richard Meltzer to musicologists Susan McClary and Robert Walser to rock critic and historian Robert Palmer, as well as by its critics, for example, Allan Bloom.² Nevertheless, I think that this position is mistaken. I suggest that, at the level of generality presupposed by classifications as broad as "classical" and "rock," it is not distinctive aesthetics that separate these types.

I. THE ARGUMENTS

Baugh asks: "Does rock music have standards of its own, which uniquely apply to it, or that apply to it in an especially appropriate way?" (p. 23). He believes the answer to be "yes" and notes that

any attempt to evaluate or understand rock music using traditional aesthetics of music is bound to result in a misunderstanding. ... Rock belongs to a different tradition, with different concerns and aims. ... Traditional musical aesthetics is concerned with form and composition, whereas rock is concerned with the *matter* of music. ... By "matter" I mean the way music

feels to the listener, or the way it affects the listener's body. (p. 23)

Baugh makes no attempt to define what he means by "rock" or "classical" music. The rock songs he names are confined largely to the 1960s and 1970s. As regards classical music, he mentions a number of composers, but refers to only a few works or performers. Obviously there are gray areas. How should we class rock operas, or the efforts of the Boston Pops? Despite these worries, I will accept, as does James O. Young,³ Baugh's critic, that our precritical groupings of the relevant musical types coincide well enough to make the dialogue possible.

Baugh's argument can be summarized as follows: Classical works are appreciated primarily for their forms, and the focus of attention in this music falls more on the work than the performance. The performer is subservient to the score she follows. By contrast, in rock music the performance is the object of attention and it is enjoyed and valued for its nonformal properties. The musicians usually have no score to direct them, and the sonic effects at which they aim are not ones that could be notated easily. Of importance among the nonformal properties central to rock are the "material features of sound," especially rhythm, the expressivity of notes, and volume. These affect the listener's body directly and are appreciated nonintellectually. They produce a response that is visceral or somatic. It is the aim of rock music to elicit this reaction, whereas classical music does not have this effect or purpose.

Young responds by arguing that nonformal features are no less present in classical than rock

music. Classical music often is expressive of emotion. Sheer beauty of tone is important and loudness sometimes is of expressive significance. Moreover, classical music also affects the listener's body, eliciting foot-tapping, head-nodding, air-conducting, and (in private, if not in the concert chamber) dancing. While classical performers usually follow a score, considerable freedom in the score's interpretation is tolerated; also, some classical works, such as those with a figured bass, require the performer to improvise. Because classical performers can adopt a more earthy, primitive technique when the music calls for it, Young decides that classical music encompasses all the features presented by Baugh as distinctive of rock, and more besides. He concludes:

Each of the standards of excellence in rock music performance which Baugh identifies applies as well to performances of classical music. ... This is not to say that no difference exists between rock and classical music. For better or worse, however, rock music has to be judged by the standards which have always been used to judge music.⁴

In his reply to Young's criticisms, Baugh argues that the techniques of performance for rock are not merely primitive versions of those used in classical music.⁵ A different kind of virtuosity is required, which is why good classical musicians cannot usually transfer their skills to the successful performance of rock music. Moreover, the rock player's techniques are untrained and natural, rather than mechanical and polished. He suggests, in addition, that classical music long has lost its connection with the listener's emotional or bodily response:

A tradition is an ongoing, developing thing, and the classical tradition has ... become more formalist in its standards of composition and performance and more intellectualist in its approach to listening. ... If feeling and formalism once vied with each other ..., the battle is long since over, and the formalists won.⁶

As to Young's conclusion, Baugh approaches it in a fashion that is perhaps surprising. He might have insisted that his goal was to identify features that are distinctive of, if not always exclusive to, rock music. Instead, and somewhat disingenuously, he writes: "the main aim of my

essay was to establish the limits of formalist criticism when it comes to music."⁷ He closes by turning Young's conclusion on its head.

Perhaps Young is right that what is truly valuable in classical *performances* is also a matter of feeling rather than form. But in that case, in classical music, as in rock, formal complexity can never make up for an absence of expressive qualities, and for better or for worse, classical music would have to be judged by the same performance-based standards used to judge rock music.⁸

Whereas Young intimates that rock will fare badly in the comparison with classical music according to the criteria of evaluation that apply to all music, Baugh implies the reverse. If its performance is overly intellectual, and rule governed, as Baugh often intimates, classical music will be revealed as sterile and unappealing when non-formal criteria of evaluation come into play.

Some good points are made on both sides of this exchange. Young does well to emphasize how limited is Baugh's view of the role of the performer and of the place of expressiveness in classical music. Baugh is correct to insist that rock players harness distinctive skills in the pursuit of goals different from those that concern the classical performer. Nevertheless, my overall impression is that the arguments miss each other. This occurs despite the fact that Young seems to accept the parameters set up by Baugh. Their differences might have been more clearly articulated had those parameters been examined. Baugh's argument relies on questionable distinctions between music's formal and nonformal elements and between the kinds of musicianship involved in performing the two kinds of music.

II. FORMALISM AND EXPRESSIVENESS

Baugh believes that the interest in classical music is exclusively formal, and he cites Kant, Hanslick, and Adorno in support of the claim. "Classical aesthetics of music explicitly excludes questions concerning how music feels or sounds, and the emotional reactions music provokes, from consideration of musical beauty" (p. 24). Formalist issues continue to predominate in music criticism in general, from journalism to academia (p. 24). Against all this, Young observes that composers and musicians have al-

ways regarded classical music as including the expression and arousal of emotions.⁹ (He could have added, of course, that many philosophers of music in this century have taken the analysis of music's expressive powers as their prime topic.) He argues that nonformal properties are often of more interest than formal elements in classical music.

For my part, I am more inclined to question the viability of the distinction on which Baugh founds his argument. I cannot imagine how one could listen to music without concerning oneself with form, with the structuring of sound. Music is patterned sound, and one can hear the music in the noise it makes only by detecting its pattern.¹⁰ At the micro-level, much music is organized in terms of tonalities or modalities, harmonic combinations, meter, and so on. At the mid-level, there are units such as melodies. At the macro-level, there are chunks, some of which repeat or vary previously introduced material. Unless one can hear a tune—hear when it begins and ends, when it is repeated—one cannot locate the music that is there. This way of listening is not any more “intellectual” than is hearing a sentence in one's mother tongue with understanding. In both cases, a great deal of enculturation lies behind the process, but that process is “natural” to the extent that it is our effortless way of hearing music and language as such. The perceptual experience that would require thought and special effort is that of hearing one's native music or language merely as strings of unrelated sounds.

As music, rock is no less formal than any other kind. Typically, it is tonal (though the third and seventh degrees of the scale can be inflected, as in the scale used in blues). It employs the meter of common time and a persistent backbeat. It uses familiar harmonic patterns. It contains melodies. It is sectioned according to strophic or other repetitive structures. Baugh allows as much, but he suggests that art rock was a disaster when it attempted to make its forms the focus of interest (p. 25).¹¹ When rock succeeds, it does so not in virtue of its formal interest but, rather, by using the “materiality” of sound to generate nonformal properties. With classical music, by contrast, the listener's attention should be directed to the form, and nonformal properties are of secondary importance only. “In classical aesthetics of music, matter is at the

service of form, and is always judged in relation to form” (p. 25).

It might be said that form is one thing and expressiveness quite another. The two are distinct, certainly, but they operate in such intimate proximity that a rigid distinction between the formal and nonformal properties of music is easily undermined. The expressive character of music often depends on its structure, and we might understand a piece's form as much in terms of its expressive progress as in terms of textbook models. Micro, medium, and macro patterns of organization affect the piece's expressive character. Imagine two musical sections: a slow, dragging part (X) and an upbeat, lively one (Y). The expressive mood of the piece obviously is affected in part by how these are ordered—for example, as XY, YX, XYX, YXY, and so on.¹² Take the twelve-bar pattern of blues as an example. The micro-form usually is of an XXY type. In the final four measures, the pace of harmonic change is doubled. When this is coupled with an appropriate melodic and rhythmic intensification, the resulting impression is one of compression, of centripetal collapse, which lends a special inexorability and power in the drive to the tonic that resolves the tension and closes the section. It is these “formal” elements, as much as any others, that create the expressive effect of the singer's being over-burdened and crushed by sadness.

In addition, it is not possible to distinguish the formal from the nonformal by arguing that perception of the former is intellectual where that of the latter is not. Emotions have a large cognitive component. And one needs to perceive and understand lots of things about music in order to be able to recognize expressiveness in it (and to respond to what one hears with appropriate emotions). So practical is the knowledge involved that its role is not always apparent to the absorbed listener. But as soon as she is presented with music ordered according to conventions very different from those with which she is at home, its expressive character is rendered opaque. I suspect that most Western listeners can make little of the “nonformal” properties of Japanese *gagaku* or Chinese opera when they encounter such music for the first time.

Baugh implies that those who listen to classical music attend in an intellectual way to its form, whereas rock music engages the listener's

feelings and thereby engenders a noncognitive response. I believe that he mischaracterizes the person who listens to classical music. While that person's experience must be informed by a knowledge of the relevant conventions, practices, and idioms, it need not be intellectual in the sense of requiring an internal commentary that refers to technical notions.¹³ And while some pieces, such as Bach's fugues, do invite attention specifically to the details of their structure, many others are to be understood and appreciated in terms of their expressive or lyrical character.

In general, I doubt that a distinction can be drawn between formal and nonformal properties that will be such as to show that a person might listen in terms of the one without an awareness of the other. And I doubt that there is any basis for distinguishing the person who listens to rock music from the one who listens to classical music on the grounds that the former's interest is in nonformal properties that are appreciated noncognitively, whereas the latter's concern focuses on forms that are recognized in a self-consciously intellectual fashion. If the discussion is about a person who *listens* to the music she appreciates, Baugh's contrast between rock and classical music is unconvincing.

One way of breathing life back into the distinction between formal and nonformal musical properties is by arguing that the person who appreciates rock does *not* listen to it, though she is affected, nonetheless, by what she hears. In effect, this is how Baugh develops his argument. While he sometimes writes as if what is important to rock music is its engagement with the audience's emotions, more often he characterizes the crucial response as yet more primitive than this. He insists that rock affects the *body* and that the reaction that it provokes is somatic, visceral, in the gut. The three features he mentions as constituting "rock's essence" (p. 28) are such because of their capacity to provoke this response.

The materiality of tone, or more accurately, of the performance of tones, is only one important material element of rock music. Two others are loudness and rhythm. Both of these are also more properly felt by the body than judged by the mind ... and the proper use of both is crucial to the success of a rock music performance, a success which is judged by the feel-

ings the music produces in the listener's body. ... These material or "visceral" properties of rock are registered in the body core, in the gut, and in the muscles and sinews of the arms and legs, rather than in any intellectual faculty of judgment. (pp. 23–24)

Obviously, very loud music has an effect on the body, and not just on the ears; you can feel it vibrate in your chest cavity. (p. 28)

As he describes it, the rock audience's response is not based on their listening to the music as such, but is a physiological reaction to the noise it makes.

Baugh is inclined to take the argument further by suggesting that, because of the way it affects the body, rock music falls in a tradition in which music is for dancing, not listening, to. "A bad rock song is one that tries and fails to inspire the body to dance" (p. 26). He allows that there is a significant body of rock music that one is not meant to dance to. Nevertheless, he maintains that rock remains in touch with its historical roots in dance music, as classical music does not. The dance types from which classical music arose were appreciated for their formal qualities, "not for their somatic or visceral aspects. On the contrary, in courtly dance, matter and the body are subject to form and the intellect. This was never more true than in Romantic ballet" (p. 26). In response to Young's objection that those who danced to the music of Mozart and Haydn were not in the least concerned with the music's form,¹⁴ Baugh replies:

The fact that at one time the music was played and listened to with dance in mind does not mean that it is still played and listened to that way. ... In the second place, even in the eighteenth century, dance was a highly formal affair: minuets and waltzes observe strict formal patterns. ... Rock dancing can include a lot of fancy footwork and intricate movements, but not often according to a set pattern, and sometimes there is no formal pattern at all.¹⁵

I am unconvinced by the claim that rock music is always more intimately connected to dance than is classical music. Is it the case that baroque dance suites or contemporary minimalist works—not to mention Bartók's music for the ballet *The Miraculous Mandarin* or Stravinsky's for *The Rite of Spring*—are less kinetically im-

elling than rock ballads such as “The Rose,” or “Yesterday”? Is “A Day in the Life” more “in touch” with the dance tradition to which it is heir than is Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony? I doubt that most people feel irresistibly impelled to dance to rock music heard on the radio. Rock music, like other kinds, is very frequently used as a background accompaniment to other activities. Anyway, does no one ever dance to Mozart in the privacy of her home? Of course, rock music that is written to be danced to is danced to when it is played at dances, but this is how people respond to dance music at dances, and it is how they always have done. It is worth recalling that dancing is a socially sophisticated, self-conscious, and deliberate reaction to music. Low-level motor and physiological responses triggered by music might impel the listener to dance, but this is by no means inevitable. Whether the primitive response finds expression in this way depends on the social context and personal inclination of the listener.

Baugh’s more interesting and basic point, I think, is the one about the way that music affects the body. Particular timbres or discords can turn the listener’s blood cold and make his skin-hairs stand on end. Certain tones, intervals, cadences, or sudden changes in dynamics, tempo, or rhythm can cause the listener to catch breath, or to exhale. Sometimes it is only when he does so that he realizes how responsive to the music his pattern of breathing has become. And above all, music’s regularities and its cross-patterns are echoed kinesthetically by both the performer and the listener, who twitch, tap, contract, flex, twist, jerk, tense, sway, and stretch as they react bodily to the music. Music moves us, quite literally, and often we are unaware of the small motions we make in response to it.

It seems to me that, when Baugh writes of a somatic, visceral, body-core reaction to rock music, it is the response just described above that he is referring to. His main claims are these: Rock music engages the listener’s body by provoking such a response. It does so mainly in terms of timbral quality, loudness, and rhythm. This reaction is unthinking and noncognitive; it does not require listening as such. Classical music does not have as its main aim the stimulation of an equivalent response.

I would reply with two points. All music, classical as much as other kinds, produces a visceral

response in those who are familiar with, and who enjoy, its style and idiom. This reaction usually is unselfconscious but it is not thereby noncognitive. Because the response is to the multi-stranded pattern of tensions and relaxations that propel the music forward and bring it to a close, the listener must have internalized aspects of the style’s “grammar,” so that she has expectations that can be confirmed, delayed, or defeated by the music’s course. (Music that is entirely unfamiliar and unpredictable makes one feel consistently uncomfortable or indifferent, whereas the response I have been describing reflects the articulation of the music.) Accordingly, while the listener need not attend to the music to the exclusion of all other actions and thoughts, at least she must register its features and hear them as such if it is to affect her body. Despite Baugh’s emphasis on the nonintellectual character of the rock audience’s response, there is no reason to doubt that the followers of rock attain an appropriate awareness of the music presented to them. The rock listener might not be aware of her awareness of relevant features, but the same goes equally for the person who listens to classical music. The second point is this: While timbral quality, rhythm, and loudness all can contribute to evoking a visceral reaction, so too can many other musical elements. These other elements are significant in rock music, as much as classical. Baugh underestimates the extent to which the visceral response he describes depends not only on the musical features he highlights, but also on a song’s melodic and harmonic shape, its words, its overall structure, and so on.

Baugh may be correct in thinking that some rock music takes as its prime goal the arousal of a physiological response. I suspect, however, that this truth cannot easily be generalized into one about the fundamental difference between rock and classical music. As I have already indicated, there are many classical works that are no less direct in their appeal to the listener’s body. In the past, innovations in all kinds of music have been consistently condemned as lascivious and morally corrupting for this very reason. Meanwhile, many types of rock music invite attention more to their lyrics, their melodies, their expressiveness, or their self-conscious playing with the conventions of the genre than to the “materiality” of their sounds.

III. WORKS, PERFORMANCES, AND NOTATIONS

Baugh maintains that, for classical music, the object of attention is the work, whereas for rock music it is the performance. In rock, it is the singer (or the electric guitar), not the song, that is important (p. 23). This difference is “a matter of degree,” he allows (p. 27), as he surely must. Few people think all rock songs are equally good and it is similarly plain in the case of classical music that certain singers and performers are lauded, whereas no one would turn out to hear me sing opera.¹⁶

Baugh often makes his point by suggesting that musical notations are not adequate to capture the nuances of rock performance, whereas performances of classical music are governed by faithfulness to the composer’s score. He writes: “no standard score captures the subtleties or timing and rhythm that a good rock musician can feel” (p. 26). In rock music,

questions of “faithfulness” to the music rarely arise. The only question is whether the performance/interpretation is convincing, not whether it is “faithful” to some (usually non-existent) score. No one got too upset when Joe Cocker performed the Beatles’ “With a Little Help from my Friends” in a way that was not in the least suggested by the original recording. ... What the body recognizes may not lend itself to notation or formalization, and it is unlikely that a more adequate form of notation could capture these “material” qualities. (p. 27)

And again: “Classical music and technique do lend themselves to formalization, and to a certain extent a classical musician’s performance, however bravura or subtle or nuanced, is still going to be judged by the score.”¹⁷

Baugh takes his position further with the suggestion that playing the right notes is far less important in rock than in classical music.

Neither Clapton nor Hendrix, nor any good rock instrumentalist, takes an intellectualized approach to music. Both play with an intensity that still connects directly with the body, and ... both are often not that good technically; they take chances and they make mistakes. Which is why they are unpredictable and exciting in a way that flawless musicians are not. Even when they hit the wrong notes, they do so in interesting and even exciting ways, creating a tension

that can add to musical expression. When they hit the right notes, it is not because the notes are right that makes them great guitarists, but the way the notes sound, and the “timing” of the notes. (p. 28)

By contrast with those who listen to classical music,

rock listeners are willing to concede a fair number of wrong and roughly rendered notes, as long as the tones are played in a way that engages the ear and the body. Rock listeners also prefer a performance where the beat is staggered to one where it is even, playing around the beat to playing on the beat, and playing that is emotionally engaging to the sort of technically accomplished and polished performances at which some classical (and rock) musicians excel.¹⁸

Implicit in these remarks is a view about the kinds of musicianship required by rock and classical music. I will return to that topic presently, but here wish to take up the claims about notation. I regard their introduction as a red herring.

The absence of a notation is no barrier to the preservation of a performance or interpretation in all its subtle detail. Some rock groups can duplicate their recordings in live performance. For that matter, other groups sometimes can sound, down to the smallest detail, uncannily like the original recordings made by others. (Young rock players often learn their trade by trying as hard as they can to sound just like those they emulate.) Also, the absence of a notational system need not be a barrier to the faithful preservation over decades or longer of complex, extended works. This is apparent in the gamelan music of Central Java and the early church traditions of Gregorian and Ambrosian chant, for instance. In sum, there is no direct connection between the absence of notation and the performer’s freedom in rendering the given music.

On the other hand, no notation specifies every aspect of performance. As instructions issued to performers, scores underdetermine many of the concrete details of an accurate performance.¹⁹ Interpretive niceties always remain the prerogative of the performer who works from a notation. The difference between an adequate and a great classical performance often depends on fine distinctions in shades of timbre, attack and decay, phrasing and rhythmic articulation, balance between parts, pitch wobbles. These are not no-

tated; neither could they be achieved by a formulaic approach to the score's rendition.

Also, it should be recalled that notations must be interpreted in conjunction with the performance practices they assume. Baugh writes of rock music: "Good rhythm cannot be achieved through simple formulas. ... It is a less a matter of tempo than of *timing*, of knowing whether to play on the beat, or slightly ahead of it or behind it. ... It cannot be captured or explained by any stateable principle" (p. 26). Though he takes himself to be characterizing a distinctive feature of rock performance, it seems to me that he might as well be talking here of the performance of classical music.²⁰ For instance, in the Viennese waltz the second beat of the measure should be "early." This is not apparent in the notation if it is read literally and naively, but of course the notation should not be read this way and is not so interpreted by a musician at home with the appropriate performance tradition. Notations of rock music, when read by those who know what to do with them, are no less adequate to the subtleties of the performance practice than is an equivalent notation of a classical piece.

I hazard that Baugh should be discussing ontology rather than notation. Though he does not mention the nature of musical works, what he seems to have in mind is that the rock musician has more freedom than her classical counterpart because of differences in the types of works they play.

Some musical pieces are thick with constitutive properties, while others are thinner. Any attempt to instance the piece should aim to reproduce its constitutive properties. If the work is thick, much of the performance is specified, though countless other details remain to be added by the performer in realizing the work. Accurate interpretations will differ in many respects, but also will possess much that is common. If the piece is thin, more of the performance's details are interpretive and fewer are work-constitutive. Inevitably, where pieces are very thin, performers are valued above composers and the focus of attention is more on the performance than the work.²¹ Jazz standards are examples of thin works. For these, the piece might consist only of a melody and basic chord sequence. Many, but not all, classical works are thick. For them, the work is likely to be as interesting as its performance.

If a piece is specified by a notation, it is often apparent whether it is thick or thin. For thick works, lots of details are indicated and the performance practice treats these as work-determinative.²² For thin pieces, many of the details of performance are not specified and there may be instructions indicating that the performer is to improvise within given parameters or stylistic constraints. If a piece is communicated, instead, via a model instance, as is the case in oral traditions, that instance will be thick with properties. Which of these belong to the work and which to the particular interpretation is evident only against the background practice in the treatment of relevant pieces. The piece might be thick or thin. Which it is, is governed by standards accepted within the appropriate performance tradition as determining what counts for accuracy in performances.

As a song, the Beatles' "With a Little Help from my Friends" is rather thin in work-constitutive properties. Joe Cocker's recorded versions are in a different style and feature an introduction and coda, along with a great deal of elaboration, that are not present in the Beatles' recording, but, in the main section, the words, the melody, and the basic harmonic structure preserve what is constitutive of this song. It is appropriate that "no one got too upset" by Cocker's version, since, in my view, it instanced the song he purported to be performing. This does not show that questions of "faithfulness" to the music never arise in cases of this kind. It reveals, instead, that rock songs are ontologically of the thin variety.²³

In light of the above, I find it difficult to follow Baugh's claim that wrong notes do not matter in rock music, as they do in classical music. If he means that we are not concerned that Hendrix departs from Dylan's recording of "All Along the Watchtower" because we are more interested in what Hendrix does with the song than with his mimicking the original recording, then of course he is correct. But that does not show that what we value are "wrong" notes, because it does not show that the notes are wrong. Alternatively, if he thinks that, within passages improvised as part of the song's rendition, notes that are stylistically inappropriate are welcomed, I am skeptical. When the guitarist's hand slips, the result might sometimes be interesting, but this happy accident surely is the exception rather than the rule. Bum notes are just that, and rock

musicians try as hard as any others to avoid those notes or chords that are deemed clangers within the style they adopt.²⁴ Finally, Baugh's point could be that rock audiences tolerate wrong notes because they recognize the pressures of live performance. They sometimes esteem a performance for its enterprise and verve, despite its containing wrong notes. This last claim applies as readily to performances of classical as to those of rock music, however. Schnabel's recorded performances of Beethoven's piano sonatas contain many wrong notes, while being respected as great interpretations.

So far I have criticized Baugh for the way in which he sets up the point he intends to make. He presents what should be a claim about ontological types—namely, that rock songs are ontologically thinner than most classical works—as one about the role of notations and about the kind of musicianship that is involved in executing them. But even if he makes his point poorly, is he not correct, after all, to insist that rock music differs from classical in allowing more freedom to the performer, and that, as a result, performances rather than songs are properly of more interest to the rock aficionado? Though he unduly denigrates the creative contribution made by the performer of classical music, along with the audience's interest in this, is he not fundamentally correct in his insistence that the appreciation of rock music is more performance-based than is so for classical music?

What one makes of this question will depend on what one takes the primary text of rock to be. If it is the song, Baugh may be right after all. But are songs the only musical works on view in rock music? There is reason to think not.

Theodore A. Gracyk has argued that what distinguishes rock, construed as a broad musical type, is that the primary work is the recording.²⁵ One could say that there are two works here, the song and the recording. Or, alternatively, one might maintain that one work, the recording, manifests (without thereby instancing) another, the song. But, however one counts the number of works that are on display, Gracyk is insistent that, in rock music, the piece on which the focus falls is the recording. His argument is plausible, though I cannot review its details here. Suppose that he is correct in his analysis. What are its implications for Baugh's position?

If the primary works in rock are recordings,

then these works are very thick with properties. Every aspect of the sound captured by the recording technology is constitutive of the work. A piece of this kind is not for performing, it is for playback, though performing might be involved in its initial creation.²⁶ On this account, rock will be quite distinct from classical music, which remains mainly for performance, though performances can be transmitted by recordings. While the classical tradition accepts electronic works within its purview, these form a minority, rather than the mainstream. The primary works in rock music will be ontologically very different from most classical works, then, and this will be because rock pieces depend essentially on the electronic medium for their creation and dissemination.

Baugh argues that, in rock as distinct from classical music, performances rather than works are the focus of aesthetic attention. He writes of rock as if it always involves live performance. To pick just one instance, he says: "The effect of the music on the body is of prime importance for rock music and its antecedents (blues, jazz), so that the music is regulated by the dancers: musicians will vary beat, rhythm and tempo until it feels good to dance to" (p. 26). He does not acknowledge the fact that rock is much more often presented as, and transmitted via, recordings, and that its effects on the body, when heard through speakers or headphones, is very different from those when it is heard live. If Gracyk is correct about the nature of rock, Baugh must be importantly mistaken. It could still be true that rock emphasizes the "material aspects of sound" more than classical music does, but it could not be that this is a function of the manner of live performance, which is a claim that Baugh makes central to his argument. Moreover, our interest in rock would primarily be an interest in works (that is, recordings), not in performances.

IV. MUSICIANSHIP

Earlier I observed that Baugh regards classical and rock musicianship as differing. He argues that these types of music require different techniques of performance, so that it is inappropriate to view rock as employing a crude version of classical technique. I believe that he is right in this observation. Many of the claims he makes in arguing for it strike me as dubious, however. In particular, he is wrong to equate classical tech-

nique with mechanical, heartless efficiency, and also mistaken in characterizing musicianship in rock music as “natural” and “innate.”

I have already quoted passages in which Baugh implies that technique in classical performance is mainly a matter of following a score with automatic, literal-minded precision and with only a cursory nod toward expressiveness and the like. That attitude is present when he writes: “The performance standards for rock vocalists have little to do with the virtuosity of an opera singer or with an ability to hit the note indicated in the composition at the time indicated” (p. 27). Though he describes great rock singers (p. 27) and guitarists (p. 28) as lacking in technique, obviously he means that they lack the kind of technique that is appropriate for classical music, and that their music is the more exciting and powerful for this. Rock music has its own, different standards of virtuosity—“a virtuosity ... that connects directly with the body, provoking a visceral response” (p. 27). He develops his position this way:

The standards of rock music are not formalizable into a science but are a knack or an art that is learned by practice. ... The techniques necessary for good rock music can sometimes be mastered through a simple combination of exposure to the idiom and raw, inborn talent. ... The acquisition of “proper” technique serves only to obscure and distort a technique that has been acquired “naturally,” which is to say, by a combination of innate gifts and lucky circumstances. ... They are often not the sorts of techniques that could be formalized in such a way as to be taught. ... The difference between formalizable and non-formalizable technique comes from the different traditions behind rock and classical music.²⁷

As regards what passes for virtuosity and musicianship in classical music, I think Baugh is simply uninformed. He implies that the ideal classical performance would be one that might be generated on a synthesizer, and nothing could be further from the truth; nothing is denigrated more in classical music than a performance that is judged to be mechanical and “unmusical.” As I have already indicated, classical music depends for its successful performance on inflections and articulations that are controlled by the performer, even if she is following the score as she plays. Raw musical talent might be a matter

of “natural” or “innate” potential and there might be aspects of musicianship that cannot be taught, except perhaps by example. But if this is true, this truth applies as much to classical as to rock performers. In either case, the realization of innate potential is likely to depend on hours of practice. I suspect that there are as many rock musicians who are inseparable from their guitars and who practice constantly as there are violinists who are similar.²⁸ It is not so that the performance techniques are more formalizable in the one kind of music than the other. In both, many basic aspects of playing can be taught, while others, ones that distinguish gifted masters from those who are merely competent, cannot easily be acquired solely by training and practice.

There is a further respect in which the techniques of rock music might be regarded as “natural” by contrast with those of classical music; namely, in the sense of “natural” that is opposed to “artificial” or “contrived.” (Baugh does not make the claim explicitly, but it is heard often enough.) It might be thought that, unlike rock musicians, classical musicians need years of training, since they must master sound production of a kind that is inherently unnatural.

My interest in and exposure to non-Western musics makes me very skeptical of claims of this sort. The singing in classical opera is highly stylized, I accept, but the same is true in Chinese folk music or Australian aboriginal song-cycles. What sounds natural depends on the conventions of performance practice that have been absorbed by the listener. For instance, in the recent African-American popular repertoire (and in much white rock besides), the tessitura for male singers is consistently and spectacularly high. Baritones and basses are as common among males in this group as they are in others, I assume, but one would gain no inkling of this from listening to most popular male vocalists. Also, when rock appeared in Britain, singers adopted an American accent. Later, the first use of a Liverpoolian inflection was regarded as gimmicky, but soon was accepted (and copied). If rock singers sound natural, they do so only in relation to the mutable norms established for such music. Further, rock music has its standard riffs and expressive protocols, as it must, given that it displays a recognizable style.

The musicianship of rock performers is not to be distinguished from other kinds in terms of its

naturalness. The difference is better described with reference to the sonic ideals to which the performers aspire; that is, it is a matter of differences in musical styles and idioms. Generalizing wildly, rock prefers “dirty” timbres and “bent” pitches more often than classical music does. Also, there are techniques that are distinctive to the instruments associated with rock music, for instance, that of creating special timbral qualities on the electric guitar through the exploitation of volume and feedback. I take it that these are the kinds of things Baugh has in mind when he claims that rock concerns itself with the “materiality” of sound, though I do not find his terminology especially appealing because I see these as arbitrary aspects of style that are not more musically elemental or engaging than the many alternatives promoted in other musical idioms. I agree, though, that achieving the sonic ideals of rock in a convincing fashion requires virtuosity, because I think that almost all musical styles make demands on the performer.

There is a hint in Baugh’s paper that he would take the argument a step further. He mentions that Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix “have been guilty of virtuosity for its own sake on many occasions” (p. 27). It may be that he thinks classical music values virtuosity for its own sake in a fashion that rock does (or should) not.²⁹ In rock music, virtuosity should be the means to other ends, such as expressiveness. But again, this indicates how limited is Baugh’s view of the classical tradition. Some types of classical music—in particular, the concerto—feature the instrumentalist’s mastery of her medium, but even in this music “mere” virtuosity is condemned. Most kinds of classical music call for virtuosity not in order to highlight it but to achieve other effects, such as expressive ones, that depend upon it.

So far I have been agreeing with Baugh that rock music involves a kind of virtuosity, the standards of which differ from those of classical music, though I have suggested that this is a function both of the particular sonic goals at which the performers aim and of the different kinds of instruments they play. I conclude this part of the discussion by registering a caveat that draws attention, as I did before, to the crucial role of recording technology in the production of rock music.

Increasingly, rock musicians make extensive use of sampling and of synthesizers, not only in

their recordings but in live performance. This inevitably raises doubts about their musicianship. Even if the players themselves lay down the material that later is sampled, we all know that their efforts can be modified and reconstructed in the editing process, so that what one hears is by no means transparent to what was done. Studio manipulation, rather than musicianship, might be what is on display, even in the case of “live” performance.

It could be suggested that the move to knobs-on, rather than hands-on, sound generation leads to a new kind of musicianship and virtuosity.³⁰ Many rock musicians take an active role in the studio methods that lead to their recordings or to the electronic material that is incorporated into their performances. Even if this idea is accepted, it offers little support for Baugh’s approach to the distinction between rock and classical music, with its emphasis on the idea that rock is performance based in a fashion that allows for a mutual interaction between the performer and the audience.

V. IS THERE A DISTINCTIVE AESTHETICS OF ROCK MUSIC?

Does rock music require a different aesthetics from that appropriate to classical music? What you answer might depend on the level at which you take the question to be pitched. If you take it as low level, as asking if we attend to different features in appreciating and evaluating rock and classical music, the answer might be “yes.” If you take it as high level, as asking if the principles of evaluation and appreciation are radically different for these two kinds of music, the answer might be “no.”

Considered at the low level, our aesthetic interests tend to be specific to genres, periods, and styles. In considering a particular work, we attend to subtle differences in relevant properties. In works of another genre, period, or style, those properties might not be aesthetically appropriate or important, and it is others that are relevant. (Compare listening to baroque pedagogical fugues and romantic opera, or Schubert’s songs and Bruckner’s symphonies.) The aesthetics of different genres, periods, and styles vary to the extent that the properties relevant to an aesthetic interest in, and evaluation of, their member works differ.

Considered at a higher level, an aesthetic interest does not vary from genre to genre. Many aesthetically important properties—such as narrative, representational, and expressive ones, or others such as unity in diversity—are common to many genres, periods, or styles (though they might depend on low-level features that differ according to the particular work's type). Moreover, in all genres, periods, or styles, our concern is with what Kendall Walton has called “variable” properties.³¹ That is, we focus on a subset of the work's properties (those that are most likely to be varied) and consider what is done with these in the given work. Viewed at an abstract level, we concentrate on the same thing, on the set of variable properties, even if the members of this set vary between genres, periods, or styles.

Baugh aims his question at the low level, presumably, for it is here that it most obviously makes sense to maintain that rock and classical music require different aesthetics. But at that level, the relevant distinctions are those of genre, period, and style, which is a much more fine-grained level of categorization than the one he considers. Rock, as a broad classification, encompasses many genres and styles—pop, art, progressive, alternative, and experimental; blues, metal, punk, techno, ballads, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, industrial, reggae, grunge, hip-hop, and so on. It seems to me that the appreciation of blues requires a different aesthetics from hip-hop, for instance. And while expressive tone, loudness, and rhythm might be crucial for heavy metal, it is far from obvious that they are similarly important in songs such as “She’s Leaving Home” and “Strawberry Fields,” which are among the examples of rock offered by Baugh. Similarly, classical music covers many kinds—sonata, concerto, quartet, symphony, madrigal, Lied, mass, overture, ballet, opera. It also has distinctive styles or periods—late-nineteenth-century romantic symphonies are quite distinct from late-eighteenth-century classical symphonies, and *seria*, *buffa*, *Singspiel*, *grand*, and *verismo* are very different kinds of operas. At the low level, each of these requires its own aesthetics.

In this connection, it is striking to note that the features listed by Baugh as distinguishing rock from classical music have, in the past, been identified explicitly as marking crucial differences

between certain types of classical music. In about 1600, its concentration on new, rough timbres, rhythmic vitality, and loudness was thought to separate the newly emerging operatic style from other music of the day. Early this century, Stravinsky’s ballets were distinguished from their predecessors in virtue of the centrality they accorded to these same features.

I think that properties as specific as the ones Baugh points to fail to capture a difference between rock and classical music construed as broad kinds, for they apply only to much more fine-grained types. And if there are differences between the broad categories, I suspect they are rather trivial. At the relevant level of generality, I doubt that one will find contrasts deep or distinctive enough to provide the basis for an aesthetics.³²

STEPHEN DAVIES

Department of Philosophy
University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019, Auckland
New Zealand

INTERNET: SJ.DAVIES@AUCKLAND.AC.NZ

1. Bruce Baugh, “Prolegomena to Any Aesthetics of Rock Music,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 23–29. In subsequent references, page numbers are given in parentheses.

2. See Richard Meltzer, *The Aesthetics of Rock Music* (New York: Something Else Press, 1970); Susan McClary and Robert Walser, “Start Making Sense! Musicology Wrestles with Rock,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, eds. Simon Frith et al. (London: Routledge, 1990); Robert Palmer, *Rock and Roll: An Unruly History* (New York: Harmony Books, 1995); and Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

3. James O. Young, “Between Rock and a Harp Place,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995): 78–81.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

5. Bruce Baugh, “Music for the Young at Heart,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995): 81–83.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 81. Baugh goes on to interpret Young’s conclusion to the effect that rock must be evaluated by the standards that apply to all music as suggesting that rock “can appropriately be assessed by formalist criteria” (p. 81). Presumably Baugh takes Young to be saying that all music must be assessed in both formalist and nonformalist terms, whereas a more charitable reading would have Young claiming that the evaluation of music is sometimes one, sometimes the other, and, where appropriate, both.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

9. Young, pp. 78–79.
10. Some music might not be patterned—for instance, John Cage’s 4’33”, or works all aspects of which are generated by chance procedures. But, though these pose a challenge for what I say, that can provide no comfort for Baugh’s position.
11. Baugh seems to think that form in rock is so highly standardized that it is not a worthwhile object of aesthetic attention. Ted Gracyk has suggested to me that Baugh’s dismissal of art rock ignores the fact that, in this genre, basic forms sometimes are treated as jumping off points for extended improvisations by groups such as Pink Floyd and King Crimson. That is, Baugh does not appreciate that the lack of formal restraint in this music provides for a different listening experience from that afforded by most rock music.
12. Moreover, in some cases, it can be the expressive character of the material that provides the key to an appreciation of details of its formal structure, or so Gregory Karl and Jenefer Robinson have argued in “Shostakovich’s Tenth Symphony and the Musical Expression of Cognitively Complex Emotions,” *The Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism* 53 (1995): 401–415.
13. See chapter 6, “Understanding Music,” in my *Musical Meaning and Expression* (Cornell University Press, 1994).
14. Young, p. 80.
15. Baugh, “Music for the Young at Heart,” p. 82.
16. One could argue that rock performance usually is a theatrical event in which the personalities, dress, actions, and make-up of the performers are crucial elements, whereas, in the performance of *instrumental* classical music, such cross-media displays are suppressed. Whatever we should make of this idea, it is not one to which Baugh appeals and neither will it separate rock from classical opera and ballet.
17. Baugh, “Music for the Young at Heart,” p. 82. There are “notationists” in fields such as rock, jazz, and flamenco, though. Frank Zappa scored “The Grand Wazoo” of 1972 and from the early 1980s most of his pieces were notated. Some others who do not use notations require the band to memorize their parts and do not allow deviations from their instructions. One such was Captain Beefheart.
18. Baugh, “Music for the Young at Heart,” p. 82.
19. For further discussion, see my “Authenticity in Musical Performance,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 27 (1987): 39–50.
20. An anonymous referee makes these claims: Rock music is much more locked-in rhythmically than classical music. Orchestras and chamber groups are notoriously imprecise and take great liberties with the pulse. The importance of the drum set and the ongoing, always present rhythmic template beneath all of rock music is its signature and most defining feature.
21. See my “Authenticity in Musical Performance” and also “The Ontology of Musical Works and the Authenticity of their Performances,” *Noûs* 25 (1991): 21–41.
22. Scores can contain notational elements that serve as interpretational recommendations without being work-determinative. I take this to be the case in eighteenth-century

scores that mark dynamics, phrasings, and fingerings, and that write out cadenzas and decorations. Unless properly interpreted, such notations could give the impression that the work is thicker than in fact it is.

23. Alternatively, we could regard Cocker’s version as a transcription of the Beatles’ song. In that case, it is pertinent to observe, as Young does (p. 80), that classical composers often have produced variations on others’ themes and transcriptions of others’ pieces, many of which depart radically from the original. So there would be nothing here distinctive to rock music.

24. Allan Beever tells me Eric Clapton said that playing wrong notes ruined concerts for him.

25. Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock Music* (Duke University Press, 1996). I should add that Gracyk does not completely neglect the role of live performance in rock.

26. An illustrative analogy can be drawn here with movies. A movie is not for acting, but for screening, though acting might go into its creation as a work.

27. Baugh, “Music for the Young at Heart,” p. 82.

28. In *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Wesleyan University Press, 1993), Robert Walser devotes a chapter to the connections between classical music and heavy metal. He records classical influences on the guitar techniques used by performers of heavy metal (pp. 63–75) and notes that both kinds of music esteem similar kinds of virtuosity (pp. 76–102). He quotes vocalist Robert Halford as saying: “I don’t think that playing heavy metal is that far removed from classical music. To do either, you have to spend many years developing your style and your art. ... It’s very much a matter of dedication” (p. 106).

29. I think that there are respects in which rock virtuosity is not very different from the classical variety. Some rock musicians—Zappa, Clapton, and Van Halen—make manifestly difficult-to-play music sound fluent and they are respected and admired for doing so, as well as for whatever else they achieve. Baugh, as quoted previously, holds that Clapton and Hendrix are poor in techniques and, anyway, that virtuosity is never admired for its own sake in rock music. I believe he is wrong on both counts.

30. Theodore A. Gracyk makes the point in “Listening to Music: Performances and Recordings,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997): 139–150. As he recognizes, it applies also, though in a slightly different way, to recordings of classical music. Classical musicians exploit the advantages of recording technology, but they are expected to be able to play live the works they record.

31. Kendall Walton, “Categories of Art,” *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 334–367.

32. I have benefited considerably from discussing the issues raised here with my students. For their helpful comments on drafts of this essay, I thank Allan Beever, Stan Godlovitch, and Ted Gracyk. Also, two anonymous referees for this journal provided many useful suggestions.