



Schopenhauer, the Philosophy of Music, and the Wisdom of Classical Indian Philosophy

Richard White¹ 

Accepted: 18 July 2021 / Published online: 28 August 2021
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2021

Abstract

Among Western philosophers, Schopenhauer is one of the few who seeks to clarify the nature of music, and its effects upon us. He claims that music is the most important of all the arts; and he argues that music is a kind of metaphysics that allows us to experience the ultimate reality of the world. In this essay, I evaluate Schopenhauer's philosophy of music in the context of his overarching philosophy. Then I discuss the relevance of traditional Indian philosophies -- including Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism -- which Schopenhauer recognized as forerunners to his own philosophical system. Here, the discussion of Om is particularly important. Schopenhauer's discussion of music is insightful. But his insistence on the priority of the will is problematic. I suggest another perspective on willing, ultimate reality and music which follows the classical Indian philosophies that he affirms.

Keywords Schopenhauer · Music · Vedanta · Upanishads · Buddhism · Will · Om

There are many reasons why we listen to music: Music makes us happy, and it calms the savage beast within. Music seems to clarify the world for us, and it promotes a kind of spiritual attunement. And in general, we could say that music opens up our inner life. The other arts are capable of affecting us in a similar way, and like music, they can break us open or fill us with longing. But as many writers have insisted, music is perhaps the most powerful and the most immediate of all the arts. Even so, it is difficult to write about music, or to explain how it is able to affect us so profoundly. As Schopenhauer says: 'Men have practiced music at all times without being able to give an account of this; content to understand it immediately, they renounce any abstract conception of this direct understanding itself.'¹ This is

¹ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* vol.1, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover, 15), 256. (Hereafter referred to as *WWR*).

✉ Richard White
rwhite@creighton.edu

¹ Department of Philosophy, Creighton University, Omaha, NE 68178, USA

the ‘mystery’ of music, and Schopenhauer is one of the few philosophers who have tried to make sense of it. Not surprisingly, a number of composers including Wagner, Brahms, Liszt, and Mahler have been enthusiastic supporters of Schopenhauer’s account, but recent philosophical commentators have been more critical.² It is time for a reappraisal: Schopenhauer illuminates the nature of music in his writings and defends its priority; and he claims that music reveals the essence of the world to us, not in the language of concepts but in the immediate experience of music itself.

In this paper, I begin with Schopenhauer’s metaphysics as the underlying context for his discussion of music and all the other arts; then I focus on three significant themes which help to describe his philosophy of music. Next, I discuss Schopenhauer’s connection to traditional Indian philosophies — Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism — which he affirms as forerunners to his own philosophical system; and through this cross-cultural perspective, I argue that Schopenhauer’s insistence on the priority of the will is deeply problematic. I suggest another perspective on music, ultimate reality, and the will which is more compelling, and based upon the Indian philosophical traditions which he himself affirms.

Schopenhauer’s Pessimism and the Philosophy of Art

Schopenhauer is well-known for his avowedly pessimistic philosophy, in which life is ultimately pointless, without abiding happiness or any final meaning. According to him, we are all manifestations of the one primordial will, or the will to live, which is ‘the innermost essence, the kernel, of every particular thing and also of the whole’.³ The will strives restlessly and relentlessly without end. This means that every goal is provisional, and every stopping place is only the starting point for fresh desires and distractions, and so our lives move continually from one dissatisfaction to another. In this context, Schopenhauer argues that non-existence or oblivion represents the only permanent salvation that is available to us in this worst of all possible worlds, and that ‘we have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world; that its non-existence would be preferable to its existence; that it is

² See, for example: Philip Alperson, ‘Schopenhauer and Musical Revelation’ in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40, 1, 155–166; Lydia Goehr, ‘Schopenhauer and the Musicians: an Inquiry into the Sounds of Silence and the Limits of Philosophizing about Music’ in *Schopenhauer, Philosophy and the Arts* edited by Dale Jaquette (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 7), 200–228; Günther Zöllner, ‘Schopenhauer’ in *Music in German Philosophy: An Introduction* edited by Stefan Lorenz Sorgner and Oliver Fürbeth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 21), 121–139; Malcolm Budd, *Music and the Emotions: The Philosophical Theories* (London: Routledge, 2), 76–103. For the most part, these commentators are not sympathetic to Schopenhauer’s discussion of music. For example, Budd writes: ‘We must now decide how much truth there is in Schopenhauer’s philosophy of music. Unfortunately, there is very little. In the first place, his theory of music inherits many of the defects of his metaphysics. These defects, some of which are plainly visible and widely recognized, render his metaphysical conception of the world unsupportable’ (96). Matthew Del Nevo offers one of the few positive readings of Schopenhauer’s philosophy of music in his book, *The Metaphysics of Night* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 5), 51–91. In my paper, I have benefitted from all of the above essays.

³ *WWR* vol.1, 110.

something which ought not to be, and so on'.⁴ Schopenhauer is serious enough, but his principled pessimism is also a deliberate affront to nineteenth century optimism and a pointed rejection of modern Western values, including civilization, progress, and reason.

We must also bear in mind that Schopenhauer was among the first Western thinkers to take Asian philosophy seriously. In *The World as Will and Representation*, he quotes extensively from Hindu and Buddhist texts which had recently become available for the first time in European translations; and he argues that works like the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* reflect his own philosophy *avant la lettre*. In some important ways, however, Schopenhauer's understanding of Asian philosophy is flawed, and at times, he appears to reduce all of it to the absolute desire for oblivion or nothingness. As he comments, 'in Asia, existence itself is looked upon as an evil and the world as a scene of misery, where it were better not to find oneself'.⁵ At the same time, Schopenhauer saw that the newly available Eastern philosophy was an essential corrective to modern individualism and the blind faith in progress that characterized much of late eighteenth century and nineteenth century thought. His scathing and polemical style seems deliberately intended to transform individual readers by shaking their deepest convictions.

So how are we to deal with this impossible situation which Schopenhauer describes as the essence of the human condition? Schopenhauer argues that our *knowledge* of the human situation suppresses our will to live, and this is something that happens to us 'suddenly, as if flying in from without'.⁶ He denies that we have any choice here, for once we realize how things are we can no longer acquiesce in the pleasures of the world, and we must soon be disgusted with life: 'The will now turns away from life; it shudders at the pleasures in which it recognizes the affirmation of life. Man attains to the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, true composure, and complete will-lessness.'⁷ Now in some passages, like this one, Schopenhauer emphasizes how suffering undermines the will to live. It leads us to reject the world, and to feel compassion for all human beings as we come to realize that we are all in the same boat. But in other passages, Schopenhauer appears to suggest that not willing may actually be an achievement of the will itself: In his discussion of asceticism, for example, Schopenhauer considers poverty, chastity, and the mortification of the will through the torment of the body, and he argues that such practices can destroy the will to live: 'Thus he resorts to fasting, and even to self-castigation and self-torture, in order that, by constant privation and suffering, he may more and more break down and *kill the will* that he recognizes and abhors as the source of his own suffering existence and of the world's'⁸ (my own italics). On the face of it, this is not about the withering of the will or even 'not willing', for

⁴ WWR vol.2, 576.

⁵ Schopenhauer, *The Will in Nature* translated by Karl Hillebrand, 16: available from wikisource at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On_the_Will_in_Nature, 86.

⁶ WWR vol.1, 404.

⁷ WWR vol.1, 379.

⁸ WWR vol.1, 382.

it suggests a kind of *willing not to will* which involves a vehement rejection of life. The ambivalence between ‘not willing’ and ‘willing not to will’ (or *killing* the will) runs throughout Schopenhauer’s writings, and this is a tension that we must keep in mind. Later, it will help us to think about Schopenhauer’s philosophy of music, and the nature of the revelation which music is supposed to provide.

Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art is more appealing than his prescriptions for salvation. And in *The World as Will and Representation*, he dwells on the profound importance of art as a *preliminary* experience of release that intimates the possibility of a final enlightenment, and the end of willing. Most of the time, I am the subject of my own life. I order my experience in terms of my own categories and concepts, and the world is the object of my knowledge and control. But in the authentic experience of art, we allow the artwork to wash over us, as we experience its beauty and its charm. As Schopenhauer understood, to appreciate a work of art, we cannot try to control it or reduce it to our own preconceived ideas. We must allow it to be fully present to us for only then can we be inspired and transformed by it. In short, art involves the suspension of the incessant willing which characterizes most of our lives, and in this respect, it would be true to say that art is a respite from suffering. For Schopenhauer, in this ‘aesthetic method of consideration’ there is a sense in which we lose our everyday existence as separate individuals as we become, at least for a while, the ‘pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge’.⁹

More positively, though, Schopenhauer claims that a great work of art, such as Shakespeare’s *King Lear* or Brueghel’s *Crucifixion*, offers the spectator a vision of the phenomenal world from a more exalted level which corresponds to a higher level of the will’s objectification. And he calls this the ‘Platonic Idea’ since it is a universal essence or truth which can be grasped within the particular.¹⁰ In this way, the great painting or the great work of literature can show us the truth of the visible world, ‘only with greater concentration, perfection, intention and intelligence’ than we would find in our own everyday encounters.¹¹ All of this helps us to understand the importance of aesthetic experience. For Schopenhauer, literature, painting, and most of the other arts point us toward essential truths about the world that go beyond the everyday representations in front of us. And for as long as our aesthetic experience lasts, we have the pleasure of being released from the will’s relentless striving which Schopenhauer so bitterly complains of. This brief summary will help us to keep Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art in view. The interesting point is that he believes music is exceptional insofar as it does not correspond to this basic model which characterizes all the other arts.

⁹ *WWR* vol.1, 179.

¹⁰ For Schopenhauer’s understanding of ‘Platonic Ideas’, see *WWR* vol.1, 233–236.

¹¹ *WWR* vol.1, 266.

Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Music

According to Schopenhauer, music works differently from all of the other arts because it is not the representation of a Platonic Idea or of anything else that exists in the world around us. As he comments: '[Music] stands quite apart from all the others. In it we do not recognize the copy, the repetition, of any Idea of the inner nature of the world. Yet it is such a great and exceedingly fine art, its effect on man's innermost nature is so powerful...'¹² On this point, Schopenhauer was almost certainly influenced by Plato: In the *Republic*, Plato describes how different instruments, modes, or keys affect us in different ways; and for this reason, he censors different instruments, modes, and keys, allowing some in the ideal state while disallowing others. Why? 'Because rhythm and harmony most of all insinuate themselves into the inmost part of the soul and most vigorously lay hold of it in bringing grace with them; and they make a man graceful if he is correctly reared, if not, the opposite.'¹³ Plato focuses his attention on the education of the soul — through music and gymnastics — and a considerable part of the *Republic* is devoted to musical aspects since music is 'the guardhouse' of the soul.¹⁴ Following Plato, Schopenhauer also describes how music calibrates the soul: a major key usually connotes confidence and optimism; a minor key suggests sadness and melancholy; and a slow piece of music is experienced quite differently from one that is light and brisk. The deeper point here is that music sensitizes the soul; it cultivates our emotions, and in this way, it helps us to shape our inner lives. Schopenhauer says that in music, 'the deepest recesses of our nature find expression'.¹⁵ And this is an important insight: Music explores the inner space of our deepest self, and in this way, it enlarges and enhances our spiritual life. Here, we can go further into Schopenhauer's own philosophy of music by considering three points which may be viewed as fundamental.

First, Schopenhauer claims that music does not represent the Platonic Ideas or anything that can be sensed in the phenomenal world because it is a reflection or an imitation of the will itself. He notes a paradox here: music is a copy of something (the will) which cannot be represented because it lies beyond the intellect and the conceptual apprehension of the world: 'Music is by no means like the other arts, namely a copy of the Ideas, but a *copy of the will itself*, the objectivity of which are the Ideas.' And he adds, 'For this reason the effect of music is so very much more powerful and penetrating than is that of the other arts, for these others speak only of the shadow, but music of the essence.'¹⁶ Some critics have taken issue with this formulation — if we cannot *know* the will — as Schopenhauer claims — then how can we say that music is a copy of it?¹⁷ But Schopenhauer's response is not

¹² *WWR* vol.1, 256.

¹³ Plato, *Republic* translated by Allan Bloom (New York; Basic Books, 12), 401d.

¹⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 424d.

¹⁵ *WWR* vol.1, 256.

¹⁶ *WWR* vol.1, 257.

¹⁷ See, for example, Philip Alperson's comments in 'Schopenhauer and Musical Revelation': 'Schopenhauer, however, wants to have it both ways: he wants to say that musical revelation is otherwise ineffable and yet he wants to philosophize about it... Schopenhauer's theory of musical revelation cannot be justifiably maintained' (162).

unreasonable: Don't take my word for it, he says, but listen to music with this view in mind, and decide for yourself whether this isn't how music affects us. For even if it is the case that we cannot grasp the will as an object of knowledge, we can still *know* it in a more direct way because we ourselves are separate manifestations of the one primordial will to live; and our lives are driven by the will as we are drawn to one goal after another. Sometimes, we are able to satisfy our desires but more often than not we experience dissatisfaction, and as we make our way through life, we encounter sickness, loss, and death. Schopenhauer suggests that a great work of music is able to express the ebb and flow of our inner life, and our struggle through contentment, dissatisfaction, despair, happiness, and boredom. Even so, it might still be said that music is 'totally subjective', because there are *no* objective measures of musical taste. But against this, Schopenhauer points out that the intervals which are the basis of musical harmony are built into the natural world, and Pythagoras discovered that the objects which produce sound stand in arithmetical relation to each other. As Bryan Magee notes, this is an important insight, because 'it means that music is not arbitrary in the sense that language is. Language is entirely a human creation; but music is rooted in the nature of things'.¹⁸ And this helps us to think about music as the revelation of an ultimate reality which underlies individual differences.

The second point is that Schopenhauer focuses on the emotional appeal of music. As we noted above in our discussion of Plato, music is inherently emotional; and the best and most obvious way to describe a piece of music is by using emotional terms. A symphony or a sonata can be 'cheerful', 'solemn', 'light-hearted', 'melancholy', or 'restrained'. And music can move us profoundly because it evokes serenity, sadness, frustration, expectation, and joy, and it explores the whole range of our emotional life. A really great piece of music can inspire us with a heightened sense of existence. As Schopenhauer puts it: 'The inexpressible depth of all music, by virtue of which it floats past us as a paradise quite familiar and yet eternally remote, and is so easy to understand and yet so inexplicable, is due to the fact that it reproduces all the emotions of our innermost being, but entirely without reality and remote from its pain.'¹⁹ But how is this accomplished? For one thing, he argues that music communicates pleasure, emotion and pain, but not any *particular* pleasures, pains, or emotions. Thus, a symphony can project sadness or happiness but not the happiness of returning home or the sadness of losing a friend:

Therefore, music does not express this or that particular and definite pleasure, this or that affliction, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment, or peace of mind, but joy, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment, peace of mind *themselves*, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature, without any accessories, and so also without the motive for them. Nevertheless, we understand them perfectly in this extracted quintessence.²⁰

¹⁸ Bryan Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10), 187.

¹⁹ *WWR* vol.1, 264.

²⁰ *WWR* vol.1, 261.

In this respect, there is also a kind of isomorphism between the line of the music and our own emotional life. For a melody is like an individual existence as it moves through different possibilities and setbacks even while it approaches the promise of happiness in the final resolution. And this is why, when we listen to music, we often imagine a story or a scene to illustrate our feelings and to provide an imaginary correlate for our musical experience.

Even so, Schopenhauer argues that such representations must distract us from the power of the music itself. And this is why he favors ‘absolute music’ or music that is unencumbered with words or anything else that would draw us back into conceptual thought. Of course, it may be argued that a song is even more powerful when the words and music enhance each other; but Schopenhauer’s point is that words always return us to the phenomenal world and bind us more completely to it. He insists that music in its pure form does not have any *meaning* at all, although it reflects the movement of the will which is the ultimate reality. He could have added that music which is born from the intellect cannot reflect our inner life in the same way. Schoenberg’s twelve-tone music might be a good example — such music is revolutionary and it may be brilliant, but for many, it is unsatisfying precisely because it does not appeal to our emotional sensibility or follow the intentional movement of human life.

The third point is that Schopenhauer celebrates music’s ability to reveal the inner nature of the world to us. He claims that through the experience of music, we are able to experience ultimate reality and meaning; and he makes this point in a memorable formulation: ‘Music is an unconscious exercise in metaphysics in which the mind does not know it is philosophizing.’²¹ Once again, this is not really an argument, and the truth of this claim can only be validated by personal experience. Schopenhauer believes that great music draws us in because it reveals the truth of the world to us, and so it breaks through the realm of appearances. Many others have had a similar insight concerning music, and they have tried to put this into words. For example, in one of his own discussions of music, Roger Scruton seems to be making a similar point when he explains: ‘In some way it [a great musical work] is setting an example of the higher life, inviting you to live and feel in a purer way, to free yourself from everyday pretenses. That is why it seems to speak with such authority: it is inviting you into another and higher world, a world in which life finds its fulfillment and its goal.’²² And then he adds: ‘We single out great works of art generally, and great works of music in particular, because they make a difference to our lives. They grant us an intimation of the depth and worthwhileness of things. Great works of art are the remedy for our metaphysical loneliness.’²³ Now Scruton does not seem to have Schopenhauer in mind when he writes this. But these comments are in line with Schopenhauer’s own views on music, and especially with our sense that music discloses a higher realm of being — or a ‘metaphysical’ order — that is usually hidden from us.

²¹ *WWR* vol.1, 264.

²² Roger Scruton, *The Soul of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 18), 167.

²³ Scruton, 173.

Nietzsche, who *was* inspired by Schopenhauer, makes the same sort of point when he comments in *The Case of Wagner*:

Has it been noticed that music liberates the spirit? Gives wing to thought? That one becomes more of a philosopher the more one becomes a musician? – The grey sky of abstraction rent as if by lightning; the light strong enough for the filigree of things; the great problems near enough to grasp; the world surveyed as from a mountain. – I have just defined the pathos of philosophy. – And unexpectedly answers drop into my lap, a little hail of ice and wisdom, of *solved* problems. – Where am I?²⁴

Here again, music seems to clarify the world. It promotes lucidity and enhanced insight into the way things are; and this is a reflection of its own metaphysical ultimacy. Like tragedy which shows the ultimate reality of suffering as well as the possibility of redemption, music describes the inner nature of the world, but in a language that reason does not understand. Great music is like great literature, art or, poetry, which makes us exclaim: ‘Yes, that’s exactly right!’ and ‘You shouldn’t change a line!’ All of this is difficult to put into words, but according to Schopenhauer, we *know* that music is capable of profound illumination. It is uncanny, but it is also quite real.

So far, we have considered three significant aspects of Schopenhauer’s philosophy of music: The basic reality of music as a reflection of the will, its emotional efficacy, and the power of its metaphysical illumination. But there is another issue that requires further discussion: Schopenhauer gives us an interesting perspective on his own position when he comments: ‘Therefore, from our standpoint, where the aesthetic effect is the thing we have in mind, we must attribute to music a far more serious and profound significance that refers to the innermost being of the world and of our own self.’²⁵ Now according to Schopenhauer, ‘the innermost being of the world and of our own self’ is the will, which is where the self and the world are completely coincident with each other. Of course, we cannot *know* the will as an object because it precedes the projection of categories and concepts on the world. But Schopenhauer suggests that we can *experience* it in the very act of willing and striving, with all the attendant satisfactions and dissatisfactions that constitute the typical human life. But there is a problem here: For Schopenhauer, the experience of the will is not a pleasant one. He says it is like being chained to the wheel of Ixion.²⁶ And the more we understand our situation, the more hopeless we are bound to feel. The experience of music touches us at the deepest part of ourselves, where we are supposedly one with the underlying will. But if this is the case, then how can listening to music ever be pleasant, let alone a ‘joyful’ kind of experience? Scruton’s point, that music reveals ‘the depth and worthwhileness of things’ is well-taken, and this is an intuition that many people would share. But how

²⁴ Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner* translated by Walter Kaufmann in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* edited by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 11), 614.

²⁵ *WWR* vol.1, 256.

²⁶ *WWR* vol.1, 196.

can music be so illuminating, and how can we enjoy music so much if, as Schopenhauer claims, it reflects the will, which is the scourge of our existence?

In fact, Schopenhauer argues that listening to music is pleasurable, because in listening to music, we achieve a kind of transcendence — we are no longer the struggling, striving self that we are for most of the time because now we are freed from our everyday projects. As with the other arts, we become impartial spectators — ‘the pure will-less timeless subject(s) of knowledge’ — but in music, what we observe or encounter is the ultimate drama of the will itself, and this is an experience that can be pleasant or even blissful: ‘Only in this way does music never cause us actual suffering, but still remains pleasant even in its most painful chords; and we like to hear in its language the secret history of our will and of all its stirrings and strivings with their many different delays, postponements, hindrances, and afflictions, even in the most sorrowful melodies.’²⁷ In other words, music is enjoyable because it allows us to experience ultimate reality and meaning without the dissatisfaction that we typically experience in life itself.

Now according to Schopenhauer, the transitory bliss that we associate with aesthetic experience is a promise of the lasting happiness that we would achieve if we could finally overcome the will within ourselves. In this respect, as it has been noted, art has a *negative* appeal insofar as it releases us from our everyday involvement with willing. But it is important to remember that art also has a *positive* appeal, and this is a point that Schopenhauer insists on. For example, he says that tragedy reveals the truth of the world to us and it shows us how we can achieve salvation through renunciation; while painting and the visual arts depict the beauty of the world through the expression of the ‘Platonic Ideas’ that are embodied in it. But what about music? Is it enough to say that we love music just because it allows us to escape (briefly) from willing? Like the other arts, music must also have a positive appeal, and especially if it is the *most* powerful art as Schopenhauer claims. Is it simply that music reveals the reality of the will while keeping us safe from harm? I do not think this is a sufficient explanation, and it certainly does not capture the sheer joy that music can inspire. Also, if the will *can* be overcome, even temporarily, then how can we say that it is the *ultimate* reality of the world? What kind of reality are we left with when we transcend the will, and what is the ‘ultimate reality’ that music reveals at this point? It would help us to think about these things in relation to traditional Indian philosophy, including Advaita Vedanta and Buddhist philosophy. Not because Schopenhauer should have followed these ‘kindred’ philosophies more closely than he did, but because they seem to have made more sense of the happiness that music gives us. The argument here is not complex or technical since it refers to the basic wisdom of classical Indian philosophy; and it relies on texts that Schopenhauer would certainly have known. But it does propose a different way of thinking about music and the will, and their connection to ultimate reality and meaning.

²⁷ WWR vol.2, 451.

Schopenhauer and Classical Indian Philosophy

As we have seen, Schopenhauer was one of the first Western thinkers to take Asian philosophy seriously, and throughout his life, he made an extensive study of Indian philosophy (including Buddhism) which appeared to anticipate his own philosophical views.²⁸ Certainly, he could not have known that earlier Vedantin philosophers, such as the great eleventh century Abhinavagupta, had already developed views on aesthetics that were remarkably similar to his own. According to Edwin Gerow, for example, Abhinavagupta held that in the experience of art, the *rasa*, or the aesthetic mood, is never just a personal emotion, for here one relinquishes one's own personal projects and experiences things from a more universal point of view. In other words, aesthetic experience can be viewed as a manifestation of the eternal Self or Atman; and the feeling of aesthetic rapture is 'a foretaste of the bliss of emancipation, promised by the great non-dual traditions of India'.²⁹ In this respect, Gerow also notes that, 'Abhinavagupta's influential commentary brings aesthetics into relation with theological speculation', or with the nature of ultimate reality itself.³⁰ And since this seems to anticipate Schopenhauer's own discussion of aesthetics, it would not be a stretch to think of Schopenhauer as a thinker who belongs to the same tradition which includes Shankara, Abhinavagupta, and other Indian philosophers.

Schopenhauer did not have many original texts or commentaries to refer to, but like Abinavagupta, he was inspired by the *Upanishads*, and he wrote that it was 'the most profitable and sublime reading that is possible in the world; it has been the consolation of my life, and will be that of my death'.³¹ Now it is not unlikely that in affirming the priority of music, Schopenhauer was influenced by his reading of the *Upanishads*, which celebrates *Om*, or the sacred sound that signifies the essence of ultimate reality. As Robert Wicks points out: 'Upon surveying various philosophical theories of the world's foundations, it is unusual to encounter descriptions of the universe's foundation as a vibration or sound. Typically, we encounter substances, relationships, forms, or energies, that is to say, entities whose character stems from one of the five senses other than hearing, or ...from pure thought'.³² Now this is an important comment, for there is a parallel between the *Upanishads* and Schopenhauer's work insofar as both of these try to grasp ultimate reality, not in terms of conceptual thinking, but in terms of the divine sound as music or the cosmic vibration. For Schopenhauer, music is more powerful and more penetrating than any other art in revealing the innermost essence of the world to us. It is profound and it connects us to ultimate reality and meaning. But the same kinds of claims are made

²⁸ For further discussion of Schopenhauer's understanding of Asian philosophy, see J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 4), especially 67–79.

²⁹ Edwin Gerow, 'Indian Aesthetics: A Philosophical Survey' in Eliot Deutsch and Ron Bontekoe, *A Companion to World Philosophies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 6), 317.

³⁰ Gerow, 318.

³¹ Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena* vol.2, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 17), 397.

³² Robert Wicks, *Schopenhauer* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 20), 110.

about *Om* in classical Indian philosophy: For *Om* is the name of ultimate reality, as well as the primordial sound that discloses this reality to us, and allows us to be one with it. Obviously, there is a great difference between the complexity of music, which Schopenhauer describes, and the simple uttering or chanting of *Om*. But in the end, they both evoke the basic insight that some form of cosmic vibration, or music, is the essence of reality itself.

According to traditional Vedanta philosophy, the cosmos is primordial music which is expressed by the syllable *Om*. *Om* is the underlying vibration of the cosmos, or the cosmic sound which pervades the entire universe. It is also the name for the absolute reality of Brahman, or the universe viewed as a totality rather than as a conglomeration of many different parts. In their discussion, Kumar et al. describe *Om* as the original sound from which all things later become manifest. Referring primarily to the *Mandukya Upanishad*, they write:

The sacred syllable *Om* is the principle sound from which all other sounds and creation emerge. It underlies all phonetic creations. The utterance of *Om*, consisting of the three letters *A*, *U*, and *M*, covers the whole process of articulation. It is like the sound of a gong that gradually tapers to a point and merges in silence. One who attains *Om*, merges with the Absolute.³³

This comment brings out the spiritual dimension of *Om*, for in seeking attunement with the Absolute, we are encouraged to chant or meditate upon *Om* as the sacred symbol in order to experience the ultimate reality of Brahman. Elsewhere, in the *Mundaka Upanishad*, it is said that ‘he who knows Brahman becomes Brahman’.³⁴ For at this moment of insight, there is no final separation between the subject and the reality that he or she apprehends.

Another passage from the *Mundaka Upanishad* is illuminating because it emphasizes the relationship between the individual and ultimate reality itself. Here, the devotee is encouraged to follow the teaching of the Upanishad, to become ‘imperishable’ by withdrawing from the ego and the body, and finally merge with the Absolute:

Affix to the Upanishad, the bow incomparable, the sharp arrow of devotional worship; then, with mind absorbed and heart melted in love, draw the arrow and hit the mark – the imperishable Brahman.

Om is the bow, the arrow is the individual being and Brahman the target. With a tranquil heart, take aim. Lose thyself in him, even as the arrow is lost in the target.³⁵

In this passage, the divine sound *Om* is grasped as the way to experience the oneness of Brahman, for here, the *means* is identical to the *end* since ‘the arrow is lost

³³ Sanjay Kumar et al., ‘Meditation on Om: Relevance from Ancient Texts and Contemporary Science.’ *International Journal of Yoga*, vol.3 no.1, 9, 5.

³⁴ ‘Mundaka Upanishad’ in *The Upanishads*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester (New York: Signet, 19) 47.

³⁵ ‘Mundaka Upanishad,’ 44.

in the target'. Here, we can experience a sense of the oneness of being itself. But all of this seems to anticipate the thought of Schopenhauer, who argues that music is the way to experience ultimate reality and truth.

In the *Mandukya Upanishad*, *Om* is that aspect of the self which is beyond the senses and the understanding, and beyond all expression. It is the universe itself, for it is said: 'Whatsoever has existed, whatsoever exists, whatsoever shall exist hereafter, is OM. And whatever transcends past, present, and future, that also is OM.'³⁶ And while it cannot be known, the experience of *Om* involves a sense of joy and even bliss:

It is pure unitary consciousness, wherein awareness of the world and of its multiplicity is completely obliterated. It is ineffable peace. It is the supreme good. It is One without a second. It is the Self. Know it alone! This Self, beyond all words is the syllable OM.³⁷

In this respect, the divine sound is one with absolute reality itself; and this seems to correspond to Schopenhauer's view that through music, we can achieve the most complete involvement with the 'innermost being of the world'.³⁸ In both cases, this is a blissful experience insofar as it involves the deepest recesses of our nature.

Clearly, there are parallels between some passages in the *Upanishads* and some of Schopenhauer's own ideas. But does any of this square with Schopenhauer's claim that *willing* is the nature of ultimate reality? As we have seen, Schopenhauer advises us to 'kill the will' or just allow it to wither away, in order to achieve a final salvation. But this implies that there is a reality that is 'beyond' willing, or a reality that may be revealed in aesthetic experience, which is capable of filling us with joy. It may help to think about this in the context of Buddhism, which Schopenhauer studied along with Vedanta philosophy. Here, I am not so much referring to a 'Buddhist' philosophy of music, but to basic Buddhist ideas: In Buddhist thought, the first noble truth affirms the reality of suffering —that life is suffering, or at least unsatisfying — while the second noble truth says that suffering is caused by our craving and attachment to the things of this world, including ourselves.³⁹ On the face of it, this *seems* to correspond to Schopenhauer's own view that willing — as craving or attachment — is the ultimate reality, and that this must lead to our endless dissatisfaction and distress. But this is not right, because the Buddhist view calls this perspective into question, and the third noble truth calls for the overcoming of desire, or what is sometimes referred

³⁶ Mandukya Upanishad' in *The Upanishads*, 51.

³⁷ 'Mandukya Upanishad,' 52.

³⁸ In the classical Western tradition, there is also a long-standing belief, associated with Pythagoras, Plato, and Marsilio Ficino, that some kind of cosmic vibration, or music, is the essence of reality itself. This is sometimes known as 'the music of the spheres', and according to Ficino and others, our own spiritual task is to harmonize our soul with this divine music — a theme which ultimately goes back to Plato's position in the *Republic*, if not earlier. Schopenhauer's philosophy of music can be seen as a continuation of this tradition which helps to explain the spiritual basis of music. See Joscelyn Goodwin (ed.), *The Harmony of the Spheres: the Pythagorean Tradition in Music* (Rochester: Inner Traditions: 8).

³⁹ See the discussion of the Four Noble Truths in Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Harper, 14), 16–50. Also Michael Carrithers, *The Buddha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3), 53–78.

to as non-attachment, and this is to be achieved by following the eightfold path. The problem is that according to the Buddhist view, all of our attachments and all our willing derive from ignorance or a failure to understand the nature of reality itself. But it is held that if we *could* achieve non-attachment then we would experience the true reality of the world which is nothing other than nirvana itself, where ‘nirvana’ involves the ‘blowing out’ of the self. Hence, for the ‘authentic’ Buddhist, the priority of the will and willing is a false belief based on ignorance; while the cultivation of compassion and non-attachment is a profound expression of wisdom, and a liberating insight since it reflects the way things are: There is a reality that is beyond willing, individuation, and separate souls, and the goal of enlightenment is to achieve this standpoint. But even if this resembles Schopenhauer’s denial of the will and willing, it is at odds with Schopenhauer’s claim that the will is metaphysically ultimate.

For the Vedanta philosopher, everyday reality is a very limited view, but we can progress to the blissful experience of Brahman as a cosmic oneness, which exists beyond the pain of separation and individuation. In the *Chandogya Upanishad*, Uddalaka explains this to his son:

No, my son, in the beginning there was Existence alone – One only, without a second. He, the One, thought to himself: Let me be many, let me grow forth. Thus out of himself he projected the universe; and having projected out of himself the universe, he entered into every being, All that is has its self in him alone. Of all things he is the subtle essence. He is the truth. He is the Self. And that, Svetaketu, THAT ART THOU.⁴⁰

In Vedanta, the claim ‘Tat tvam asi’ — That art thou! — is associated with the most profound joy because it identifies my own individual existence with Brahman or the sacred reality that underlies all things. For Atman — the deepest level of myself — *is* Brahman, which means that the ‘innermost kernel of existence’, or the truth of ultimate reality, lies deep inside me, and this is what music or ‘the divine sound’ illuminates and inspires.⁴¹ Once again, this is not an experience that can be put into words, for here we are beyond the reach of the intellect. But it suggests that something like this is the origin of that sense of bliss and enlightenment that music inspires within us.

I would suggest that only something along these lines can account for the tremendous appeal of music, its depth and its power, as well as the extreme pleasure that music brings to us by showing us the ultimate reality of the world. Schopenhauer himself says that music is ‘metaphysical’ because it connects us to ultimate reality and truth; but he seems to insist on the ultimacy of the will, and this is problematic. At one point, he summarizes his position as follows: ‘In the whole of this discussion on music I have been trying to make it clear that music expresses in an exceedingly universal language, in a homogeneous material, that is, in mere tones, and with the

⁴⁰ ‘Chandogya Upanishad’ in *The Upanishads*, 78.

⁴¹ For further discussion of the *Upanishads*, see the classic commentary by Sri Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads* (New York: Harper, 13).

greatest distinctness and truth, the inner being, the in-itself, of the world, which we think of under the concept of will, according to its most distinct manifestation.’⁴² Schopenhauer has some real insight into the way that music works; but he is wrong about the ‘inner being’ of the world, which must transcend pure willing even on his own view of things. According to Advaita Vedanta, it is possible to grasp the absolute oneness of the world as a blissful state of being. But the experience of music is also a form of self-overcoming, and it is blissful insofar as it allows us to participate in the same oneness of being, or the ultimate reality of the world.

Now if we continue with this line of thinking, there is also a connection between listening to music and the practice of meditation, which is important in most of the classical Indian philosophies. We might have thought that being affected by music requires us to be passive in allowing the music to wash over us and sensitize our souls. Schopenhauer himself says that hearing is a passive affair, and he explains: ‘Sight is an *active*, hearing a *passive* sense. Therefore sounds affect our mind in a disturbing and hostile manner, the more so indeed, the more active and developed the mind. They can destroy all ideas, and instantly shatter the power of thought.’⁴³ Even so, it seems clear that *listening* — as opposed to hearing — is an active and mindful practice that we can cultivate within ourselves. To begin with, listening requires self-overcoming, for it involves clearing the mind and putting every projection or free association to one side so that we can let the music resonate through us. We really do not hear the music if we are distracted or thinking about other things, and so it requires an effort to stay open to the symphony or the fugue, or whatever kind of music it is that we are listening to. Then, by focusing on the line of the music and following it through from one passage to the next, we can harmonize ourselves with it and make it our own. In this way, listening to music trains the mind and it is one of the ways of enhancing concentration. Either it is a lot like meditation, or it is a form of meditation itself.

When we meditate, we typically focus on breathing or the thoughts, emotions, and feelings that arise within our conscious minds. We observe them and allow them to pass, and in this way, we can achieve a kind of dissociation from our everyday lives, or a ‘quiet mind’, which is beyond the endless ‘chattering’ of our inner voices. This is not something that Schopenhauer ever dwells on, but if he had understood the importance of meditation in Buddhism and classical Indian philosophy, he would have seen that there is a connection between music and meditation, and this would have strengthened his discussion by clarifying the effect of music upon the deepest part of ourselves: For music, like meditation, can heal us by attuning the soul, and bringing us back to our true nature. By following the line of the music, we can lose our selfish projections as we come to identify with a deeper reality that supports us and sustains us.

Schopenhauer was profoundly drawn to the philosophy of Vedanta and Buddhism, but he does not take the final step of affirming the reality that lies beyond willing. He emphasizes that the will is the ground of everything, and individuals

⁴² WWR vol.1, 264.

⁴³ WWR vol.2, 28.

are only the secondary manifestations of the one primordial will. In some passages, Schopenhauer talks about self-overcoming in terms of asceticism where the will seems to assert itself against its own willing: For if everything is will, then even the negation of the will must be a form of willfulness. But he also claims that with the death of the will — assuming that such a thing is possible — there would finally be nothing left, just a pale shadow of the self, will-less, unmotivated, and basically uninvolved: ‘Essentially nothing but phenomenon of the will, he ceases to will anything, guards against attaching his will to anything, tries to establish firmly in himself the greatest indifference to all things.’⁴⁴ Now there are two issues here: First, can we overcome willing? — Schopenhauer says that we can but this is problematic given the ultimacy of the will in his system, as well as his assertion of natural necessity. Sometimes, he seems to insist that there is nothing apart from willing: ‘The will must live on itself, since nothing exists beside it and it is a hungry will.’⁴⁵ Second, even if we can suspend the will, what is it that lies *beyond willing*? Schopenhauer is ambivalent on this point also, but in other traditions, including the ancient philosophy of Vedanta and Buddhism, the overcoming of the will can lead to the opening of a higher or a greater reality and the experience of inner peace or even bliss. This can be experienced in meditation, but it can also be achieved through the power of music.

Conclusion

It is time to consider some conclusions. Schopenhauer has a variety of insights and intuitions concerning the nature of music. But his view of the metaphysical ultimacy of the will is questionable, and it is certainly at odds with other views, including the traditional Indian philosophy which he claims to be inspired by. Here, I suggest three basic points that can help to illuminate a more compelling account of music, one that is largely though not completely consistent with Schopenhauer, and which aligns with the basic standpoint of Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism. This is not to say that one would have to be a non-dualist of the Vedanta school (or a Buddhist) to accept this revised philosophy of music. But something like this account can explain the power of music to move and inspire us. Schopenhauer does not relate these three points systematically, but his philosophical account suggests that they are essential aspects of music, and the keys to its mystery.

First, it can be said that music sensitizes us. In particular, it stimulates and evokes our emotional life without harming us, and it allows us to experience the immensity of our own inner world. In this way, our lives are enriched, and we can experience the real depth of our inner life which is increasingly difficult to know, especially in the contemporary society we belong to. Music stimulates the soul, and in this way, it helps us to resist the homogenization of modern consumer culture.

⁴⁴ *WWR* vol.1, 380.

⁴⁵ *WWR* vol.1, 154.

Second, music shows us the continual movement and the striving of life, and it allows us to follow this striving — through every degree of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and across the whole range of emotions — though without the requirement of our own personal involvement. In this respect, music cultivates an attitude of non-attachment and disengagement from the world while it presents all the drama of the world to us. As we have seen, listening to music is also closely related to the practice of meditation which has an important place in the Indian philosophical tradition.

Finally, music allows us to *experience* ultimate reality or the unity that lies beyond our own separate existence; and this is why music can be so profoundly affecting and moving. Here, Schopenhauer's pessimism and his belief in the ultimacy of the will are at odds with the classical Indian view, for losing oneself in music is akin to the blissful experience of oneness that many of these philosophers have described. The earliest Indian philosophers wrote about this in their accounts of *Om*, while mystics and poets have also sought to evoke it. For all of these thinkers, it is an experience that partakes of the deepest bliss because it restores us to a state of unity with the cosmos. Schopenhauer helps us to see the healing power of music as a respite from the will to live; but given his views on the relentlessness of the will, he is not in a position to affirm the *positive* dimension of music as a celebration and an enhancement of life. Against this, however, it can be argued that great music is inspiring in a positive way because it discloses the true depth of the world to us, and only something like this can explain the profound satisfaction that music can bring. For it takes us *beyond* willing to the truth of enlightenment and 'the innermost being of the world'.

References

- Alperson, P. (1982). Schopenhauer and musical revelation. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 40(1982), 155–166.
- Budd, M. (1985). *Music and the emotions: The philosophical theories*. Routledge.
- Carrithers, M. (1996). *The Buddha*. Oxford University Press.
- Clarke, J. J. (1997). *Oriental enlightenment: The encounter between Asian and Western thought*. Routledge.
- Del Nevo, M. (2014). *The metaphysics of night*. Transaction Publishers.
- Gerow, E. (1999). Indian aesthetics: A philosophical survey. In E. Deutsch & R. Bontekoe (Eds.), *A companion to world philosophies*. Blackwell.
- Goehr, L. (1996). Schopenhauer and the musicians: An inquiry into the sounds of silence and the limits of philosophizing about music. In D. Jaquette (Ed.), *Schopenhauer, philosophy and the arts*. Cambridge University Press.
- Goodwin, J. (Ed.). (1992). *The harmony of the spheres: The pythagorean tradition in music*. Inner Traditions.
- Kumar, S., et al. (2010). Meditation on Om: Relevance from ancient texts and contemporary science. *International Journal of Yoga*, 3(1), 1–5.
- Magee, B. (1997). *The philosophy of Schopenhauer*. Oxford University Press.
- Nietzsche, (1968). The case of Wagner. In *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. Modern Library.
- Plato. (1991). *Republic*. Translated by Allan Bloom. Basic Books.
- Radhakrishnan, S. (1994). *The Principal Upanishads*. Harper.
- Rahula, W. (1974). *What the Buddha taught*. Harper.

- Schopenhauer. (1969). *The world as will and representation* two volumes. Translated by E.F.J. Payne. Dover.
- Schopenhauer. (1903). *The will in nature*. Translated by Karl Hillebrand. Available from wikisource at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On_the_Will_in_Nature. Accessed 30 July 2021.
- Schopenhauer. (1974). *Parerga and Paralipomena* vol.2. Translated by E.F.J. Payne. Oxford University Press.
- Scruton, R. (2014). *The soul of the world*. Princeton University Press.
- The Upanishads. (2002). *Translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester*. Signet.
- Wicks, R. (2008). *Schopenhauer*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Zöllner, G. (2011). Schopenhauer. In S. L. Sorgner & O. Fürbeth (Ed.), *Music in German philosophy: An introduction* (pp. 121–139). University of Chicago Press.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.