

# ROUSSEAU AND AESTHETIC MODERNITY: MUSIC'S POWER OF REDEMPTION

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## ABSTRACT

*Despite Rousseau's condemnation of the 'progress' of civilization and his suspicions concerning the arts, he none the less articulates a redemptive role for aesthetic experience within modern life. In choosing music as his privileged aesthetic object, he suggests the possibility of an eighteenth-century aesthetic based on experience that anticipates later developments in romanticism and modernism. And by locating the possibility of redemption within aesthetic experience couched in terms of musical performance, he articulates a modern role for the work of art that looks forward to nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetic theory from the German Romantics to the Frankfurt School.*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau – better known for his critiques of the project of Enlightenment and for the rhetorical barbs he aimed at the *philosophes* – is not usually thought of as a defender of progress or a champion of social change. While his *Confessions* (1770) are often invoked as the first modern autobiography and his *Social Contract* (1762) is widely considered to usher in an era of 'modern political theory', most of his assessments of humankind's development dwell on the negative effects of the progress of civilization.

Beginning with his tirade against the corrupting effects of the arts and sciences in the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (written in 1750 in response to the Dijon Academy's question of whether 'the reestablishment of the sciences and the arts has contributed to the purification of manners and morals'), Rousseau's faith in the ability of enlightenment or aesthetic experience to overcome the fragmentation and alienation of eighteenth-century life is shaken, to say the least. Indeed, laying the blame for society's ills squarely on the shoulders of the 'enlightened' arts and sciences seemingly leaves no room for Rousseau to use them for society's redemption. Throughout history it is the arts and sciences that have led to the division of labour, increasing social dependence, the downfall of the ancient democratic republics and the lack of satisfaction generally in public life.

Never one to flinch at self-contradiction, Rousseau is also the composer of operas, the author of plays and novels, and certainly an influential force in, if not the creator of, a certain romantic aesthetic. In his creative work, as well as in his numerous theoretical writings on music, Rousseau articulates a role for aesthetic experience within contemporary life that would help to overcome the fragmentation and alienation that he so keenly experienced. In spite of his condemnations of the arts in the *First Discourse*, Rousseau holds open the possibility that such experience – in the specific form of musical performance – contains the potential to bridge this fragmentation. Indeed, Rousseau's privileging of music enables him to formulate an aesthetic based on experience that anticipates later developments in romanticism and modernism; it also allows for an insight into aesthetic experience that goes beyond other formulations of the period, including those most often conceived with painting or the novel in mind. Most importantly, by locating the possibility of redemption within aesthetic experience couched in terms of musical performance, Rousseau articulates a role for the work of art that looks forward to nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetic theory, from the German Romantics to the Frankfurt School. Finally, by reserving a redemptive role for music, Rousseau may



be read, retrospectively and ironically, as a defender of modernity against postmodern critique. His offer of music as a remedy for the encroachment of modern life locates the cure within the illness itself, prefiguring the solutions of a later modernism. In the unfolding of ‘an aesthetic modernity,’ Rousseau’s understanding of music reasserts for us the ongoing urgency of the Enlightenment project.

## DEFINING AESTHETIC MODERNITY

In order to situate Rousseau’s contribution to aesthetic theory, it is necessary to trace a brief history of developments in aesthetics related to the emergence of modernity. Beginning in the seventeenth century, progress in the sciences, and specifically Cartesian rationalism, with its insistence on truth and reason grounded in logical a priori, redefined the basis for knowledge. From the standpoint of the sciences, nature is viewed with respect to stable standards for the determination of truthful propositions. These same concerns are echoed in classical aesthetic theory, where stable rules guarantee the content of art oriented towards the exposition of eternal truths. As Ernst Cassirer asserts with respect to the Cartesian influence in seventeenth-century aesthetic theory: ‘Art, likewise is to be measured and tested by the rules of reason, for only such examination can show whether or not it contains something genuine, lasting and essential.’ Thus nature, through the lens of the sciences and the arts, is viewed as governed by stable, knowable, rational laws that should also condition aesthetic production and reception. Cassirer concludes: ‘The course of seventeenth and eighteenth century aesthetics was thus indicated once and for all. It is based on the idea that, as nature in all its manifestations is governed by certain principles, and as it is the highest task of the knowledge of nature to formulate these principles clearly and precisely, so also art, the rival of nature, is under the same obligation.’<sup>1</sup>

The influence of Cartesian rationalism on scientific method marks a shift that is often identified with the emergence of modernity. However, the aesthetic principles that accompany this shift towards a scientific modernity do not coincide with what is normally associated with a modernist aesthetic. Indeed, the insistence on stable truth and unifying principles accentuates formal considerations in aesthetics. In the realm of music, this type of aesthetic tends to reduce music as an aesthetic object to its mathematical principles and formal properties, focusing on its virtual existence rather than its performance. Further developments in scientific method fuel the movement of aesthetic theory away from formal considerations and towards the possibility of critical analysis that can account for and appreciate musical practice.

According to Cassirer’s analysis of the development of Enlightenment thought, it is the emergence of empiricism and scepticism that enables the shift away from the privileging of logical judgment characteristic of Cartesian rationalism, and towards a scientific and aesthetic theory that allows for the intervention of the phenomenal world in both cases. In the realm of science, this opens the closed systems of the seventeenth century to the more open-ended modes of thought of the eighteenth century. Rather than the ‘unity, uniformity, simplicity, and logical equality [that] seem to form the ultimate and highest goal of thought’ characteristic of the seventeenth century, eighteenth-century philosophical and scientific thought attempts to account for multiplicity, variety and change. The individual point of view becomes central to the Enlightenment project as the universal Cartesian subject cedes its place to the situated subject of Lockean empiricism, Leibnizian monadology and Humean scepticism.

From the standpoint of aesthetics, this shift inaugurates a subjective turn: logical judgments are no longer as highly prized as those that are limited in scope but as such necessarily valid, as in judgments of taste that rely upon the subject’s knowledge of his own perceptions. The break with classical aesthetics that occurs during the eighteenth century enables the consideration of works of art from the standpoint of experience. For music, this means the beginning of a turn towards musical practice, performance and reception. And for

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1 Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 279–280. All further references to Cassirer in the text come from these pages.



Rousseau, it is this attention to musical practice that enables him to formulate an aesthetic that is distinctly 'modern'.

Every aesthetic theory chooses a privileged object that 'illustrates' its principles. For the classical aesthetic of the seventeenth century, the privileged objects are poetry and theatre, illustrating the eternal and stable truths of classical formalism. For an eighteenth-century aesthetic, oriented towards subjective perception and feeling, the novel and genre painting play pivotal roles in illustrating the effects of the work of art on the perceiving subject.<sup>2</sup> In many respects, the choice of object is not only conditioned by theoretical principles, it also serves to reinforce and further to delineate aesthetic theory. Forming a dialectical circuit, aesthetic theory and privileged object mutually condition and reinforce each other.

In the case of Rousseau, who nowhere formulates an independent aesthetic theory, the choice of object is paramount. Indeed, Rousseau's concentration on music enables the articulation of an aesthetic theory that breaks in dramatic ways with others of the period.<sup>3</sup> Because of both his exclusive attention to music and his failure to develop an independent theory, Rousseau gains an insight into aesthetic experience – understood in relation to musical practice – that prefigures nineteenth- and twentieth-century conceptions of the work of art. Rousseau's 'modernity' in this respect, although clearly in some sense a product of the emergence of a certain scientific equivalent, none the less also represents a radical break with seventeenth-century classical aesthetics and even the more subject-centred theory of his contemporaries, pointing the way towards conceptions of modernism of the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup>

## ROUSSEAU'S MODERNITY

Classing Rousseau among the 'moderns,' or as a thinker who not only gives voice to a certain conception of modernity as a critic of the Enlightenment but also shapes our understanding of the emergence of the concept, is least problematic from the standpoint of his social and political thought. Rousseau's social and political theory diagnoses many of the ills of contemporary life, inaugurating, as I have argued elsewhere, philosophical critical theory.<sup>5</sup> Specifically with respect to the wedge he drives between nature and society, Rousseau's thought necessitates a reconceptualization of social life and puts into question the possibility of happiness, sparking debates that continue today. Indeed, as Hans Robert Jauss has argued, Rousseau's thought opens the door to a new kind of historical thinking that positions man within a narrative of his own creation: 'The resulting question that is asked by Rousseau, a question that has been epoch-making for ensuing generations, is, as condensed from its many variations: how can man in the modern world, considering his second existence as *homme civil*, reappropriate his lost totality of the *homme naturel* and so recover his chance for happiness?'.<sup>6</sup>

2 For discussions of eighteenth-century aesthetics specifically concerned with the effects of the work of art on the reader or spectator see, for example, Jay Caplan, *Framed Narratives: Diderot's Genealogy of the Beholder* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) and Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

3 On the centrality and importance of the *Dictionnaire de musique* as an articulation of aesthetic theory see Cynthia Verba, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Radical and Traditional Views in the *Dictionnaire de musique*', *Journal of Musicology* 7/3 (1989), 308–326, and John T. Scott, 'The Harmony Between Rousseau's Musical Theory and his Philosophy', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59/2 (1998), 287–308.

4 It is important to note that Rousseau's choice of music as privileged aesthetic object also runs counter to what have been characterized as Enlightenment trends towards the visual. For a discussion of the turn towards the ocular, especially in the American Enlightenment, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, 'Hearing Loss', in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Back (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 41–59.

5 See my *Mass Enlightenment: Critical Studies in Rousseau and Diderot* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

6 Hans Robert Jauss, 'The Literary Process of Modernism From Rousseau to Adorno', *Cultural Critique* 11 (1988–1989), 39.



This question, sparked by Rousseau's assessment of mankind's present state, introduces a distinctly modern attitude with respect both to the historical present and to possible sources of redemption. Many critics, Jauss among them, consider the response to the question, and specifically the identification of works of art as a locus of potential happiness, to be a product of later thought, in particular romanticism, modernism and the avant garde. However, I believe that Rousseau already hints at such an answer in his understanding of music.

Although Rousseau inaugurated a certain conception of modernity conceived as historical consciousness, it is the philosophers of the twentieth century who have fully explicated the view glimpsed by him. In a now celebrated speech, given in Frankfurt when he received the city's Adorno prize, Jürgen Habermas argued in favour of conceiving of modernity as an 'unfinished project'.<sup>7</sup> Against the disillusionment of postmodernists, who proclaim both the project of Enlightenment and modernity dead or, at the very least, not worth pursuing, Habermas defends the ideals of the Enlightenment, and specifically the reintegration of the aesthetic and the lifeworld. For all this defence, he is not so far from Rousseau in seeking a remedy for the ills brought about by enlightenment and modernity from within the project of Enlightenment itself.

In the course of his argument, Habermas, citing Adorno on Baudelaire, conceives of modernity as a relation to the 'new'. Habermas isolates the present's relationship to the past as particularly significant for defining the modern. As he sees it, the move away from the models of classical antiquity and towards independent standards of beauty defines modernity:

With varying contents, the term *modernity* repeatedly expresses the consciousness of an era that relates itself to the past of classical antiquity in order to conceive itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new. This is not true merely of the Renaissance, with which the modern age [*Neuzeit*] begins for us; people also thought of themselves as 'modern' at the time of Charlemagne, in the twelfth century, and during the Enlightenment – that is, whenever the consciousness of a new era in Europe developed through a renewed relationship to classical antiquity. In this process, *antiquitas*, antiquity, was considered a normative model to be imitated . . . Only with the French Enlightenment's ideals of perfection and the notion, inspired by modern science, of the infinite progress of knowledge and an infinite advance towards social and moral betterment was the spell that the classical works of antiquity exerted on the spirit of those *early* moderns at each point gradually broken.<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, it is with the French Enlightenment that Habermas locates a break that inaugurates a new relationship with the past that will reconfigure conceptions of beauty for modernity. Consistent with Cassirer's understanding of the emergence of eighteenth-century aesthetics outlined above, Habermas also stresses the open-ended quest for human progress – unbounded by rationalist classical ideals – as characteristic of the 'modern' subjective turn. Luc Ferry's account of the development of aesthetics similarly highlights this Enlightenment shift: 'Among the *ancients* the work is conceived of as microcosm – which permits them to think that outside of it, in the macrocosm, an objective or, better, substantial criterion of the Beautiful exists – it is given meaning among the moderns through reference to subjectivity, to become for the *contemporaries* the pure and simple expression of individuality'.<sup>9</sup>

A part of the shift that both Ferry and Habermas locate in the subjective turn which occurred during the Enlightenment relates to the concept of imitation. As Habermas recounts the development, classical aesthetics insists on eternal aesthetic standards having their roots in antiquity and being grounded in rational

7 Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project', in *Critical Theory: The Essential Readings*, ed. David Ingram and Julia Simon-Ingram (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 342–356.

8 Habermas, 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project', 343.

9 Luc Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus: The Invention of Taste in the Democratic Age*, trans. Robert de Loazia (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 8.



truths. With the turn towards subjectivity, the concept of the beautiful itself becomes subjective, pushing aside the need for, and indeed the belief in, the imitation of absolute objective standards of beauty.<sup>10</sup> Rather than imitate classical models, or eternal singular truths, the new aesthetic of the eighteenth century relies upon judgment and subjective experience of the natural world in order to produce artistic imitations. In the effort required of both artist and audience to relate the work of art back to nature through judgment, mimesis of this new type emphasizes the subjective experience of the aesthetic object.

With respect to music, debates about its mimetic ability are more acute than similar arguments in the other arts. In effect, defenders of music during the eighteenth century struggle to maintain its status as an art, rather than a science, by insisting on its potential for imitation.<sup>11</sup> In part, this defence of music relates back to an earlier classical aesthetic that viewed music's mathematical and formal qualities as indices of its ability to represent eternal and stable truths. For the newer, subjectively oriented aesthetic, music's rational and stable formal qualities pose an obstacle to the imitation of nature conceived as dynamic and changing. What is at stake, in the arguments concerning mimesis in music, is music's status as an art.<sup>12</sup>

Many critics have detailed Rousseau's debt to and departure from the various theories of imitation of his day.<sup>13</sup> While acknowledging Rousseau's debt to other theorists, and the historically specific reasons for his insistence on mimesis in music, it is important to highlight the ways in which, for Rousseau, mimesis relies on judgment – a subject to which I shall return. With respect to both painting and music, Rousseau gives voice to an aesthetic founded on a new type of mimesis. In the *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, he argues in favour of an aesthetic based on formal relations between colours and sounds that produces an imitation going beyond the merely pleasing or agreeable. For Rousseau, art moves its audience through formal relations that imitate nature:

Comme donc la peinture n'est pas l'art de combiner des couleurs d'une manière agréable à la vue, la musique n'est pas non plus l'art de combiner des sons d'une manière agréable à l'oreille. S'il n'y avoit que cela, l'une et l'autre seroient au nombre des sciences naturelles et non pas des beaux arts. C'est l'imitation seule qui les élève à ce rang. Or qu'est-ce qui fait de la peinture un art d'imitation? C'est le dessein. Qu'est-ce qui de la musique en fait un autre? C'est la mélodie.<sup>14</sup>

Just as painting is not the art of combining colours in an agreeable manner for the eyes, music is not the art of combining sounds in an agreeable manner for the ear. If it were only that, the one and the other would number among the natural sciences and not the arts. It is the imagination alone

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- 10 The appearance of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* in 1750 is often cited as marking a significant turning-point in the definition of the term 'aesthetics' as a branch of philosophy dedicated specifically to perception through the senses, for which he used the experience of art as a primary example.
- 11 During the eighteenth century music was considered to be both an art dependent on mimesis and a science that dealt with the realm of sensory impressions. For a discussion of music's double status as art and science see Verba, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau'. See also the opening remarks in the 'Discours préliminaire aux éléments de musique théorique et pratique suivant les principes de M. Rameau éclaircis, développés et simplifiés par M. D'Alembert': 'On peut considérer la musique comme un art qui a pour objet l'un des principaux plaisirs des sens, ou comme une science par laquelle cet art est réduit en principes.' Reprinted in Catherine Kintzler, *Jean Philippe Rameau: Splendeur et naufrage de l'esthétique du plaisir à l'âge classique* (Paris: Minerve, 1988), 193.
- 12 Interestingly, these same issues reappear in modernist and avant-garde music. As Douglas Kahn has argued, modernist and avant-garde composers of the early twentieth century turned away from the incorporation of pre-recorded sounds within their compositions, deeming them too referential and, therefore, too mimetic, particularly for the avant-garde aesthetic. See Kahn, 'The Sound of Music', in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, 77–90.
- 13 See Verba, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau', and Scott, 'The Harmony Between Rousseau's Musical Theory and his Philosophy', on imitation in Aristotle and the abbé Dubos in relation to Rousseau.
- 14 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, 5 volumes (Paris: Gallimard, 1959–1995), volume 5, 414. All translations are my own.



that elevates them to this rank. So what makes painting an art of imitation? It is design. What makes of music another one? It is melody.

It is form, in its arrangement of colours and sounds, that distinguishes the work of art from science. Simple colour and sound production belong either to the realm of science or to simple physical pleasure; formal design aimed at mimesis characterizes art for Rousseau. But, as we shall see, the formal qualities of music must be redefined in order to break away from the earlier conceptions of music so prized by the classical aesthetic as merely formal or mathematical.

Imitation of nature as a defining feature of art does not in and of itself mark a significant break that one could characterize as 'modern.' The move away from classical aesthetics towards a dynamically conceived nature as the model for art, although significant for the reconceptualization of the understanding of the present, does not provide sufficient ground for a new understanding of the role of the work of art in the 'modern' world. Rousseau's emphasis on formal criteria for judging works of art as imitations of nature requires further elaboration of the function of these 'imitations' in such a world.

Coupled with the shift in emphasis towards nature is a new attitude to the present. I would characterize this attitude as elegiac, expressing a feeling of irrecoverable loss with respect to the past. Indeed, although the Enlightenment marks a break with antiquity and stands on its own, as it were, in Rousseau's thought, the *present* of the Enlightenment stands abandoned, or at the very least in mournful solitude, with respect to all that has gone before.

This plaintive relation to the past is perhaps most evident in the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750), the *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* (1755) and other works that sketch a time of the origin and subsequent development of humanity that has led to man's perdition in the modern world. The elegiac solitude of the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1777) and of *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques* (1772–1775), as well as (to some extent) the hermetic isolation of small family groups in *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and *Emile ou de l'éducation* (1761), also voices the alienation and lack of community that Rousseau perceives in 'modern' life.<sup>15</sup> Most significantly for my purposes here, the *Essai sur l'origine des langues* gestures to a lost age in which singing, poetry and speech were one: 'verses, songs, speech have a common origin' (les vers, les chants, la parole ont une origine commune<sup>16</sup>), providing a kind of sonorous plenitude of energy and passion. In most of Rousseau's corpus, there is a general feeling, an overall pathos, of loss with respect to the past – an elegiac lament for an immediacy, fulfilment, plenitude and, ultimately, a satisfaction that is lacking in the present. The character Pygmalion, expressing despair over his loss of talent in the opening lines of Rousseau's *scène lyrique*, epitomizes the plight of the 'modern' artist: 'There is no soul there nor life; it is only stone. I will never make anything of all that. O my genius, where are you? My talent, what have you become? All my fire is extinguished, my imagination is frozen, the marble leaves my hands cold.' (Il n'y a point-là d'ame ni de vie; ce n'est que de la pierre. Je ne ferai jamais rien de tout cela. O mon génie, où es-tu? Mon talent qu'es-tu devenu? Tout mon feu s'est éteint, mon imagination s'est glacé, le marbre sort froid de mes mains.<sup>17</sup>) Pygmalion the sculptor, Rousseau the 'modern' writer and by extension all we 'moderns' have lost our fire and our imagination and are haunted by a memory, or by traces of the primordial 'fire' left in works of art.

The elegiac mode of Rousseau's works implies a need for redemption. Pygmalion finds what he seeks in his own *chef-d'oeuvre*, Galathée. As Shierry Weber has persuasively argued, Pygmalion finds intimacy and a 'new' whole self in his fusion with Galathée, the work he has produced.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Patrick Coleman reads

15 For a discussion of alienation in Rousseau, see my *Mass Enlightenment*, especially chapters 1–3.

16 Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume 5, 410.

17 Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume 4, 1214. *Pygmalion* in and of itself is a paradoxical text from the point of view of genre alone. The alternation between spoken voice and orchestral music indicates a new direction in thinking about opera. For a discussion of *Pygmalion* within the context of opéra comique, see Jean-Christophe Rebejko, 'Rousseau et l'opéra-comique: Les raisons d'un rejet,' *The Romantic Review* 89/2 (1998), 161–185.

18 Shierry Weber, 'The Aesthetics of Rousseau's *Pygmalion*,' in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), 65–81.





*Pygmalion* as a commentary on Rousseau's anxiety in anticipating the reception of his own work – an anxiety that anticipates modernism.<sup>19</sup> If the artist finds solace in his relationship with his own creation, is society to do the same? Can and do works of art provide what is missing in the 'modern' world?

For both Weber and Habermas – to return to the historical argument concerning the emergence of modernity (which in many respects extends Rousseau's argument of the first and second discourses) – an increased rationalization and separation of the domains of knowledge leads to a severing of ties between formerly united spheres of expression. This 'differentiation of the values spheres', and splitting-off of expert domains of knowledge, leaves art independent from either religious-metaphysical or moral value.<sup>20</sup> Art, as an independent sphere, has its own experts – artists, collectors, connoisseurs, critics – and its own value: authentic aesthetic expression. Many of these cultural changes were already palpable by the mid-eighteenth century.

But the differentiation and secularization of the spheres and the appearance of expert knowledge in the aesthetic domain do not go far enough in explaining the crisis of values expressed in Rousseau's elegiac mode. It is clear that cutting artistic expression loose from either religious-metaphysical or moral-practical expression creates difficulties for understanding the role of the work of art. But the crisis seems to go even deeper than the splitting-off of the aesthetic domain. Well before the nineteenth century Rousseau is not simply lamenting increased rationalization in the form of specialization and compartmentalization. Given the state of society as Rousseau sees it, produced in large measure by the increase in knowledge generated by the Enlightenment and, indeed, by society itself as it necessarily divorces man from nature, art must provide something to replace the displaced values. Increased secularization and expert knowledge has led to a crisis in meaning and value, not only for art, but for all domains of knowledge. For Rousseau, questions of legitimation lie at the heart of man's self-examination in a secularized modern world, and the realm of art may offer a last bastion of hope for a society grappling for meaning and value. At the very least, the elegiac mode laments the increased alienation and secularization in the 'modern' world expressed by means of literary art.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, the break with the past articulated in the elegiac mode, coupled with the need for redemption, invites a consideration of the future. The aesthetic expressions of modernity loosely grouped under the rubric 'modernism' are characterized by a specific temporal attitude with respect to the present that cuts ties with both the past and the future. Looking to Baudelaire, Adorno and Habermas – and Foucault as well – define a modernist aesthetic as a certain relation to the 'now'. They locate the modernity in Baudelaire's work in 'the ephemeral, the fleeting, the contingent'.<sup>22</sup> In this relationship to the now, according to Habermas, modernism celebrates the present, not by attempting to capture and freeze it, but rather in 'the forward orientation, the anticipation of an undefined, contingent future, and the cult of the New'.<sup>23</sup> He continues, 'What is expressed in the new value accorded the transitory and the ephemeral and in the celebration of dynamism is the longing for an immaculate and unchanging present. Modernism, a self-negating moment,

19 Patrick Coleman, 'Rousseau and Preromanticism: Anticipation and Oeuvre', *Yale French Studies* 66 (1984), 67–82.

20 Compare Coleman's discussion of secularization in romanticism with Rousseau's own paradoxical relation to Christianity in 'Rousseau and Preromanticism'.

21 In 'The Literary Process of Modernity,' Jauss contends that Rousseau diagnoses the conflict between nature and civilization without offering any solution: 'The three means of reform that he had developed in *Emile*, the *Social Contract*, and the *Nouvelle Héloïse* were already inconsistent at the most basic level of their disparate points of departure, leaving, all told, nothing more than an aporia, whose solution was accessible neither to Rousseau nor to the French Enlightenment'; 41. I will argue in favour of a reading of Rousseau's music theory that proposes a version of aesthetic modernism offering aesthetic experience – in the form of music – as an antidote to the alienation of modern life.

22 Foucault cites Charles Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), 13, in 'What Is Enlightenment?', in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1997), 310.

23 Habermas, 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project', 344.



is “nostalgia for true presence.” This, says Octavio Paz, “is the secret theme of the best modernist writers.”<sup>24</sup> Rather than try to recapture a lost past or freeze a fleeting present, the modernist aesthetic celebrates the ephemeral.

In Rousseau’s corpus, this type of relation to the present is expressed most clearly and forcefully in the Fifth Promenade of the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*:

Mais s’il est un état où l’âme trouve une assiette assez solide pour s’y reposer tout entière et rassembler là tout son être, sans avoir besoin de rappeler le passé ni d’enjamber sur l’avenir; où le tems ne soit rien pour elle, où le présent dure toujours sans néanmoins marquer sa durée et sans aucune trace de succession, sans aucun autre sentiment de privation ni de jouissance, de plaisir ni de peine, de désir ni de crainte que celui seul de notre existence, et que ce sentiment seul puisse la remplir tout entier[e]; tant que cet état dure celui qui s’y trouve peut s’appeler heureux, non d’un bonheur imparfait, pauvre et relatif tel que celui qu’on trouve dans les plaisirs de la vie mais d’un bonheur suffisant, parfait et plein, qui ne laisse dans l’âme aucun vuide qu’elle sente le besoin de remplir.<sup>25</sup>

But if there is a state where the soul can find a foundation solid enough to rest itself entirely and bring together there its whole being, without having to remember the past or connect to the future, where time would be nothing for it, where the present would last for ever without none the less marking its duration and without any trace of succession, without any feeling of privation or of enjoyment, of pleasure or of pain, of desire or of fear other than that of our very existence, and that this feeling alone could fill it entirely; as long as this state lasts the one who finds himself there can call himself happy, not of an imperfect happiness, impoverished and relative such as the one that one finds in the pleasures of life but a sufficient happiness, perfect and whole, that leaves no void in the soul that needs to be filled.

How can this peace and tranquillity, this plenitude and happiness be achieved in the modern world? And, given the alienation, secularization and compartmentalization produced by the Enlightenment, what kinds of experiences can evoke this feeling of ‘sufficient, perfect and full happiness’?

## THE MUSICAL AESTHETIC

Modernism, as an aesthetic, responds to the needs of the ‘modern’ world as articulated in the elegiac mode and expressed in the new attitude towards the present. Habermas’s and Foucault’s readings of Baudelaire relate the modernist aesthetic to a certain conception of modernity that identifies art as a possible response to, and cure for, the woes introduced by the Enlightenment project and continued into modernity.<sup>26</sup> As we have seen, Rousseau’s corpus also exhibits many of the most significant traits associated with this nineteenth-century understanding of ‘modernity’. The elegiac mode and especially the attitude towards the present echo the definition of modernity and modernism normally associated with Baudelaire.

There is, however, a significant difference between, on the one hand, voicing these attitudes towards ‘modernity’ in works of art (such as novels, plays, autobiographies and other forms of writing) and, on the other, articulating an aesthetic theory. Certainly this type of awareness of the present, especially expressed in

24 Habermas, ‘Modernity: An Unfinished Project’, 344, citing Octavio Paz, *Essays* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), volume 2, 159.

25 Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume 1, 1046.

26 In both Habermas and Foucault there is a tendency to elide the Enlightenment project, modernity and modernism into one continuous developmental phenomenon. While I will try to keep these various strands separate, especially with respect to the differences between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I would acknowledge that my reliance on Habermas’s theorizing has led to some blurring of these nebulous boundaries.





laments over a lost plenitude in the past, characterizes many writings from many periods. What distinguishes aesthetic modernism as a definitive break is the theorization of a new aesthetic attitude centred on the subject as a response to the perception of the various aporia produced by the historical developments of the second half of the eighteenth century. Aesthetic modernity – both the artistic practice and its theoretical articulation – responds in a self-conscious way to the diagnosis of modernity's ills.

Although the articulation of a 'modernist' view with respect to time is certainly clear in the passage from the fifth 'Promenade' of the *Rêveries* cited above, the *Rêveries* do not present an aesthetic theory. Setting aside questions of composition and intended audience posed by the text of the *Rêveries* – though related to modernist and postmodernist problematics – an autobiographical text does not offer aesthetic theorization on the order of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Moreover, although *Pygmalion* thematizes many of the central questions of aesthetic theory in its depiction of the artist in relation to his work, it does not itself articulate a fully developed one.

Rousseau's most fully developed aesthetic theory lies in the body of texts devoted to music. While the composition of these texts spans many years and genres, and the texts therefore do not offer an aesthetic system in the way that Baumgarten's and Kant's do, it is precisely Rousseau's specific attention to music – and his failure to articulate a fully theorized vision – that enables a coherent and audacious aesthetic theory to emerge. It is in this theory that Rousseau makes art, and specifically music, respond to the needs generated by modern life.

Music plays the key role in Rousseau's aesthetic theory for a number of reasons. First, by way of negative argument, it is important to point out that none of the other arts – poetry, literature, painting, theatre or sculpture – can provide the type of solace and remedy for modernity's ills that music can. While this is true because of Rousseau's particular views of the other arts – which may relate to their privileged status as chosen object for other aesthetic theories – it is also related specifically to Rousseau's understanding of music as an art form. Rather than dwell on Rousseau's catalogue of complaints relating to the other arts, I turn to his specific characterization and understanding of music.

First, as I have argued elsewhere, Rousseau's conception of music is profoundly temporal.<sup>27</sup> In the *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, he distinguishes music from painting as an auditory as opposed to a visual art form, anchored in time rather than space:

Chaque sens a son champ qui lui est propre. Le champ de la musique et le tems, celui de la peinture est l'espace. Multiplier les sons entendus à la fois ou developper les couleurs l'une après l'autre, c'est changer leur économie, c'est mettre l'oeil à la place de l'oreille, et l'oreille à la place de l'oeil.<sup>28</sup>

Each sense has a field that properly belongs to it. The field of music is time, that of painting is space. To multiply the sounds heard at the same time or develop the colours one after another is to change their economy, it is to put the eye in the place of the ear and the ear in the place of the eye.

Music's temporal form requires performance for its very existence. While painting and sculpture may be created and left behind for their audience, music, at least in the eighteenth century, required performance in order to be perceived. While this argument may sound like a reiteration of the Derridean reading of the privileging of presence in Rousseau, instead, the privileged status of music has more to do with its existence in time and the need for its perpetual (re)creation in performance than it does with the need for musicians to be present in order for it to be experienced.<sup>29</sup> Music exists in a virtual form as notes written on a page, but it comes to life and exists in its 'true' form – as a temporal art form – only when it is performed. The performance of music privileges its existence in the 'here and now', its fleeting and ephemeral quality as an

<sup>27</sup> See my 'Music and the Performance of Community in Rousseau', in *Rousseau on Music and Language*, ed. Claude Dauphin, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 8 (2004), 192–200.

<sup>28</sup> Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume 5, 420.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).



art form, and also cuts against the rational and purely formal conception of music as a set of mathematical relations.<sup>30</sup> Put another way, music is inherently sequential. And while our experience of painting and sculpture may indeed be sequential as well, as our eyes pass over various parts of the work of art to take it in, all parts are none the less simultaneously present. Not so with music: because one part succeeds another in time, our experience of it is always ordered and temporal.

To reframe Rousseau's position in relation to the aesthetic of modernity, this means that music expresses through its very form one of the central tenets of modernism: the ephemeral quality of the here and now. One might even go so far as to suggest that music, through its temporal form, expresses the elegiac theme of loss: at the conclusion of each performance, nothing remains but the memory of the sounds. 'Colours are durable, sounds evaporate, and there is never any certainty that those that are reborn are the same as those that have been extinguished.' (Les couleurs sont durables, les sons s'évanouissent, et l'on n'a jamais de certitude que ceux qui renaissent soient les mêmes que ceux qui se sont éteints.<sup>31</sup>) The performance can never be exactly repeated.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, we can only return to the experience of the work of art in memory.

In addition to its temporal/sequential form, music also presents another formal attribute that aids its expression of a modernist aesthetic: it is an inherently relational art. Rousseau writes:

Chaque couleur est absolue, indépendante, au lieu que chaque son n'est pour nous que relatif et ne se distingue que par comparaison. Un son n'a par lui-même aucun caractère absolu qui le fasse reconnoître; il est grave ou aigu, fort ou doux par rapport à un autre; en lui-même il n'est rien de tout cela.<sup>33</sup>

Each colour is absolute, independent, whereas each sound is only relative for us and only distinguishes itself through comparison. A sound has by itself no absolute character that makes it recognizable; it is low-pitched or sharp, strong or soft in relation to another; in and of itself it has none of all that.

Whether one believes what Rousseau says about colours or not, it is his insight into the nature of musical sounds that is of consequence. What Rousseau means is that, in contrast to colours, musical signs, like linguistic ones, are arbitrary: in and of themselves they have no particular value. Individual notes become recognizable and derive value from the signifying system in which they are embedded:

Dans le système harmonique un son quelconque n'est rien non plus naturellement; il est ni tonique ni dominante, ni harmonique ni fondamental; parce que toutes ces propriétés ne sont que des rapports, et que le système entier pouvant varier du grave à l'aigu, chaque son change d'ordre et de place dans le système, selon que le système change de degré.<sup>34</sup>

In the harmonic system, no sound is anything just by its nature; it is neither tonic nor dominant, neither harmonic nor fundamental, because all these properties are only relationships and, the entire system being able to move from low to high, each changes order and place in the system according to the change in degree of the system.

30 Although music requires presence for performance, its temporal quality and unrepeatability suggest a highly unstable art form. Rather than the stability that Derrida sees in the privileging of speech over writing in the *Essai*, I would suggest that the privileging of music has everything to do with its unstable dissemination.

31 Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume 5, 420.

32 Jauss, 'The Literary Process of Modernity', 59, suggests that unrepeatability is a characteristic of second-generation avant gardists such as Apollinaire, Duchamps and Picasso, noting that their work stresses the 'pure contingency' of everyday experience. Although Rousseau's understanding of music does not encompass the quotidian, his emphasis on its sequential/temporal form does highlight what Jauss describes in the avant garde as 'the non-recoverable character of all temporal experience'.

33 Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume 5, 420.

34 Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume 5, 420.



Arguing in parallel with Rameau's theory of the fundamental bass, Rousseau insists on the relational and relative nature of musical sounds.

An art based on arbitrary signs that derive their meaning through relation has implications for aesthetic theory. In order to produce expressive and meaningful art, one must use formal attributes. In other words, for Rousseau, form and content are more intimately linked in music than in painting because of the nature of the musical sign. Moreover, in order for music to 'imitate' nature, as we have seen above that it must, music must have recourse to form. Unlike painting, which according to Rousseau has recourse to a relatively stable medium (colours) in addition to its formal design elements, music must use unstable content (sounds) arranged according to a harmonic system. While this might, at first glance, seem to place music at a disadvantage with respect to painting's ability to imitate nature, the opposite is true. Rousseau argues that music's reliance on an arbitrary sign system enables it better to imitate nature precisely because of its distance from it. Paradoxically, the arbitrariness of the musical sign enables better mimesis because of aesthetic distance and formalism: 'We see from this that painting is closer to nature and that music has more of human art.' (On voit par là que la peinture est plus près de la nature et que la musique tient plus à l'art humain.<sup>35</sup>) And yet this revival of formalism does not return to a static conception of music's ability to communicate eternal truths consistent with a classical aesthetic. Rather, music's formal qualities actually distance it from nature because they represent a human element. Further, its temporal performance quality, as well as its inherently relational character, aids it both in imitating nature and in communicating the human element operative in mimesis. As an art form, music seems better suited to the mimetic expression of an aesthetic ideal found in nature because of its formal properties.

In the *Dictionnaire de musique*, Rousseau isolates movement, another of the formal properties of music, as a feature that enables its mimetic expressions to surpass those of painting. Related again to its sequential/temporal form, music communicates even rest through movement:

La Peinture, qui n'offre point ses tableaux à l'imagination, mais au sens et à un seul sens, ne peint que les objets soumis à la vue. La Musique sembleroit avoir les mêmes bornes par rapport à l'ouïe; cependant elle peint tout, même les objets qui ne sont que visibles: par un prestige presque inconcevable, elle semble mettre l'oeil dans l'oreille, et la plus grande merveille d'un Art qui n'agit que par le mouvement, est d'en pouvoir former jusqu'à l'image du repos. La nuit, le sommeil, la solitude et le silence entrent dans le nombre des grands tableaux de la Musique.<sup>36</sup>

Painting, which does not offer its scenes to the imagination but to the senses and to only one sense, paints only objects that are subject to view. Music would seem to have the same limits with respect to hearing, and yet it paints everything, even objects that are only visible: through an almost inconceivable marvel, it seems to put the eye in the ear, and the greatest marvel of an Art that acts only through movement is to be able to form even the image of rest. Night, sleep, solitude and silence enter into the great number of music's tableaux.

Music's ability to imitate derives from the communication of movement that it entails. The musician uses movement, created through the relation of sounds, to evoke not the movement present in nature, but rather the movement created in the observer of nature. The musician thus evokes in the listener the same movements:

Que toute la Nature soit endormie, celui qui la contemple ne dort pas, et l'art du Musicien consiste à substituer à l'image insensible de l'objet celle des mouvemens que sa présence excite dans le coeur du Contemplateur. Non-seulement il agitera la Mer, animera la flamme d'un incendie, fera couler les ruisseaux, tomber la pluie et grosser les torrens; mais il peindra l'horreur d'un desert affreux,

<sup>35</sup> Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume 5, 421.

<sup>36</sup> Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume 5, 860–861.



rembrunira les murs d'une prison souterraine, calmera la tempête, rendra l'air tranquille et serein, et répandra de l'Orchestre une fraîcheur nouvelle sur les bocages. *Il ne représentera pas directement ces choses, mais il excitera dans l'ame les mêmes mouvemens qu'on éprouve en les voyant.*<sup>37</sup>

Let all of nature be asleep, he who contemplates it is not sleeping, and *the art of the musician consists in substituting for the imperceptible image of the object the movements that its presence excites in the heart of the one who contemplates.* Not only will he agitate the sea, animate the flame of fire, make the streams run, the rain fall and the torrents swell; but he will paint the horror of an awful desert, darken the walls of an underground prison, calm the tempest, make the air tranquil and serene and from the orchestra will spread a new freshness over the groves. *He will not directly represent these things, but he will excite in the soul the same movements that one feels in seeing them.*

Not only does music indirectly represent nature by communicating human feelings associated with the experience of and reaction to nature, but Rousseau's account of musical mimesis in the *Dictionnaire* stresses the turn towards subjective experience in privileging the reaction of the listener over the work of art itself or what it represents. Indeed, the work of art aims to recreate the human reaction to nature rather than nature itself, focusing our attention on the subjective and experiential character of aesthetic judgments.

To take this argument even a step further, Claude Dauphin has argued that, within Rousseau's understanding of musical mimesis, there is a distinction between a form of imitation that music shares with other arts such as poetry and painting – although distinctly different, as we have seen – and another form of imitation peculiar to music.<sup>38</sup> This second form of mimesis, which Rousseau refers to as technical imitation, enables music to imitate itself:

Imitation, dans son sens technique, est l'emploi d'un même Chant, ou d'un Chant semblable, dans plusieurs Parties qui le font entendre l'une après l'autre, à l'Unisson, à la Quinte, à la Quatre, à la Tierce, ou à quelqu'autre Intervalle que ce soit. *L'Imitation* est toujours bien prise, même en changeant plusieurs Notes; pourvu que ce même Chant se reconnoisse toujours et qu'on ne s'écarte point des loix d'une bonne Modulation.<sup>39</sup>

Imitation, in its technical meaning, is the use of a same song or of a similar song, in several parts that make it heard one after another in unison, at the fifth, at the fourth, at the third, or at whatever other interval it might be. *Imitation* is always well done, even changing several notes; provided that the same song be always recognizable and that one does not depart from the rules of good modulation.

While the first form of mimesis in music stresses the reaction of the subject, technical mimesis moves aesthetic expression even further away from the necessity of 'imitating nature' and towards an autonomous existence for music as a potentially self-referential art form. Although Rousseau never suggests that music should abandon the first type of mimesis, his recognition of technical mimesis in music nevertheless moves him another step closer to a modernist aesthetic: a fully independent art capable of supplying its own frame of reference and value. Coupled with the understanding of musical mimesis as imitation of human movement, technical mimesis asserts the primacy of music for celebrating the human capacity to create art in the here and now.

<sup>37</sup> Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume 5, 861, emphasis added.

<sup>38</sup> Claude Dauphin, *La musique au temps des Encyclopédistes* (Paris: Centre international d'étude du XVIIIe siècle, 2001), 28–40.

<sup>39</sup> Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume 5, 861.



## A KANTIAN TURN—TOWARDS A SUBJECTIVE AESTHETIC

In tracing the significant features of Rousseau's conception of music that lead him to privilege it as an art form over all others, the elements of a Kantian turn in this 'musical aesthetic' become apparent. First and foremost, Rousseau traces a formalist aesthetic that depends upon the perception not only of aesthetic form, but also, as we have just seen, on the appreciation of a kind of second-order, conditional mimesis: music imitates the movements that the listener would experience if he were before the spectacle of nature. As already noted, 'the art of the musician consists in substituting for the imperceptible image of the object the movements that its presence excites in the heart of the one who contemplates'. It is clear that judgment is entailed on the part of both composer and performer as they seek to elicit this movement in the 'heart' of the listener, while the relational and arbitrary character of the musical sign-system also requires the use of judgment – by composer, musician and listener alike. For, as Rousseau argued, in and of themselves musical notes communicate nothing. It is only through formal relations that sounds become meaningful in musical 'communication'. In his clearest articulation of the need for judgment in aesthetic perception specifically related to form, Rousseau writes in the article 'Unité de mélodie':

Tous les beaux Arts ont quelque *Unité* d'objet, source du plaisir qu'ils donnent à l'esprit: car l'attention partagée ne se repose nulle part, et quand deux objets nous occupent, c'est une preuve qu'aucun des deux ne nous satisfait. Il y a, dans la Musique, une *Unité* successive qui se rapporte au sujet, et par laquelle toutes les Parties, bien liées, composent un seul tout, dont on aperçoit l'ensemble et tous les rapports.<sup>40</sup>

All the arts have some *unity* of object, source of the pleasure that they give to the mind: for divided attention rests nowhere and when two objects occupy us, it is proven that neither one of them satisfies us. There is in music a successive *Unity* that relates to the subject and through which all the well-linked parts form a single whole, of which we perceive the entirety and all the relationships.

Melodic unity provides formal coherence that enables the perception of individual parts in a musical piece while at the same time allowing a perception of the piece as a whole. Perceiving musical form with the aid of melodic unity implies an act of judgment: the listener must reassemble the various parts in order to 'hear' the piece as a whole. Anticipating Kant, it is clear that Rousseau's understanding of music both highlights perception and at least implies judgment on the part of the subject.

In these respects, Rousseau's understanding of our appreciation of music combines key elements of prior aesthetic theory in ways that anticipate Kant. The insistence on the perception of form reiterates the importance of form in classical aesthetics but conceives it in terms of relations and movements rather than static universal qualities. Likewise, the insistence on perception, which is central to the subjective turn in eighteenth-century aesthetics, is tempered by the insistence on form. For Kant, the perception of form is not sufficient to define aesthetic judgments. As is the case for Rousseau, for Kant too it is important to continue to distinguish between aesthetic and scientific judgments. To this end, Kant introduces the notion of disinterestedness.

For Kant, all aesthetic judgments are by nature disinterested. He argues that interest of any kind would colour judgment, rendering it no longer aesthetic. Indeed, Kant's understanding of aesthetic form as 'purposiveness without a purpose' necessitates that all aesthetic judgments be disinterested.<sup>41</sup> Rousseau's musical aesthetic, while not entirely consistent with Kant on this point, none the less goes a long way towards a conception of 'disinterestedness.' With his emphasis on the listener's perception of form, Rousseau already makes a major step towards Kantian-style disinterestedness. Melodic unity as a formal attribute of the aesthetic object stresses a 'disinterested' appreciation of musical works. Coupled with the second-order

40 Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume 5, 1143.

41 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), 38–45, 55.



conditional mimesis, in which the musician imitates movements in the soul that could be elicited by nature, it is clear that aesthetic perception and the aesthetic object itself are highly abstract. The listener never believes him/herself to be ‘before nature’ but, rather, experiences the same sorts of movements s/he might experience before nature. The second-order character of the representation entailed in music underscores nature’s absence. Added to this is the ephemeral, temporal quality of musical performance, again stressing the fleetingness, and ‘unseizability’, of the musical work of art. This last attribute underscores music’s odd form of material existence, which belies ‘interest’ of the type that Kant seeks to ban from aesthetic judgments.

Finally, the emphasis on the aesthetic experience of music – rather than on music as an aesthetic object – also moves in a Kantian direction. Rousseau consistently returns to the theme of what the listener feels on experiencing a piece of music. Beyond the perception of form and the feelings elicited by nature, music is a profoundly human art. As John Scott has asserted, because music has a moral cause for Rousseau, it also has a moral effect: music, along with language, was born to communicate passion and not need.<sup>42</sup> For Rousseau, our ‘interest’ in music is a moral and human interest. To continue with a passage that I cited above, ‘painting is closer to nature and music has more of human art. We feel also that one interests more than the other precisely because it brings man closer to man and always gives us some idea of those who are like us.’ (La peinture est plus près de la nature et . . . la musique tient plus à l’art humain. On sent aussi que l’une intéresse plus que l’autre précisément parce qu’elle rapproche plus l’homme de l’homme et nous donne toujours quelque idée de nos semblables.)<sup>43</sup> This interest in music suggests that we listen not only to be moved, but because we recognize human feeling, passion and, ultimately, morality behind the sounds.

While at first glance this interest in music appears to go against the Kantian proscription against interest in aesthetic judgments, on closer inspection it is clear that this type of interest does not entail the material existence of the aesthetic object or any desire on the part of the listener to possess it in any material way. The interest described by Rousseau relates to music’s ability to capture and hold our attention as a meaningful and moving experience.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, I would argue further that the interest Rousseau describes relates to what postmodern critics such as Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Luc Nancy have perceived in the Kantian sublime: a moment when the subject accedes to an indirect experience of itself.<sup>45</sup> In the case of Rousseau, what the subject of musical aesthetic judgment experiences is a glimpse at human community rather than at itself in its own limitless potential. If this is true, it makes Rousseau more ‘modernist’ in his use of aesthetics than his celebrated successor Kant.

## MUSICAL REDEMPTION

As a more human art form than painting, music offers a greater ‘shot at redemption’ (to quote Paul Simon) than do other art forms.<sup>46</sup> For modernity, increased alienation and secularization, as well as a rationalization of the domains of knowledge, already recognized by Rousseau, lead both to the splitting-off of the aesthetic

42 See Scott, ‘Harmony,’ 299.

43 Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume 5, 421.

44 Rousseau’s conception of interest, in this respect, appears to be closer to Condillac’s than to Kant’s. In the *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines* Condillac argues that we make sense of the infinite number of perceptions with which we are bombarded by paying attention to those that are most meaningful to us, based on our passions and temperaments: ‘Concluons que nous ne pouvons tenir aucun compte du plus grand nombre de nos perceptions, non qu’elles aient été sans conscience, mais parce qu’elle sont oubliées un instant après. . . . Les choses attirent notre attention par le côté où elles ont le plus de rapport avec notre temperament, nos passions et notre état.’ Condillac, *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines précédé de L’archéologie du frivole* (Paris: Galilée, 1973), 119.

45 See Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Le sublime à présent,’ *Poésie* 34 (1985), 97–116, and Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘L’Offrande sublime,’ *Poésie* 30 (1984), 76–103. For Lyotard, the question of the present and time consciousness is central to the sublime in Kant, linking the sublime to his understanding of the break between the modern and the postmodern.

46 Paul Simon, ‘You Can Call Me Al,’ *Graceland* (Warner Brothers, 1986).





sphere and to the search for value within that sphere. Artistic production in the modern world seems to offer what Habermas refers to as a *promesse de bonheur*, citing a line of criticism that runs from Schiller to Marcuse and sees in works of art a promise of utopia.<sup>47</sup> This utopia, whether in the form of a promise of reconciliation or in the service of cultural critique, none the less represents a site of value and redemption for a world experiencing the pain of loss and separation. The modernist project, a continuation of the Enlightenment project as Habermas defends it, continues to seek progress in the form of moral betterment and greater human happiness through the vehicle of artistic expression. The elegiac mode resurfaces as an articulation of hope for redemption in and through aesthetic expression itself. For Rousseau as well, and in spite of his dire pronouncements in the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, hope for the future of humanity lies in some form of musical redemption.

Returning to my discussion of 'interest' in aesthetic judgments, Rousseau believes that the performance of music creates interest in the listener, an interest that stems from a glimpse of human community through artistic form. As a quintessentially human art form, music requires the *presence* of both performer and listener. Rousseau returns to this theme time and time again, to insist that music communicates the existence of another sentient being in its very performance:

Les sons annoncent le mouvement, la voix annonce un être sensible; il n'y a que des corps animés qui chantent . . . la nature seule engendre peu de sons, et à moins qu'on n'admette l'harmonie des sphères célestes, il faut des êtres vivans pour la produire . . . La peinture est souvent morte et inanimée; elle vous peut transporter au fond d'un désert; mais sitôt que des signes vocaux frappent votre oreille, ils vous annoncent un être semblable à vous, ils sont, pour ainsi dire, les organes de l'âme, et s'ils vous peignent aussi la solitude ils vous disent que vous n'y êtes pas seul. Les oiseaux sifflent, l'homme seul chante, et l'on ne peut entendre ni chant ni symphonie sans se dire à l'instant; un autre être sensible est ici.<sup>48</sup>

Sounds announce movement, the voice announces another sentient being; only animated bodies sing . . . nature alone engenders few sounds, and unless one admits the harmony of the celestial spheres, living beings are necessary in order to produce them . . . Painting is often dead and unanimated; it can transport you to the ends of a desert; but as soon as vocal signs hit your ear, they announce a sentient being to you, they are, so to speak, the organs of the soul and if they paint solitude for you they also tell you that you are not alone. Birds whistle, only man sings, and one cannot hear a song or a symphony without immediately saying: another sentient being is here.

Human beings are 'interested' in music, according to Rousseau, because of the presence of another similar being that is communicated through it.

This interest is clearly a moral interest: music announces sentience, movement, passion, life. In this communication of the presence of other beings like ourselves music offers a glimpse at moral community. Like the early moments of contact between humans in the *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* or the *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, when natural man first experiences and, more importantly, recognizes beings like himself, listening to music stirs feelings of the potential for connection between like sentient beings.

Earlier I suggested that, for Rousseau, the glimpse at community offered by music parallels the indirect experience the subject has of itself in the Kantian sublime. For Lyotard and Nancy, the uneasiness – what Kant dubs a 'negative pleasure'<sup>49</sup> – engendered by the play of the imagination and reason in judgments of the sublime marks a moment in Kant's thought when the transcendental subject perceives itself, if only through the violence of the experience. Kant writes, 'We hence see also that true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the [subject] judging, not in the natural object the judgment upon which occasions this state'.<sup>50</sup>

47 Habermas, 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project', 350.

48 Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, volume 5, 420–421.

49 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 83.

50 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 95.



For Kant's transcendental philosophy, the *Critique of Judgment*, and specifically judgments of the sublime, offer a window into the supreme blind spot of such a system: the subject itself. However, Kant's philosophical system does not share the elegiac mode and the need for redemption of Rousseau's vision. For Kant, the transcendental subject guarantees philosophical certainty as well as the future of humanity – again, grounded in the subject. Likewise, for the postmodernists Lyotard and Nancy the Kantian subject's glimpse of itself typifies the self-referential circularity of unstable knowledge. Using the moment of the sublime to critique the Kantian transcendental subject, they diagnose the failure of the Enlightenment project and modernity.

But the possible glimpse of humanity that music provides in Rousseau offers neither the stability of Kantian aesthetic judgments nor the instability of postmodern self-referentiality. As we have seen, Rousseau shares the anxieties and fears about the future of later 'modernists' and seeks a source of redemption.

If the Kantian sublime offers a glimpse at the stabilizing base of a philosophical edifice, then Rousseau's musical aesthetic offers the same kind of window, but on to a very different future than Kant's, one in which music elicits an interest in another sentient being and a feeling of moral recognition through an essentially ephemeral aesthetic form. The performance of music reasserts the possibility of human community, against the ephemeral quality of the temporal nature of the performance, to incite us to listen to and appreciate other human beings. Rousseau's aesthetic of modernity offers moral redemption in a form of art that is inherently communal.

As a corrective to the alienation and increased separation and specialization in the modern world, music offers the hope of bridging these gaps and rebuilding communities. Listening to and recognizing the song of another sentient being – being 'interested' in this way – means that links to others can be continuously recreated, even in the face of the fragmentation, destabilization and ephemeral quality of modern life.