

# From literal to metaphorical exemplification in music: a reply to Young

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## 1. Introduction

In his «Goodman on Metaphorical Exemplification and Musical Expressiveness», James Young provides a praiseworthy attempt of clarification of Goodman's account on this topic. His reconstruction of Goodman's theory is precise, exhaustive, clear and charitable, trying to offer the best interpretation in order to avoid some apparent worries. To this extent, I have nothing to add but recommending people to read it as a complement of Goodman's work. Young also raises some criticisms of Goodman's theory, and these are the ones with which I am concerned in this paper. I think that Young's objections are reasonable, motivated, and I share them to some extent. However, as a counterbalance to Young's pessimistic view, I will try to stress some theoretical benefits of Goodman's account of musical expressiveness in light of his more general project of a theory of art as symbol.

Young's objection to Goodman's theory can be reconstructed considering three main claims. First, he argues that Goodman's view is «a version of the resemblance theory of musical expressiveness» (Young 2023: 261). Second, whereas Goodman takes the application of expressive predicates to music to be metaphorical, Young notes that our «talk about music's expressive properties is literal» (Young 2023: 265).

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As a result, Goodman's theory is unmotivated if it aims to be descriptive of our appreciative practice. However, Goodman's account might be motivated if it provides some theoretical advantage that justifies his revisionary account. But this is not the case because, thirdly, according to Young, «Goodman's introduction of talk of metaphorical exemplification seems to have no real advantage» (Young 2023: 265). Other versions of the resemblance theory can explain the fact of music having properties in common with expressive behaviour without the notion of metaphorical exemplification. Therefore, Goodman's theory should be abandoned in favour of other versions of the resemblance theory.

I think that Young's first two claims are accurate. My worries concern his third claim and the conclusion. More precisely, my contention is that Goodman's distinction between literal and metaphorical exemplification captures something important about the symbolic function of music; as a result, this distinction can be considered as a compensatory theoretical benefit for Goodman's revisionism that may undercut a complete rejection of this theory in favour of others.

## 2. Analysis of Young's first and second claims

As noted in §1, I think Young's first two claims are right. The first claim is that Goodman's account of musical expressiveness is a version of the resemblance theory on this matter. According to Goodman's theory, a musical event  $m$  metaphorically exemplifies an emotion  $E$  if, and only if, it is metaphorically true that  $m$  is  $E$ . But for « $m$  is  $E$ » to be metaphorically true, there must be some salient properties in common between  $m$  and things that are literally  $E$ . That is, to say that «Beethoven's *Funeral March* is sad» is metaphorically true is to say that the music shares some relevant properties with behaviour literally expressive of sadness. In virtue of having those properties in common, the property of sadness is transferred to the music and the music metaphorically exemplifies sadness. But as Young sees well, this amounts to say that there is a relevant degree of resemblance between Beethoven's *Funeral March* and behaviour expressive of sadness. Therefore, it seems that there are good reasons to see Goodman's account as a version of the resemblance theory of musical expressiveness.

Young's second claim is that people's attribution of expressive properties to music is literal rather than metaphorical. This is an empirical claim that seems to be uncontroversial. Evidence vastly shows that people everywhere experience music as expressive of emotion and that they think that music literally has expressive properties. Thus, there are also good reasons to think that Goodman's metaphorical account of our talk about musical expressiveness is revisionary of our appreciative practice.

However, there is another empirical claim that is not considered by Young and that also seems to be uncontroversial. This claim is that people often disagree about which exact property the music is expressive of. There seems to be agreement about the properties that the music is not expressive of: it would be hard to find someone, for instance, saying that Beethoven's *Funeral March* is cheerful. But it is plausible to find people disagreeing on whether the music is expressive of sadness, melancholy, hopelessness, regret, anguish or grief. There is substantial agreement about the emotional spectrum within which the music moves, but there is much less agreement about what emotional property is expressed by the music.

The claim that people tend to disagree in this matter is supported by the fact that most experiments about musical expressiveness use emotion evaluation scales (see for instance: Park & Chong 2017; Juslin, Harmat & Eerola 2013; Eerola, Ferrer & Alluri 2012). In order to obtain relevant results for research and avoid answers that are too deviant, participants are given a closed list of emotions to rate them, which constrains the variability of their responses in the experimental context. This does not happen in real practice, where people usually attribute to the same musical passage different expressive properties within the same emotional spectrum.

The lack of agreement in the application of expressive terms to music is a relevant piece of evidence when it comes to assessing the theoretical benefits of Goodman's theory. This piece of evidence was rightly uncovered by the formalist (see Hanslick 1947: 37; Appelqvist 2011: 24). As we shall see in §3, Goodman's distinction between literal and metaphorical exemplification provides us with a good tool to account for this fact and, at the same time, to show that the formalist inference about the symbolic function of music is wrong.

### 3. Analysis of Young's third claim

Let us move now to Young's third claim. To recall it, Young argues that Goodman's theory of musical expressiveness as metaphorical exemplification presents no theoretical advantage with respect to other versions of the resemblance theory. This is the claim that, to my view, can be questioned if we attend more closely to Goodman's main point of his general view about the arts. My contention is that this change of focus can provide us with some reasons to think that Goodman's notion of metaphorical exemplification has some compensatory theoretical benefits.

The main focus of Goodman's project is not on the expressiveness of art, but rather on its symbolic function. This is clearly stated in his functional-symbolic definition of art: «just by virtue of functioning as a symbol in a certain way does an object become, while so functioning, a work of art» (Goodman 1978: 67). Being a symbol is thus a necessary condition for something to function as a work of art. This way, Goodman's project is against the formalist – or the «purist», in Goodman's terms –, according to which art has nothing to do at all, or in a relevant sense, with symbolizing.

Within this project, the notion of exemplification plays a crucial role. Exemplification is one of the three modes of symbolization, along with representation and expression. Exemplification is different from representation. When a work represents something, the work refers to properties that it does not possess. By contrast, «exemplification is possession plus reference» (Goodman 1976: 53): the work refers to properties that itself literally possesses. Possession is intrinsic to the work because it depends solely on its nature and configuration. However, reference is extrinsic. As Goodman puts it, «the establishment of the referential relationship is a matter of singling out certain properties for attention» (Goodman 1976: 88). Reference is thus context-dependent: in certain contexts, but not in others, some properties of a thing are singled out for attention, and it is in those contexts that the thing exemplifies those properties.

Exemplification is also different from expression. In the case of expression, the work refers to properties that itself possesses, not literally, but metaphorically. Metaphorical possession is a matter of

metaphorical exemplification, and so, exemplification is required to explain expression. In Goodman's words, «not all exemplification is expression, but all expression is exemplification» (1976: 52). More precisely, expression is a kind of exemplification, namely, metaphorical exemplification. An object *o* metaphorically exemplifies a property *E* when it is metaphorically true that *o* is *E*, which requires that *o* shares some salient properties with (resembles to) objects that literally possess *E* (for a finer analysis of this notion, I refer again to Young's (2023: 258–260) paper). Given the strong connection traditionally assumed between art and expression, Goodman thus puts exemplification at the core of the symbolic function of art.

So understood, exemplification is for Goodman a powerful tool against the formalist, avoiding the charge of *ad hocism*. Goodman observes that, even if a work of art neither represents nor expresses, it necessarily exemplifies some properties while functioning as art. When exhibited in an art museum (*i.e.* when functioning as art), a non-manipulated stone calls attention to some of its properties (shape, texture, colour, etc.). The stone exemplifies those properties and functions as a symbol in that context, whereas it does not when it is in the countryside. Goodman's appeal to exemplification cannot be interpreted as an *ad hoc* move against the formalist. He is not positing an *ad hoc* mode of symbolization different from representation and expression, the ones rejected by the formalist, to argue for the symbolic function of art. Since expression is a kind of exemplification, what Goodman says is that a work that is not expressive of emotions does not exemplify properties in one way, but it does so in another way. This is what the formalist fails to see, according to Goodman. All artworks are symbols, and hence, they have cognitive import: there is something to be understood in them.

This is particularly important concerning the case of absolute music, or «music alone», against the formalist. Formalism mainly originated from Hanslick's reflections about music, which exerted a great impact on this art form. This success is motivated by an inference from two ideas. The first is a traditional assumption about the nature of the musical medium: such medium is conceptually indeterminate or ambiguous (cf. Hanslick 1947: 28–30; Appelqvist 2011: 20). The second idea is the fact of disagreement about the attribution of expressive features

to music pointed out in §2. The formalist explains this fact by saying that our expressive talk about music is determined by our emotional responses to music, and hence, we should treat it as metaphorical rather than descriptive because there are not publicly shareable criteria of correctness. In other words, the attributions of expressive content to music are arbitrary, and standard versions of the resemblance theory are not able to solve this problem (cf. Appelqvist 2011: 28–31). The formalist's inference is that music neither represents nor expresses. Since there is an «unproblematic agreement in the purely musical» (Appelqvist 2011: 31), works of music are to be understood in purely musical terms.

It is at this point that Goodman's distinction between literal and metaphorical exemplification has some theoretical benefits. First, this distinction captures the disanalogy between musical and expressive attributions to music. Second, it does so by offering a way to explain the phenomena rightly pointed out by the formalist: namely, that there is an unproblematic agreement on the purely musical whereas there is a relevant disagreement about the emotional property the music is expressive of. And third, it also accounts for the broadly shared intuition that music has to do with emotion and has expressive content. His view opens the door to acknowledge the normative force of our expressive talk about music, avoiding the charge of arbitrariness addressed by the formalist against standard versions of the resemblance theory. And so, accepting the assumptions about the nature of musical meaning and about the disanalogy between musical and expressive attributions held by the formalist, Goodman's theory shows that the formalist's inference that denies the symbolic function of music is wrong.

Purely musical attributions are explained via literal exemplification. Goodman's theory allows us to see that a work of «pure music» is a symbol and that it has cognitive import. A certain pattern of sounds  $\phi$ , when reproduced in a context of musical performance, always literally exemplifies some of its acoustic and formal properties. An essential feature of a context of musical performance is that it is a context in which the attention of the audience is mainly directed to the music performed, being the context of the concert hall a paradigmatic example. It is a context that singles out for attention many of the properties that  $\phi$  literally possesses.

Suppose that  $\phi$  is the sound structure of (Mozart's *Symphony No. 36*. When  $\phi$  is reproduced in a context of performance,  $\phi$  exemplifies some combinations of sound frequencies, timbres and rhythms, as well as the structural properties of the symphonic genre. These are properties that  $\phi$  literally possesses and that are singled out for attention in a context of performance for the very nature of that context. In such a context, Goodman's notion of exemplification enables us to see that, against the formalist, Mozart's *Symphony No. 36* is functioning as a symbol. The same can be said of works that belong to contemporary musical genres that are designed to refrain from expression and representation, like minimalism and serialism. When the sound structure of Steve Reich's *Music for Pieces of Wood* is reproduced in a context of performance (*i.e.* when functioning as a work of music), it exemplifies some of the acoustic and structural properties that it possesses. Insofar as the properties exemplified are literally possessed by the work, there is no ground for relevant disagreement about the attribution of purely musical properties to a work.

In turn, expressive attributions to music are explained via metaphorical exemplification. According to Goodman's theory,  $\phi$  metaphorically exemplifies an expressive property  $E$  when it is metaphorically true that  $\phi$  is  $E$ . And « $\phi$  is  $E$ » is metaphorically true when  $\phi$  resembles objects that literally possess  $E$ . Crucially, this view provides a way to explain why disagreement about such attributions is not unusual while avoiding, at the same time, the charge of arbitrariness of expressive attributions (*i.e.* their alleged lack of normative force).

Resemblance between particulars (either objects or events) is not *tout court*, but relative to respects. Which respects are relevant to decide whether a certain claim about resemblance between particulars is true is contextually determined. Resemblance relations are not dyadic, but triadic: they include two particulars and a context. One of the most relevant defenders of this approach is David Lewis (Lewis 1973: 91–2), but his account is no more than an elaboration of Goodman's view on this matter (cf. Goodman 1970: 27). The contextual account of similarity is relevant for musical expressiveness. In a context of musical performance,  $\phi$  exemplifies some of its properties, those that are singled out for attention in that context. But in this very same context,  $\phi$  may not metaphorically exemplify the expressive property  $E$ . Attention

to the work's acoustic properties<sup>(1)</sup> is necessary, but not sufficient, to ascertain the work's expressive properties. What is additionally required is a context that, not only singles out the work's acoustic properties, but also selects the relevant respects of similarity between the work's acoustic properties and objects that are literally *E*. Given a kind of context of performance  $C_i$  ( $1 \leq i \leq n$ ),  $\phi$  literally exemplifies the acoustic property *F* at  $C_1, C_2, C_3 \dots C_n$ , but  $\phi$  metaphorically exemplifies the expressive property *E*, for instance, only at  $C_2$  and  $C_3$ . The contexts to capture the work's expressive properties are thus a subset of the set of contexts of performance.

This explains why the presence of disagreement is more usual in the case of attributions of expressive properties to music. According to Goodman, «exemplification or expression of anything beyond the score by a performance is reference in a semantically dense system, and a matter of infinitely fine adjustment» (Goodman 1976: 238). The purely musical properties that a performance exemplifies are those that are not beyond the score. However, a work's performances can exemplify properties beyond the score, and this is the case of expression (metaphorical exemplification). The «infinitely fine adjustment» alludes to the more complex process involved in identifying the reference in the case of expression than in the case of exemplification of purely musical properties. In the former, but not in the latter, it is necessary to be in a context that enables us to identify the relevant aspects of similarity and dissimilarity between the work's performance and the object that literally possesses the expressive property. This is why disagreement arises more easily in the case of expressive attributions than in the case of purely musical attributions.

Even so, the formalist may still ask why we *ought* to be placed in a context that enables us to identify the relevant resemblance relations between the music and objects that literally possess a certain expressive property. Why should we not be placed in a context that prevents us

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(<sup>1</sup>) In the present discussion, of course, by a «work's acoustic properties» I am referring to those properties possessed by a properly formed performance of that work. So, this is a case of resemblance between particulars: between a properly formed performance of the work (which exhibits the work's acoustic properties) and an object that literally possesses some expressive property.



from identifying any of those resemblance relations and from hearing the music as expressive of emotions?

In the final part of *Languages of Art*, Goodman says two things that may be helpful to answer this question. First, in general, about aesthetic experience and understanding, he says:

Aesthetic experience is dynamic rather than static. It involves (...) identifying symbol systems and characters within these systems and what these characters denote and exemplify, interpreting works and reorganizing the world in terms of works and works in terms of the world (Goodman 1976, 241).

And specifically about the properties expressed by music, he says:

The property in question is rather compliance with supplementary instructions, verbal or otherwise, either printed along with the score or tacitly given by tradition (Goodman 1976, 237).

The answer to the formalist question can be summarized, in other words, as follows: we ought to be placed in a context in which we can make sense of the work's point in light of the normative background of our musical practice as a whole. To make sense of the point of works that belong, for instance, to the genres of minimalism and serialism, we should be placed in a context that prevents us from identifying relevant resemblance relations between the music and objects that literally possess expressive properties. The point of works in those genres is precisely to avoid musical expressiveness, and to hear them as expressive of emotion would amount to misunderstand them. However, to make sense of the point of baroque concertos, like Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, we should be placed at a context to identify the relevant resemblance relations. The point of each movement of this work, as of many Baroque works, is to express a feeling or emotion, and, in Vivaldi's particular case, an emotion or feeling associated with the year's seasons.

## Conclusion

Goodman's theory of musical expressiveness as metaphorical exemplification is revisionary of our intuitions about our expressive talk about the music. I have tried to show that such a revisionary account can supply some compensatory theoretical benefits in comparison to standard versions of the resemblance theory of musical expressiveness. First, the distinction between literal and metaphorical exemplification captures the disanalogy pointed out by the formalist between attributions of purely musical and expressive properties to the music. The distinction also explains the fact, rightly uncovered by the formalist, of the presence of usual disagreement about the property that the music is expressive of without embracing the formalist conclusion that music is not expressive of emotions. Finally, Goodman's theory also provides a solution to a challenge addressed by the formalist against standard versions of the resemblance theory of musical expressiveness: it can explain the normative force of our attributions of expressive properties to the music. Although Young's criticisms of Goodman's theory are well motivated, I hope to have shown that it is worth considering understanding musical expressiveness.

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