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## "Themes in the Philosophy of Music", Stephen Davies, Oxford 2003 : [recenzja]

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Sztuka i Filozofia 40, 156-161

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2012

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Michał Nakoneczny

**Stephen Davies, *Themes in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 296**

Davies' "Themes in the Philosophy of Music" is one of the few publications that tackle the problem of the ontology of musical works. This book is a compilation of essays that amount to a systematic and almost complete exposition of current issues in the philosophy of music, but it can also be read as a historical account of the author's education, the process of forming his ideas and shifting interests. In this article I introduce the author's profile and follow his latest book as faithfully and closely as if for an extended review to put his arguments in a wider context of currently open debates and to evaluate how it does for an opinionated sketch of the current state of the art in metaphysics of music.

Stephen Davies got his Ph.D. from the Birkbeck College, University of London in 1976 and the first two publications ("The Expression of Emotion in Music" in 1980 and "Is Music a Language of the Emotions?" in 1983) come from chapters of his doctoral dissertation. In that time numerous papers were devoted to topics of the relationship between emotions and music and of the expressiveness of music. The most prominent thought of that period was the persona theory of music. The theory hypothesised that the person who feels the emotions expressed by music is an imaginary persona, while the listener only follows the progression of the musical piece as a representation of both mental and physical actions and feelings of the mentioned persona. Davies' "Contra the Hypothetical Persona in Music" is an extensive, two-fold argument against that theory. First, Davies claims that his previous accounts of musical expressiveness might still be preferred over the persona theory. We cannot be certain, he says, whether all attentive listeners share such (persona) visualisations. Second, Davies doubts whether the musical work itself is rich enough in features to accommodate all the possible 'imagined narratives.'

The first part of the book about expression is closed by "Philosophical Perspectives on Music's Expressiveness" – a systematic overview of positions within the discussion on music's expressiveness.

In mid 1980s, Davies focused mainly on the topic of representation and nature of musical works. "Transcription, Authenticity, and Performance" and "Authenticity in Musical Performance" come from this period. The main question

motivating these two articles was the enquiry into the conditions for authentic performances of scored works. The author limits his input to clarifying the balance between two opposing forces: first, the restrictions imposed by the work on what could be done by the transcriber or performer, and, second, the freedom essential to the creative and interpretative functions played by those two. Yet, there is more in these bits than advertised. They can be read as short expositions of metaphysical theses on the identity criteria for musical works. Originally, these two papers were presumably the first on their subjects written by a philosopher.

Davies is one of the clear-headed musicologists, who deny that John Cage's *4' 33''* is a musical work on the condition that "the contents of performances of Cage's piece are the sounds that otherwise would be ambient to those performances (which is the way Cage most often characterises it)" (p. 5). It is not to deny that *4' 33''* is a piece of art. Davies makes an essential criterion for an entity to be a musical work out of the just mentioned conditional (musical work's parameters must establish that sounds made outside count as ambient). *4' 33''* falls short of that criterion and might well be a piece of art, but not a piece of music.

While fierce to the composers and their works, the author develops a forgiving and accessible theory of listeners' appreciation of musical works. The optimistic message of "Attributing Significance to Unobvious Musical Relationships" is that the familiarity with all the technicalities, knowledge of music theory, history of music or academic studies are not absolutely required for the listener to appreciate what she is hearing. Listening carefully is all one might need. Having said what is not necessary in order to appreciate a piece of music, Davies presents the positive requirements for fullest comprehensions that are not commonly accepted. In "Musical Understanding and Musical Kinds" he says that the acquaintance with previous musical pieces which had shaped the one being appreciated (or its 'historical relatives' as he calls the related works in chapter 1) together with familiarity with the conventions of the epoch is postulated as crucial for full understanding of a musical piece of art. The overall image of music appreciation under Davies' theories prioritises historical knowledge about the author and the piece over insight into the mathematical structure of the score. Thus defined 'appreciation' is clearly opposed to 'interpretation' of the work ("The Multiple Interpretability of Musical Works") which in turn does involve scrutiny of how individual formal features of the work contribute to create a coherent whole.

Every philosophical discussion should start with ontological justifications in favour of the existence of the disputandum and be followed by a metaphysical analysis of the structure of the entity in question. Davies does just that. After playful and rather introductory analysis of Cage's *4' 33''* (with especially frisky and playful introduction to the first chapter) and after postulating just one of all the necessary conditions for a piece of art to be a musical work, the author continues to a full-fledged ontological discussion that lies at the heart of all questions for any metaphysician. The most prominent essay in the book, "Ontologies of Musical Works" is one of the two original, previously unpublished

articles. It is divided into three sections, with the first one presenting a systematic overview of possible positions in the ontology of music, while the second is Davies' own account of the metaphysical structure of musical works. The third part recapitulates central theses of the paper.

First, Davies claims that he adopts ontological vocabulary from the discussion of natural kinds but in fact the distinctions he employs to account for the status of musical works date way back in time and are definitely more universal. The image Davies sketches divides philosophers of music into two exclusive and mutually hostile camps – the nominalists and the realists about musical works. Working in tempo allegro, he only mentions the linguistic irreducibility argument against class-nominalism. Here, somewhat more extensive and serious discussion of the possible varieties of nominalistic stands as well as a direct analog of the fictionalism position from the debate on universals is called for.

Fortunately, the realistic position is investigated more scrupulously. Davies is not afraid of the contemporary distinctions within analytic ontology and straightforwardly claims that musical works are abstract entities and proceeds to investigate whether they are abstract particulars or abstract universals. He mentions transcendental (Platonic) and innate (Aristotelean) version of realism about universals and works out the implications of both theories for musical works. Finally, he discusses the theory of musical works as kinds, with idealism and action-type theory as its subtypes. The author places himself in the camp advocating for musical works as socially prescribed sound-event kinds.

Davies' overview of the current theories, while entertaining and truthful, is substantially lacking. Among the contemporary theorists he enumerates and discusses are Goodman's theory of properly formed instances (and his argument for note-for-note accuracy of instances of one musical work); and Currie's theory of artworks as action types, but nowhere, at least in this volume,<sup>1</sup> can we find any reference to Levinson's theory of musical works as tuples of sound and performance-means as indicated by the composer. This is especially worrying for two reasons. First, Levinson's account of musical works is (most deservedly) one of the most cited theories in the contemporary debate on ontology of music. The theory enjoys more than 100 citations since its publication in 1980, which stands out in the pace of discussions in peer-reviewed philosophical journals, especially in fields as not popular as metaphysics of music. Also, statistics aside, Levinson's article is one of the hardly any papers that propose a fully worked out (yet, controversial) ontology of musical works.

Second, Davies is clearly aware of Levinson's contribution to the philosophy of music, as he cites him while discussing the necessary conditions for being a musical work ("John Cage's 4' 33": Is It Music?" p. 22); the connection between ontology of musical works and the authenticity of performance ("The Ontology of Musical Works and the Authenticity of their Performances," p. 60);

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<sup>1</sup> Davies presents a long critical discussion of Levinson's view in his (2001). There Davies postulates that his own theory encompasses the views of Webster (who characterizes musical works as thin particulars) and Levinson (advocating for thick particulars) but escapes the vainglory of aspiring for the title of the one true theory. Davies grimly concludes that „no theory is true of all musical works, not even for all musical works created for live performance“ (p. 43).

and mentions him while arguing against hypothetical emotionalism (“Contra the Hypothetical Persona in Music,” p. 157). Thus, why Levinson’s theory of ontology of musical works is left out, remains a mystery.

Last on this section, little is said about the on-going debate on the creatability and perdurantist against endurantist views on the existence of musical works.<sup>2</sup>

In the second and third sections, Davies puts forward his own theory for ontology of musical works. He claims that musical works are socially constructed entities with ‘historical relatives’ as a central key to their appreciation. He allows for changes in form and substance for musical pieces by adopting socially relative criteria for type-inclusion: “What can and cannot be specified as part of a musical work depends on when and where that specification is made, and changes in the relevant constraints are affected as much by technology and society as by what might be dubbed ‘purely musical’ parameters” (p. 40). Subsequently, he argues for four entailments following from the main thesis: first, the possibility of creating (rather than ‘finding’ or ‘discovering’) musical pieces; second, the historicity of musical works and of today’s listeners not entailing that works of the past are inaccessible; third, the social constructedness and relative criteria for what it means to be a musical work does not entail evolving identity (not to be mistaken with significance) of a musical work; and fourth, that there is no privileged socio-historical position from which to appreciate and understand any musical work.

These thoughts are extended in “The Ontology of Musical Works and the Authenticity of their Performances”. As the publisher promises in the colophon, Davies argues that reducing musical works into a single category is less justified than postulating a number of categories for their rendition. In essence, Davies puts forward two extremes<sup>3</sup> of ontological accounts dependent on the function of the musical work. The first one, the ‘thin in properties’ extremum, analyses musical works as “sound structures of rhythmically articulated notes, or a relationship between notes, or some combination of these two” (p. 65). All the musical pieces that do demand a fixed instrumentation count as ‘thin.’ This account is characteristic to scores of earlier periods. Machaut’s *Messe de Notre Dame* is a piece for which the authenticity of its performance is not a function of the instrumentation.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, we may find the ‘thick in properties’ pieces. To those, the instrumentation as well as all the other features specified by the composer are essential to the authenticity of their performance, and so to their identity. One of Mahler’s symphonies could not be performed with instruments different from those originally planned. Here, obviously, accounting for musical works in terms of abstract sound structures is not enough.

A clear trend in support of this distinction is visible in the history, says Davies. Musical works are getting ‘thicker’ over time. Finally, the author sees a distinction

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<sup>2</sup> See *The British Journal of Aesthetics* issues from 2000 to 2008 with Dodd (2000), Predelli (2001), Sharpe (2001), Dodd (2002), Trivedi (2002), Caplan and Matheson (2004) and published after Davies: Caplan and Matheson (2006), Cameron (2008), and Caplan and Matheson (2008).

<sup>3</sup> This theory is a direct analog of the distinction between ‘thick’ and ‘thin particulars’ among substratum theorists. See, Armstrong (1989, p. 60) for the theory and, among others, Sider (2006) for a complete but accessible commentary.

between pieces for performance (presumably, 'thin') and for playback (electronic pieces in the second group of 'thick' works).

I do not find this metaphysical analysis entirely satisfying for the reasons of parsimony and completeness. First, postulating a continuum of ontologies for musical works seems the very least economical way of formalising their nature. Second, should ontologies of musical works admit of degree, the author still failed to look into their common parts. Obviously, there must be an ultimate nature common to all the music, to account for calling them 'musical works,' even as in 'thin musical works' or 'thick musical works'.

The second of the two previously unpublished essays, "What is the Sound of One Piano Plummeting?" punchlines the whole collection with a Zen-sounding yet in fact a very troubled and grievous question of instrument torture. Having gone through the questions of ontological status of musical works and their performances and questions about music's expressiveness and appreciation, the author wonders why witnessing abuse of musical instruments causes the spectators to feel distress. While this is the least philosophical bit of the whole book (and a "personal note", as he summarises the chapter in the introduction) it introduces the author as a seriously involved musicologist, rather than a detached armchair-philosopher, and the whole chapter is even more elucidating as to the author's character than the very first sentences of the book: "I studied philosophy in order to write about music. It was as simple as that".

As I stated at the beginning, the book might be read in a number of ways, but should it serve as a systematic exposition of state of the art in philosophy of music, it might be advisable to revise the structure of the book, especially order of the chapters in the future editions. Readers who would like to go through Davies' positions on ontology, performance, expression and appreciation of music would need to employ more caution and insight than just blindly following the chapter order or relying on the table of contents. The remark on the unhelpfulness of the table of contents holds also for a positive surprise within the book. There is more for the interested ontologist than the table suggests. "Transcription, Authenticity, and Performance" and "Authenticity in Musical Performance" are in fact metaphysical enquiries into the identity criteria of musical works, while they are not introduced as such by the author in the introduction and are not placed in the section on ontology.

On the last critical note, one can safely add metaphysicians to the intended readership of students and scholars of aesthetics, art theory, and musicology. The book is accessible to theorists of music and art as well as to aestheticians and philosophers alike. Davies' swift and easy to follow yet philosophically engaging writing makes it accessible for newcomers into the field and interesting for experts, some of which will enjoy insider-jokes like comparing the pace at which a philosophical argument is presented to a tempo allegro. The book definitely meets the publisher's hype, describing it as "the best shorter writings of a leading figure in current aesthetics".

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