

Can music be a representational art

[Art & Culture](#), [Music](#)



Of all the different forms of art, none are more problematic when dealing with the issue of representation than music. When dealing with pictorial art it is common place to think that a painting of an object is a representation of it on canvas. However when a piece of music is said to represent something, numerous problems immediately arise. This is mainly due to the medium of music, sound. This essay will discuss these questions using the views of Roger Scruton, Kivy and myself.

Scruton makes his argument through five conditions but I will only deal with three of them here because they are specifically relevant to music. His general argument is that music can't represent things and even if it could it would be irrelevant to the appreciation of the music. I'll later show how Kivy defends against this and I will also introduce some arguments that Kivy fails to address.

Scruton's three conditions concerning representation in music are:

1. To be a representational work, a proper understanding of the work demands that the observer gain, some awareness of what is being represented. While the observer might not completely understand what is represented, she must still have a sufficient appreciation of what the work represents.
2. Following from 1), the observer must be able to distinguish the medium of representation (e. g. pastels) from the subject of representation (e. g. a vase). If the medium and the subject are mixed up, then the conditions for a sufficient understanding of the representation are not fulfilled (and so condition 1 is not met).

3. To be a representation, the work must convey thoughts about its subject and to be interested in the work is to be interested in comprehension of those thoughts. By thoughts, I assume Scruton means, "the sense or content of a declarative sentence," which can either be true or false. A representational work must generate propositions with truthvalues, which are available to all those who understand the work: representation is therefore essentially propositional.

Criteria one is different from the second and third because instead of identifying whether something is representational, it places conditions for when representation is aesthetically relevant. This is when it is needed for a complete understanding of the work.

In the third criteria Scruton attempts to disregard music's ability to be representative because of its abstract nature. He argues it is not enough to have bare resemblance to something that is supposed to be represented, but that it needs to be describable in words. He believes therefore that a context is needed which propositions can be made about. From a painting sentences can be formed like "there is a man smiling, sitting on a bench". The context of allows us to develop a far more definite description of what is being represented. He believes that music does not allow this narrative that is essential for representation. For someone is able to say, that a piece of music represents a waterfall but they cannot verbally expound this. No precise description can be encountered through music and Scruton believes that for representation to be able the representational elements need to be definitely describable.

But surely, we might think that music being composed of sounds can represent other sounds. Sounds have properties and because music is sound surely it is able to share these properties and represent sound. But Scruton argues that music fails to represent on these grounds because it fails upon criteria two, which is that the subject of representation must be distinguishable from the representation. He would argue that when music depicts a sound it is not representing it because it is the actual sound. The tinkling of teaspoons in Strauss' *Sinfonia Domestica* is not representative of the actual tinkling of teaspoons, but rather a reproduction of the actual sound.

According to Scruton, sounds are not differentiated by their source; so long as two sounds sound the same, there is no "essential" difference between them, regardless of whether they share a common source (or source type). This is, says Scruton, "an inevitable consequence of the logical properties of sounds." This is a valid argument.

Scruton claims that even in those cases where a passage of music may be heard as forest murmurs, for example, as rushing waters, the supposed representation is irrelevant to an understanding of the music, thereby violating condition 1. Unlike a poem, says Scruton, where to understand and appreciate the poem is to understand and appreciate the words, the same is not true in music, where a passage that is supposed to represent X, can be properly understood and appreciated without picking up on the representation Y.

However it is conceivable that one can look at a painting that is intended as representational, and not knowing what it represents, still admire it for its lines and colors. If Scruton is talking about something else, like that one cannot understand a painting as representational until one has understood the subject, or something like that, then he is simply stating a tautology. Scruton would have to establish that this is not to be the case but that he is in fact saying something more profound. If Scruton really showed that it is not the case that a representational work can be understood (even as non-representational) unless the subject is understood, then he would be showing something profound.

It is ambiguous what Scruton means by " understanding" a work of art. If he means by understanding a work of art having knowledge of its subject as representation, then sure his argument is successful. However, he has simply set up the argument in his favor. If one cannot understand a work of art without having knowledge of its subject, then if one does not have knowledge of its subject, it follows that one does not understand the work of art. It is the premise that Scruton attempts to establish through his Raphael example. However, I am not convinced he has successfully done this. He does not define what he means by 'understanding' and 'knowledge' and so as far as I know these terms might mean the same thing for Scruton

Before showing Kivy's arguments against Scruton it is important to lay down here the significance of music's relation with the emotions. Scruton proposes that it is the case that music may heighten the emotions, but ultimately music is an abstract art that has no capacity to represent. This is

an important distinction that I believe ought to be taken into account. It seems easy to confuse the ability of a song to cause us to feel a certain way with that song's representing what it is that it causes us to feel. However, this is not sound. It may be the case that the same song will cause very different emotions in different people.

If the song is representational, then it would seem that at least some of these people must be wrong if the inspired emotions conflict with one another (i. e. the same song causes me to feel happy but another person to feel sad, or even me to feel happy one day and sad another day). However, if some people are wrong, it is surely not the emotion that they feel or the causal effect of the music that they are wrong about. Therefore, if music is to be representational, it must be something about the song itself and its relation to that which it represents, not simply that it causes someone to feel a certain way.

What if the writer told us this is what he was trying to represent? I am not sure how Scruton's argument could deal with this.

When Kivy argues against Scruton's claim that music cannot represent anything because in doing so it becomes indistinguishable from what it is trying to represent (condition 2). He gives the example of Mozart's musical joke, but I believe this can cover two of Scruton's criteria. In this piece Mozart mocks a second rate composer by writing a piece that would appear like it has been written by such a composer. This piece is not an actual second rate composition because as Kivy claims " it has all of Mozart's genius".

This is shown through emphasizing certain features of a second rate piece to re-enforce the joke yet still maintaining it as a beautiful work. So it is not an imitation due to it being a masterful piece (which a second rate composer could not have achieved). Kivy said it is these reasons that mean this piece can only be perfectly understood as representing a second rate composer. From this perspective then it may seem that sounds can represent sounds. But I feel that this example illustrates a better point in conjunction with the understanding of a piece.

It could be said of the previous piece that if it is representational, then knowledge of the representation is necessary for a full understanding of the work. However, Scruton did not dispute that knowledge of any intended representations would allow a full understanding of a piece. He disputed that no knowledge of Mozart's intentions of representation is necessary for an enjoyment of the piece. But is there any examples of music that do require knowledge of any intended representation, not only for full enjoyment but also for an understanding. He uses the example of a piece called Invitation to dance by Weber.

This song is intended to represent a man and woman meeting at a dance. Whilst the song is not out of harmony and has no bad notes, it's construction is very questionable. A listener that does not know of the story would think that the piece is poorly constructed but this would be to misunderstand the work. The different sections of the music represent different scenes at the dance. Not only is it true in this case that a failure to notice the representation prevents a full understanding of the music, but significantly

detracts from a proper appreciation of the work. But if this is the case, then Scruton is wrong to claim that a piece of music can be properly appreciated without knowing or even being aware of the representational element.