

# **The Musical Representation**

**Meaning, Ontology, and Emotion**

**Charles O. Nussbaum**

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## Preface: Unwrapping the Riddle

*What is spatial and yet non-spatial, in motion and yet not in motion, meaningful and yet meaningless, sophisticated and yet primitive, universal and yet particular, voluptuous and yet austere, material and yet immaterial, religious and yet not religious?*

I spent the prime of my youth as a professional symphony musician, pursuing philosophy as a second interest. When I began thinking seriously about philosophy as a profession, and even after I actually had entered the profession, there seemed to be little connection between the inamoratas of my youth and middle age that was of philosophical interest. But as time passed and my philosophical preoccupations shifted, I began to think of music less as a topic for traditional philosophical aesthetics and more as one for cognitive psychology, philosophy of mind, and philosophical semiotic. At that point, my opinion about interesting connections between music and philosophy altered, and I embarked upon the path of investigation that has led to this book.

It takes only a small amount of perspicacity to realize that music is a remarkable, indeed an astounding, phenomenon. The emergence of human musical experience from the audition of organized tones remains deeply puzzling, truly “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma,” a riddle, moreover, of very long standing. For the naturalist, the solution to this riddle is to be found nowhere but in the collusion between the physics of sound and the organization of the human body and mind–brain. For the cognitivist, the human mind–brain is an organically embodied representational system, a system that enters into states that are systematically interrelated and that stand in intentional relations to the environment in which the human organism is embedded, or, with some cognitive luck (a nod here to epistemological and semantic externalism), into states that are supposed to stand in such intentional relations. The embodied mind–brain also represents its internal milieu, the body in which it is ensconced: it functions to regulate homeostasis and to monitor behavior. But as it regulates and monitors the body, the mind–brain also represents its environment perceptually by means of the body. Because all human sensory perception is mediated by bodily states, all human thought, even abstract thought, is permeated with the body

image. These facts, as we shall see, are crucial for unraveling the riddle of musical experience.

The direction of explanation undertaken here will not, however, be exclusively unidirectional. It will proceed not only from biology, psychology, and philosophy to music but will occasionally jog back from music to biology, psychology, and philosophy. As a product of evolution, the human mind–brain displays a layered structural organization that stands as a living record of its evolutionary history. Human representational function is similarly layered. Relatively recent cognitive acquisitions, most obviously the ability, characteristic of our species, to employ linguistic representations, did not arise *de novo* but were “exapted” or co-opted from older representational functions of which we may retain but little awareness. Consideration of the arts, and of musical art in particular, can help bring to light the more ancient cognitive functions that underlie modern human cognition, precisely because the arts, and most especially musical art, continue to exploit these older functions. The biology, psychology, and philosophy of musical representation have something to tell us about what we are, based on what we have been.

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One final note: For stylistic reasons only, I have used masculine personal pronouns throughout.