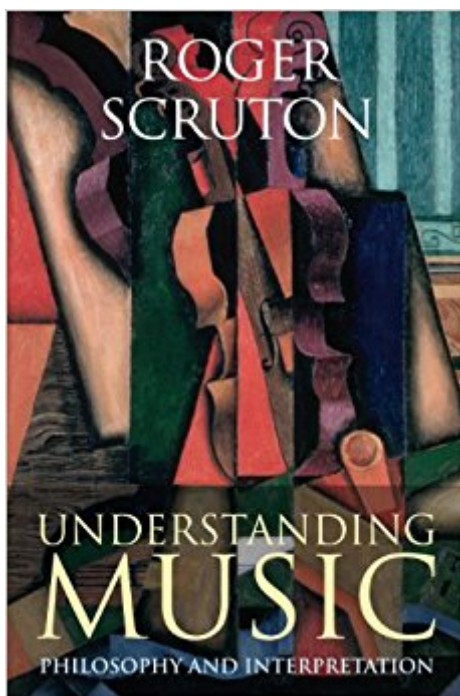


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# Understanding Music: Philosophy And Interpretation



## Synopsis

Roger Scruton first addressed this topic in his celebrated book *The Aesthetics of Music* (OUP) and in this new book he applies the theory to the practice and examines a number of composers and musical forms. His continued fascination with Wagner provides much interesting content but he also deals near-death blows to his favorite targets like Pierre Boulez and Hoagy Carmichael. His legal encounter with The Pet Shop Boys is well documented (they sued him for libel in 1999) and the book closes with a devastating chapter on pop music, containing more controversial views that readers will relish. Many will be delighted; others enraged. However, underlying this book there is a consistent argument and passion for tonality and rhythm.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The prolific philosopher turns his attention back to music, exploring the fundamental elements that make a great piece. Ranging from Wagner to Hoagy Carmichael and even a final chapter on 'the disaster of pop', this is trademark, provocative Scruton." - Bookseller, 20 May 2009. 'As a welcome addition to Roger Scruton's continuing canon of fascinating works on the nature and meaning of music, this short, dense book amply supports his genuine and lifelong belief that aesthetic contemplation offers the key to proper understanding of motivation and meaning, not just in ourselves, but in everything around us.' - Literary Review BBC Music Choice - 5/5 stars 'Illuminating ... touching ... much to inspire. Anyone who is capable of being deeply moved by music should read it.' - BBC Music Magazine 'Roger Scruton presents a depth of knowledge and understanding that

could make listening to a symphony all the more meaningful ... worthwhile for those who would like a deeper relationship with classical music.' - Good Book Guide 4/5 stars 'Aesthetic arguments are well summarised, disagreements presented very largely without querulousness; [Scruton] ... avoids shrill dogmatism. And while he makes substantial reference to music theory, he does so without the cack-handedness of many non-specialist music students.' - Classical Music BBC Music Choice - 5/5 stars 'Illuminating ... touching ... much to inspire. Anyone who is capable of being deeply moved by music should read it.' - BBC Music Magazine

Roger Scruton explores the fundamental elements that constitute a great piece of music, now in paperback for the first time. --This text refers to the Unknown Binding edition.

I've read several of Scruton's books and find him to be very enlightened in the realm of philosophy. In this book his critique of Adorno is very insightful and it alone is worth the price of the book. His view regarding aesthetics is another matter. Scruton has composed some, so he's not a complete novice when it comes to musical matters. However, his views of music on several key issues are questionable. He says, for instance, that "music does not move." Most musicians (of which I am one) will tell you quite the opposite. Because any performance of music goes from point A to point B, it certainly does move over time. We refer to "chord progressions" as such because there is a progression of harmonic events that occur over time. Rhythm is the subdivision of time over a linear time line. Harmonic rhythm is a primary aspect of most Western music. Also, he states that sound are events "which don't happen to do anything." Not true. Musical sounds (pitches) move airwaves in a vibratory fashion and thus activate, or "move" parts of our hearing apparatus (our ears). Whether air is being blown through a pipe, or a string is plucked or frictionized by a bow, or vocal chords are activated, something IS happening when we produce or encounter sound/music. Later he contradicts his "movement" premise saying (page 5) that we hear "a movement between tones, governed by a virtual causality that resides in a musical line." We perceive the sequential moment from one pitch to another because that's precisely what is taking place. Though, as Scruton avers, sound "can be identified without referring to any object which participates in them," we do identify with musical sounds and our ears make distinctions with regard to intonation, timbre, dynamics, etc. A clarinet sounds different than a violin, and different violins (or voices) have distinctly different tonal properties. No two voices possess exactly the same tonal properties and even an untrained ear can identify difference of the tonal characteristic of Frank Sinatra or Mick Jagger. With regard to expression in music, Scruton cites Hanslick and Stravinsky who opined that music is essentially

powerless to "express" anything. Stravinsky later rescinded his opinion and spoke of how, in the opening of his "Rite of Spring" we wished to "express" (his term) the awakening of nature and the primal energy of the creative impulse. The same piece of music can "mean" or evoke different responses from different people. Though an isolated pitch event may not convey or evoke an emotional response, a series of pitch events, whether melodic or harmonic, surely can. Felix Mendelssohn stated that, "The thoughts which are expressed to me by music that I love are not too indefinite to be put into words, but on the contrary, too definite." This would indicate musical expression (or rather, the ability of music evoke an emotional response) is a very real phenomenon---perhaps not fully explainable, but definitely real. I generally liked this book but had issues with some of Scruton's contentions.

I have often been frustrated by not being able to articulate just what music is. Words fail me with such an emotional topic. It was nice to know that it is not simple to define or explain and deals with both philosophical concepts and personal taste and interpretations. This book is an excellent, deeply thought out analysis of our universal love and need of music.

Excellent book, as long as you're thoroughly familiar with music.

I got in a little over my head on this one, as I should have expected. Roger Scruton has a deep knowledge of SOME forms of music, and when he is talking about things that he knows, like Beethoven's Ninth Symphony or Wagner's Ring Cycle, he has much to say, and probably, much that is valuable. I say "probably" only because I, having no real musical training, and no real philosophical training, am not in a position to judge. I have, however, read a bit of Adorno, and listened to a fair bit of jazz. So it was somewhat interesting, but mainly disappointing, to read Scruton's glancing treatment of Adorno's attitudes towards jazz. Scruton seems to have a high opinion of some forms of jazz -- he mentions the soulfulness of Monk's "Round Midnight," but he sort of stops there. And he seems to share at times, Adorno's dismissal of a good bit of jazz, but with reservations, because he notes that Adorno relegates a lot of popular music to the scrap heap, only to say, paradoxically, that it doesn't represent the "music of the people." Now, I am not sure I have gotten Scruton's position on Adorno down to a "T", but I don't think I'm far off. I listen to jazz and rock more than classical, and this is really a book for classical listeners, in my opinion. As I've said, Scruton sometimes mentions artists such as Thelonious Monk, and Genesis, and some other rock groups. And he doesn't fail to mention the contributions of African rhythms and polyrhythms to

the development of American musics. But he doesn't go deeply into how African rhythms work or have their effects. He doesn't talk at all about Brazilian music, which I would have liked. And generally, as I have said, his analyses of Mozart and Wagner, etc...are beyond my musical grasp. This is not his failing, of course, but mine. As other reviewers have mentioned, the first part of the book is on "Aesthetics," -- "Sounds," "Movement," "Rhythm," and so on. But he approaches these things philosophically, as the heading, "Aesthetics" would suggest. So when he deals with "Sounds" he explains a somewhat abstract notion of the "acousmatic" as the basis of his understanding of sound, and not the physical production of sound. I apologize to the reader if I have not explained this principle, but I was more interested in other things than this chapter. To get back to the discussion of Adorno, Scruton explores Adorno's treatment of "kitsch," fairly, I think, and also does a good job of defending tonal music from Schoenberg and Adorno's insistence on atonal musical approaches. One of the reasons I bought the book was certainly to read Scruton's treatment of Adorno. I had read a book in which Adorno called Stravinsky "hebephrenic," which is a kind of schizophrenia in which the subject is reduced to engaging in adolescent inanities. I really wanted to know what manner of man Adorno write such an absurd thing, and Scruton did not really satisfy my curiosity on this. I've had a bit of time to think about this review, and music and what have you, and I realize that one composer that I wish Scruton had talked about was Arvo Part. I just took a look in the name index, just to check whether I had missed any reference to Part, and there was none. The reason I think Part is worthy of mention, and worthy of philosophical attention, simply has to do with an experience I had a couple of months ago when I put on Part's album, "Alina." It is stunningly beautiful, partly because it requires the listener to pay careful attention. It almost shut me down, in the sense that I couldn't do anything but listen -- I was pretty much "rapt." The music itself doesn't strike me as being too complex, from the standpoint of composition or arrangement. In fact, it is stunningly simple and spare. I realize that I am perhaps fetishizing this experience: after all, I know that I am far from alone in this experience, and that Part is far from the only composer capable of inspiring such a state of awed appreciation. Whereas Scruton talks about "up" and "down", "dense," "spaced," "moving towards," or "away from," and whereas I can agree that all of these descriptions of music seem, "legitimate", I frankly don't know how to apply them to "Alina." I mean, it is "spare," from my point of view, which of course contrasts with "dense" -- McCoy Tyner has been described to me as someone who plays in a "dense" style -- and Part and Tyner are surely worlds away from each other. But, and I hate to say it, every spare sound that I hear on this recording is EXTREMELY "dense," so we have to distinguish, I hear a philosopher saying, between "senses of denseness." (!) But how to do that, I am at a loss. Maybe I should re-read this book, and see if Scruton actually

does address this. I will, patient reader, perhaps try to get back to you on this. By the way, I am also fascinated, in a way similar to the way that Part gets to me, with much of the South African piano player, Abdullah Ibrahim's music, so if you like Part, it is just possible that you would like Abdullah Ibrahim. (I know this has nothing to do with Scruton's book, but what the hell.) Also, check out an album by Terje Rypdal, Miroslav Vitous and Jack DeJohnette that came out in the 1970's on ECM -- I don't know what it's called -- for more examples of what I'm talking about. If I had to think more on this book, I would really say, given its preponderant reliance on classical examples, that you should really only check it out if you are interested preponderantly in classical music, yourself.

Philosophers of music go to great lengths in attempting to explain music philosophically. This says something about the great depths of music. I suspect that the complexity of these books comes about because the philosophy of music is really a philosophy of the mind, and not a philosophy of notes. Music taps into all areas of the mind, down to the most basic areas, dealing with the physical world. In this book, Roger Scruton is not shy about using the full force of technical terminology about both music and philosophy. He moves quickly from idea to idea and nimbly covers his subjects. Scruton emphasizes the wholistic nature of music. Music is at once technical and emotional. Form and content are inseparable. The composition itself and the performance itself work together. The book is divided into two parts. Part I is called "Aesthetics." Part II is called "Criticism." I found part I to be quite interesting and often convincing. Part II did not hold my attention. Part II is full of superlatives and gushing praise and harsh condemnations. I have to admit I liked the final chapter, an extended criticism of Adorno. I have always found Adorno's writing on music to be bizarre at best.

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