

Global Philosophy of Music: Ji Kang versus Hanslick

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ABSTRACT:

Neo-Taoists in third-century China believed that music should not be too emotive, as this resulted in an imbalance that disrupted the natural human state. This perspective is congruent with the older Taoist tenet that one should relinquish socially constructed desires in order to follow the Tao or “pathway.” The epitome of Neo-Taoist music aesthetics can be found in philosopher and guqin player Ji Kang’s thesis that *Music Has in It Neither Sorrow Nor Joy*. According to Ji, music itself is harmonious and *qi*-preserving, whereas listener emotions deplete one’s vitality or *qi*.

Despite many scholars drawing parallels between Ji’s and Hanslick’s aesthetics, these similarities are superficial in nature and obscure a fundamental divergence. In this paper, I argue that whereas Hanslick’s theory reflects the “apolitical” positivism of mid-century Austria, Ji’s thesis of “pure” music connotes his political retreat from a corrupt court he despised. Recent research in Wilfing 2018 shows how Austrian positivism was a clinical ideology intended to be the opposite of the fiery revolutionary ideals thought to be championed by Enlightenment philosophers. Seemingly in parallel, and as part of a larger move to renounce socially constructed desires (e.g., for wealth and fame) and mores, Ji Kang turned towards a musical metaphysics of cosmic harmony that connotes his resistance against assimilation to an unjust social order. The political connotations of Ji Kang’s metaphysics suggest we pause in considering contemporary European and North American musicological discourses that are well-intentioned but are often inappropriately universalized within their own contexts, not to mention other geographies. Upon recognizing that even metaphysics can have a social dimension, we might perhaps begin to dismantle neo-Kantian ethical universality.

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[1] Does music have emotion? This is by now a tired question in music aesthetics, with deliberations typically leaning either towards Eduard Hanslick’s formalism or conversely towards embodied theories of physiological arousal. Readers fatigued by that discourse may be relieved to learn that this essay takes a fresh view on the issue of musical emotion by relocating it from Europe and North America into the global arena. My goal in taking this global turn in the history of music philosophy is to demonstrate the potentialities of taking a comparative approach to fundamental

musical questions. More specifically, I seek to disturb European and North American discourses, using the case of New Musicology—specifically its suspicion of extra-social realms (the music “itself,” or Hoffmannian aesthetics, or Wagnerian metaphysics)—to reveal how ethical tenets, however well-intentioned, are always tied to specific contexts and cannot be universalized. That is to say, an objection to the specific European forms of musical autonomy, aesthetics, or metaphysics should not be expanded to a blanket ban on *all* considerations of autonomy, aesthetics, and metaphysics in other geographies. My method takes a fresh look at the North American dichotomy of musical sociality versus extra-sociality, showing how, in another time and place, it was precisely the turn *away* from the sociopolitical sphere on the surface level that posed a clandestine ideological challenge to an established regime. I begin by asking, Is there a way in which a definition of music without emotion might actually be a form of counterhegemony, rather than elitist musical autonomy?

[2] Most of us are familiar with the concept of music as standing apart from emotion. Music is its own object, and emotion is extrinsic, belonging to the listener. This is, of course, the position Hanslick takes in *On the Musically Beautiful* ([1854] 2018), which broadly represents the dominant perspective of 19th-century Austria. Essentially the same argument had been articulated 1.5 millennia ago in third-century China, in a thesis titled “Music Has In It Neither Joy Nor Sorrow.” The author, Ji Kang, was a key representative of the vaunted literati culture of ancient China, which had its beginnings during his lifetime. Members of the literati were philosophers and writers whose reputations preceded them, and were highly sought after by Chinese courts as capable men (they were all men). Outside of scholarship and bureaucracy, the literati pursued the four classical arts of *guqin* (zither) playing, chess, calligraphy, and painting, which were named in Chinese in that order (*qin qi shu hua*). The relative weight given to music in this aesthetic “quadrivium” reflects the prominence of music in Chinese philosophy.

[3] “Music Has In It Neither Joy Nor Sorrow”⁽¹⁾ is a text highly regarded in modern scholarship (Kang 2014; Egan 1997) that seeks to displace socially-oriented Confucian philosophy with neo-Taoist cosmic philosophy. Here, it is critical to note that *not all Chinese thinkers are Confucian*.⁽²⁾ By criticizing ancient rulers of previous dynasties in China, the text explicitly articulates its aims of debunking Confucianism, which Taoism regards as imposing artificial social conventions onto human nature. The essay is structured as a dialogue: a fictional houseguest presents arguments that a fictional homeowner—representing, of course, Ji Kang—then refutes in a dialectical fashion. The guest begins by laying out the position of Confucians of the previous millennium, i.e., the first millennium BCE. For these Confucians, music was an expression of a country’s flourishing or decadence, and of a person’s ethics. Ji Kang questions this view. Living in the unstable time after the Han dynasty when China fractured into the Three Kingdoms, Ji Kang and others sought new answers to old questions in order solve the pressing social problems of their time. In his response, Ji Kang lays out a series of arguments that weaken the link between music and emotions. First, music does not have a one-to-one correspondence with emotions. Because of differences of custom, he argues, it is possible for certain kinds of musical expression to be mismatched with their conventionally associated emotions. Certainly, one’s subjective feelings of attraction or dislike of music has nothing to do with the music itself, he notes. In addition, supposedly sad music is actually a subset of the concept of “sadness,” which also includes weeping; thus, the “correct” taxonomy (so Ji Kang argues) would place sad musical emotion under the concept of emotion, rather than the concept of music.⁽³⁾ On this basis, Ji Kang concludes that ancient sages who visited foreign kingdoms made deductions about them based on the totality of their experience and not just music.

[4] Following Ji Kang’s response, the guest furthers his previous argument. He refutes the idea of possible mismatch between the emotion expressed in music versus the listener’s response by pointing out that musical enculturation will prevent this scenario. Fundamentally, when one feels sad, it is inevitable that the music created will be sad. And so on.

[5] Much of the foregoing probably sounds somewhat familiar to readers engaged with the so-called analytic philosophy of music, named after its anti-metaphysical, common sense, quasi-scientific approach that is rooted largely in scrutiny of particular words and their logical usage.

There are indeed parallels between Western analytic and ancient Chinese philosophy, in both of which emotion is by turn distanced and embodied. In Peter Kivy's formalist view, rather than being an embodied experience, sadness in music is perceived by recognizing that certain musical patterns have a similar formal contour as everyday sadness (1980, 56). In contrast, Jenefer Robinson (2005, 398–405) provides an embodied explanation comprising an arousal theory, whereby listeners actually experience (low intensity) musical moods that they explain (post hoc) in terms of (high intensity) emotion. In a parallel way, Ji Kang ([ca. 223–263 CE] 1964, §1) divides emotion from music by arguing that, while music may spark emotional release, such emotion belongs strictly to the listener and not to the music. According to Ji Kang ([ca. 223–263 CE] 1964, §1) “When sorrow is hidden in the heart, it is released upon contact with (musical) harmony⁽⁴⁾ [i.e. the linear combination of the pentatonic pitches]. . . What is in the heart [sorrow] is the core factor—when released by formless harmony, what he feels can only be sorrow.”⁽⁵⁾ Ji Kang's view is contrasted with that of the Confucians, who argued that the human's inner emotions are at the heart of music (Cook 1995, 24). Confucians theorized that external stimuli provoke inner emotions that are expressed as the sounds of crying and laughter, which are in turn organized into sounded pitches (Cook 1995, 24); this pathway conveys emotion from internal to external, and is the foundation upon which Confucians argued that one could discern a country's level of prosperity from its music.

[6] Concentrating now on Ji Kang and Hanslick, notwithstanding the obvious parallels, there are important divergences between them that have been underappreciated, especially in contemporary texts arguing that Ji Kang performs an aesthetic turn, adopting—rather than differentiating Ji Kang from—Western music aesthetics of the autonomous work.⁽⁶⁾ In the following, I will lay out two major differences.

[7] The first difference is ironically built on a similarity, namely that both Hanslick and Ji Kang see “excess” emotion as harmful. The difference is that Hanslick treats emotion as something that is *neutralized* by intelligent listening, while Ji Kang treats emotion as something that is preferably *lessened* in intensity by a listener with a quiet heart. For Hanslick, intellectual contemplation prevents the listener from being “pathologically” affected by emotion ([1854] 2018, Chapter 5). For Ji Kang (in line with Confucian thought), what is important is affective moderation. Listening to moderate *shizhong* music with a quiet *pingjing* heart (Ji [ca. 223–263 CE] 1964, Section 5) is preferred to having pent up emotions released by passionate music. This is because emotions exhaust one's *qi*, a key Taoist concept referring to vital or cosmic energy (Chan 2019, Section 3). Here, *qi* energy is characterized by equanimity of the quiet heart, as compared to the discipline of physics, wherein energy is associated with chaotic water particles as they transform from ice to water to steam. The idea that *qi* energy is depleted by emotions is in accord with the key Taoist concept of non-action, or *wuwei*. Only through non-action can the Tao or the universal path be found. This philosophy is practiced in Ji Kang's famous retreat from society along with six other companions; they are collectively known as the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Groves, sealed off from the world.

[8] The second difference is that Hanslick's theory is primarily an aesthetic one while Ji Kang's is primarily a metaphysical one. Hanslick, in fact, intentionally “amputated” his metaphysical leanings, as Mark Evan Bonds put it (2014, 185). Where the penultimate paragraph in his original thesis goes as far as to say that music is part of the Spirit *Geist* of history, in later editions of his treatise, Hanslick deletes the final paragraph, in which music is the “sounding image of the great motions of the universe” ([1854] 2018, 184). Hanslick's aesthetic theory is primarily anchored in the concept of listening to moving tones created by a genius mind in accordance with the law of organic growth as found in nature. He writes the following as an example: “Because the composition follows formal laws of beauty, its course is not improvised in capricious, aimless rambling but rather develops in an organically, clearly organized, gradual manner, like luxuriant blossoms from a single bud” ([1854] 2018, 113). In stark contrast, all of Ji Kang's efforts in arguing that emotion is extrinsic to music serves his main argument that music belongs under a *metaphysical* conception of “harmony,” rather than the concept of emotion. Just as in Romantic aesthetics (especially Hoffmann), it is precisely music's supposed formlessness that makes it metaphysical for Ji Kang; to take an example, he explains that sorrow released by listening belongs to the “core factor” of one's “heart” (rather than “formless harmony”). According to him, musical

harmony belongs under the concept of cosmic harmony between man and universe, or *tianren jiaotai* (Ji 1964, [Section 8](#); Rošker 2014, 115). It is this Taoist conception of *cosmic* harmony which is at stake in Ji Kang's theory, differing from the Confucian conception of *social* harmony. For Confucians, social harmony can famously be achieved through music because of the pathways to and fro between external stimuli, inner human emotion, and sounded music, such that you can *hear* a person's ethics and the prosperity of a kingdom. This internal-external pathway also implies that music can be used to control people. In Confucian aesthetics, social harmony is achieved by respecting hierarchical social divisions and maintaining inequality while music provides the uniting force.⁽⁷⁾ For those living after the fall of the Han dynasty, however, Confucian social harmony apparently did not work as intended, and so thinkers like Ji Kang turned to cosmic harmony.

[9] I have outlined two differences between Ji Kang and Hanslick, but to fully understand the two figures, we have to look beyond the division between aesthetics and metaphysics to the *common* effect of both. I am referring to *distanciation* from the sociopolitical sphere, which one achieves by reaching for the cosmos by reaching into formal abstraction. This critical concept brings us to the third and final difference between their thought.

[10] Hanslick's thesis of formal abstraction that is famously centered on "tonally animated forms" (*tönend bewegte Formen*) (Bonds 2014, 141) erects a partition between musical tones that compose the non-signifying "content" of music on the one hand, versus all other kinds of strictly extraneous music-related media and sensations—e.g., song lyrics, bird song, and musical emotion—on the other. For Hanslick, there can be no "contamination" of the essence (tones) versus the effect (emotion) of music, which should only be considered in its purest instrumental form; the "fact" that vocal music has the same effect in instrumental arrangement is taken to be evidence of music's non-verbal essence. Hanslick's famous paring of music to its tonal essence has recently been revealed to have been influenced by mid-19th century quasi-scientific positivism in Vienna, particularly the work of Bernard Bolzano, Johann Friedrich Herbart, and Robert Zimmermann (Wilfing 2018). The post-French Revolution generation was paranoid about outgrown political passions, which they saw Kant, as a figure of the Enlightenment, as potentially igniting. Of course, Kant's pure reason is key to positivism, so as usual, this is a case of selective appropriation. Perhaps Kant was *too* revolutionary in his idea expressed in "What is Enlightenment?" that human reason leads to freedom that should stand above dogmatic state and king. The concept of moving tones was decidedly safer than idealist talk of the Spirit of history, which is marginalized in Hanslick's treatise (to say nothing of cosmic motion that is amputated altogether). Hanslick's, then, is a conservative treatise.

[11] Ji Kang's treatise may appear similar to Hanslick's in its apparent distance from history and politics. However, Ji Kang's aim in reaching for metaphysical cosmic harmony, paradoxically, was to *socially* disrupt the Confucian instrumentalization of music as a political tool. Despite the aforementioned differences between Confucian and Taoist philosophies of music, both are nevertheless founded in the logic of structural congruence based on the rational cosmic harmony of heaven and earth (humanity). For Confucians, the structures of music and the listener's mind were compatible with the structure of the cosmos (Rošker 2014, 109). Proper performance of music would allow men to be integrated into the cosmic order, thus creating social order. Due to the correspondence between the structures of cosmos and mind, listeners' emotions (conceived as part of the mind at that time) could be construed as the means by which rulers could integrate men into the social order, specifically via music, which essentially becomes a tool of micrological power, exerted *en masse* on the body politic but creating individual affective effects. Ji Kang also subscribed to the congruence of the structure of music and cosmos, but he cast out the listener's emotions through an analytic twist. Musical grief bears more affinity to everyday grief, he argues, than to the lofty heights of cosmic harmony as sounded out in music (Rošker 2014, 110). Emotion thus became extraneous to the rational cosmic structure, and was treated as already inhering in the listener, whose emotions were merely released by music.

[12] In Confucian thought, music controlled listeners' emotions and brought harmony even in the face of social inequality. Against the normative Confucian mold of social harmony achieved by

emotional micro-manipulation, Ji Kang chose to evict emotion from harmonious cosmic and musical structures, a conceptual maneuver that is in line with the general Taoist ethos of relinquishing sociality—i.e., socially constructed desires for fame and wealth—through the central tenet of non-action. Though Ji Kang and the Seven Sages were famous for their enlightened philosophy, they were also known for some of their more unconventional behaviors stemming from their disregard for social mores. The Seven Sages were famously eccentric, not just in their hermetic retreat to the bamboo groves, but also in the behavior of Ji Kang's companion, Ruan Ji, who is famed for a *guqin* zither piece known as *Wine Crazy* and was once intoxicated for sixty days. (8) Distancing themselves from the violent court of the time, storied literati men like Ji Kang and Ruan Ji became known as emblems of moral principle, often at the expense of their social status, political careers, and even their lives. To burnish its legitimacy, the court had sought after venerated literati men through marriage, or by pressing them into service as civic and military leaders; however, these efforts were often rejected. Because he refused to acquiesce to the court, Ji Kang was eventually executed at the age of forty, despite having married into the Cao royal family. (He famously called for his *qin* to play his swansong *Guangling san* before taking his last breath.) It is against this political backdrop that we may discern the resonances between (i) Ji Kang's redefinition of music so as to cut off the old Confucian links between music and human hearts and minds that were brainwashed to support social inequality, (ii) his chosen self-alienation in the bamboo groves from the court, and (iii) his eventual execution for that reticence. Countering Confucian social orientation, Ji Kang's Taoist musical harmony is part of a cosmic harmony of non-action, in which *qi* is preserved as quiet minds listened to moderate music.

[13] Romantic metaphysics is conventionally associated with Hoffman's ([1813] 1998) transcendent fabulations of giant shadows in clouds, but as usual, proper contextualization is essential for telling us what something really means. For Hanslick's milieu, Hegel's metaphysics of the Spirit of history was too dangerous and was to be *avoided* in favor of moving tones. For Ji Kang, the retreat from the social was achieved through metaphysics, paralleling his seclusion in the bamboo groves where he was symbolically shielded from a violent court he could not condone. In this case, Ji Kang's metaphysical retreat was wholly intertwined with his *political* act of refusing to serve the court, which led eventually to his execution. Thus, for all their surface similarities, Hanslick's and Ji Kang's treatises could not be more different in their social and political connotations.

[14] Hanslick and Ji Kang had different metaphysical stances. The former amputated metaphysics, which were considered dangerously revolutionary in mid-century Austria, while the latter embraced metaphysics, in which emotion was considered extraneous to the cosmic order of heaven and men. (For Ji Kang, emotion was to be relinquished [epistemologically] along with socially constructed desires for status and wealth, and the very court that Ji Kang could not in the end extricate himself from.) And yet, for both Hanslick and Ji Kang, metaphysics had definable *political* connotations. Beyond illuminating the stances and predilections of two prominent philosophers, awareness of these factors may have a much wider impact. It may lead us to rethink metaphysics and, more generally, social disengagement that appear to be apolitical in the wake of the New Musicological emphasis on context and identity. Pointing to unexpected flaws in that sociocultural turn, a small group of writers has sought to confound the ossified binary separation of the political from the putatively apolitical (musical autonomy) that emerged in the 1990s. Consider that James Currie (2009) has argued that musical autonomy could be our last hope for countering a thoroughly commodified musical and musicological world organized in arrays of contexts, while Martin Scherzinger (2004) has shown how New Musicological writings themselves betray formalistic tendencies in the course of their argumentation. What these writers are pointing out is that *every universalism leads to falsehood* at some point, even a well-intended one. I suggest that neo-Kantian moral over-generalization is perhaps the last bastion of universality to fall, and it is time for that to finally take place.

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Footnotes

1. An English translation of the essay can be found in Henricks 1983, 71–106. The text comprises eight exchanges between the fictional scenario of a house guest and homeowner in conversation. I will indicate in this essay which of the eight sections I am referring to. Ji Kang composed another related and well-known tract “Qin fu” (“Rhapsody on the *Qin*”) in service of propagating his opinions.

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2. It would be more accurate to say that many Chinese thinkers on music are influenced by a mix of Confucian and Taoist philosophies to varying degrees. Ji Kang is effecting a shift from Confucian to Taoist thought within that admixture, without excising Confucianism altogether. Third-century figures such as Ji are sometimes known as “neo-Taoist” *xuanxue* philosophers who combined elements of Taoism and Confucianism, but they are also referred to simply as “Taoist” thinkers.

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3. This line of thinking was made in accordance with Chinese epistemology, specifically the concept of *mingshi*, which refers to the binary dichotomy of concept (*ming*) and actuality (*shi*). Essentially, Ji Kang argued that the concept that emotion belonged in music was contrary to the actuality where, e.g., listeners might respond with the “wrong” emotion (Rošker 2014, 112).

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4. Little is known about ancient Chinese music, but it is extremely unlikely to have been harmonic in the Western sense. Living traditions of Chinese music sustained over recent centuries are heterophonic, suggesting that ancient Chinese music is the same. Thus it can be deduced that “harmony” for Ji Kang refers to the linear collection of scale tones.

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5. This argument would seem to work against Ji Kang’s assertion that emotion does not inhere in music because of the possibility of listeners’ erratic response; perhaps inherent emotion would never misfire, but this is not spelled out in Ji Kang’s treatise.

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6. This is the case, for example, in Liu 2006 (50). Ji Kang’s theory is described as having the “characteristics of a theory of internal musical laws.” Internal musical laws or *zili* pertain to absolute music, while external governing laws or *talv* pertain to program music. Essentially the same argument is found in Kang 2014 (173). There are, however, other authors who have noted differences between Ji Kang and Hanslick; see, for example, Xiu and Luo 1999 (113–32), and Cai 1997 (283–395).

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7. This line of thinking stems from Marxist critique of power relations in ancient China and is a core part of education in China.

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8. Ruan Ji’s aim for his 60 day intoxication was to avoid receiving a messenger from the de facto ruler at court, Sima Zhao, offering his daughter’s hand in marriage; the power struggle of the time was between the Cao royal family and the powerful political and de facto ruling clan of Sima.

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