

Rogers' Chapter 3 philosophical questions

1. How is “what do I hear?” different from “what am I listening to?”

— I love this debate! While I love it from a music standpoint, I love having this discussion with my own children and students about “hearing” vs. “listening” when it comes to communicating or receiving instructions. It is, of course, very useful in the music field, but is so applicable to life.

— Highlights the interpretive nature of listening and that perception is not neutral.

— To me this speaks to the kind of mindset you may have while listening to a piece. “Hearing” a piece feels like a deeper dive into it. You can listen to the same piece over and over but never “hear” it unless you are in the state of mind to think critically about it

— This reminded me of some points from earlier in the chapter, as well as some readings from our philosophy class. I believe this question is helping the analyst consider what are the perceptual and immediate things they are hearing, such as pitch, rhythms, timbre, etc. compared to their interpretation or intention while listening. Listening then includes things like musical syntax, structure, intent, and is purposeful rather than perception.

— I think this forces us to pay careful attention to the music.

— What I am listening to is the elements of the piece of music. I'll use my go to when I can't think of anything else and want something really “out there.” I'm listening to Drei Klavierstücke by Arnold Schönberg, a freely atonal piano piece written in 3 movements. What am I listening for? I'm trying to hear if there were any intervallic patterns that Schönberg followed when it came to freely atonal music. We humans are creatures of habit and we tend to unwittingly fall into patterns if we don't create new patterns to avoid old ones (like when he came up with dodecaphonic music). What I hear are all the different elements of the piece as they coalesce into one big piece: rhythm, tempo, pitch, timbre, harmonic intervals, performance interpretation that drives emotional involvement of the piece. It's a difference of the forest versus the trees, I suppose.

4. How much does what you're supposed to hear in a piece—or what you expect to hear—interfere with a full experiencing of that music?

— I feel like this question can be seen for both younger and older listeners. Right now, with my younger students, we are studying our concert music. To me, I am listening to the melody and words to learn it as quickly as possible. To my students, it seems like it goes in one ear and out the other; repetition is our best friend. For listeners outside of a school setting, I think that listeners can approach a piece of music with certain biases, such as cultural, stylistic, or emotional, that can color their perception. I do not particularly enjoy atonal or non-western music because my ear is trained in Western tonal harmony. I feel that this question is offering us to think of how to set aside preconceptions and understand and encounter sound without bias to not deal with interference to totally appreciate and experience the music.

5. How much more could you get from a piece (on hearing it) than you usually do? What prevents you? Isn't it all there? If not, where is “it”?

— One student's experience while listening to a piece of music could be different than another student's experience. By sharing, comparing, and contrasting ideas, we are able to get an idea of the impact of a piece of music

6. How is our perception of music colored by (auto)biographical associations, cultural prejudices, our analytical conceptual categories, or immediate environment? Are we passive victims of such things?

— Our perception cannot help but to be colored by our life experience, but I think of it more a feature than a fault. We are passive victims if we cannot be open to others interpretations of music.

— Our perception of music is certainly influenced by these things, but I do not believe we need to be passive victims to them. Being aware and naming our biases can help to negate at least some of their effects.

— I never considered my background thoughts and opinions could get in the way of how I view a piece of music. Seems a little naive, but sometimes I do not give a piece of music the time of day because of this.

— This is a question I have really had to sit down with my students to address, because there is a way to listen to ‘different’ music respectfully. This was brought up when I introduced the sitar and we watched a video about the instrument, and then listened to a song featuring the instrument. When preadolescent brains are still developing, it’s important to draw a clearly defined line between culturally disrespectful behavior and engaging in active listening.

— Music perception is still not entirely understood but is influenced by past experiences and culture.

— We have actually been discussing this a lot in Dr. Van Gent’s philosophy course! I find this to be so interesting.

7. Which is easier: overcoming our reactions to unfamiliarity or hearing something familiar in a new and fresh way?

— That is a tough one! I wish I could say I’m checking my own biases, but I crave familiarity. When I go out to a reading session or to the Middle School All-State Band, I enjoy hearing pieces which are remotely accessible to my High School Band and put them on my ever growing list of favorites. Part of my repertoire list is also limited by what is on the quite limited contest list, and I am of the opinion that it needs to change. On the other hand, approaching old pieces in new and fresh ways can be tricky as well. I am getting to that point with my middle school groups when it comes to playing my Holiday Rock Arrangements. We just don’t have as robust of a balance as we would like to have (especially when it comes to low brass), and it is hard to approach these pieces from a lopsided instrumentation standpoint. Either way, trying to keep repertoire interesting is something that is crucial to keeping young minds interested in music.

8. What makes a piece of music boring, or vivid? Do composers think of parts of their own music as being more insipid (or absorbing) than others?

— I think that frame of mind plays a big role in this one as well. The easy answer that we as directors give is “put more dynamic contrast in your playing or else it’s just boring” but I think that there is so much more than goes into a piece. I honestly don’t know if there is a “right” answer to this question.

— This makes me wonder about composers who wrote entire symphonies, operas, or other longer pieces. Did they find interest in every single detail they put into a piece? Is it just our shorter attention spans now that make us not find as much interest in these things? I saw an Instagram reel the other day that said something like songs (that are typically on the radio) are becoming shorter and shorter and the person theorized that it was because attention spans are shorter and music is much more accessible and easily skipped, therefore song writers are writing shorter songs so that more of the song gets played by the listener before being skipped.

9. How is the design (idea, conception, intention, shape) of a composition made clear?

— Discussing the outline of a piece’s structure can be helpful for students that may be struggling with figuring out its design. Sometimes this is more difficult to spot within some pieces compared to others, so having a discussion can be helpful.

11. What can we learn from music of other cultures, about them, about our own music, about ourselves?

— If the theory of perception I read last week is correct, then all musical experiences leave imprints on us. Expanding our knowledge of and listening to music of other cultures would, then, allow us to grow.

12. Can we empathize (imagine, re-create) the composer’s experience, retrace his steps, understand the composition as a microcosm of the related choices he has made, share his excitement at having discovered the right sound at the right moment, find the moment (sound complex, idea, turn of phrase, timbre, etc.) that particularly turned him on?

— Suggests that understanding music may require more than just factual notes on the page and may require reimagining the composer’s own choices.

— Attempting to learn about the intent of a piece can be helpful, including the background of the composer. Encouraging students to consider the time period, the composer’s life, historical elements can allow for considerations of a piece’s origin.

— This makes me think of when I was student teaching and I was working on the piece “Where Your Barefoot Walks” with my choir. The students were not fully getting into the piece and I sat them down one day and explained to them that the 1,000 year old poem that the piece was based off was based on love, and dove deep into the harmonies and how the piece was written. I also connected it to my own personal thoughts and desires, wishing that I could have seen my grandparents one last time to tell them I loved them. After letting the students sit on that for a couple of days, the experience that they had singing it, and the experience I had hearing them perform it, completely changed. I think if the composer were to hear their second performance of it, it would have connected with the composer’s intent and experience.

13. How is music short, or long?: as we hear it, or as we remember it?

— It can vary from moment to moment. I have a 42-minute Funktallica (Funky covers of Metallica) album on my phone; that can feel like an eternity when I’m just sitting around, but it can feel like a relatively short blip when I’m driving long distances and can help those distances not feel so long and boring (driving on Highway 20 in northwestern Iowa on my way to Sioux Falls was the definition of “fun as watching paint dry,” but this music helped it not feel so bad!). In terms of playing music, some of the longest pieces I have played (looking at Eric Whitacre’s Ghost Train and Godzilla Eats Las Vegas as being two of the longest) were also the most interesting and captivating. They told a story or at least painted a picture. The longest piece I have ever had the displeasure of listening to was a Symphony by David Maslanka. It was 35 minutes long, and by the 10th minute I was downright bored. It has to do primarily with the elements of the piece of music which make it interesting or boring. (I also have moderate to severe ADHD, which helps nothing) Music designed for high schoolers rarely exceeds 15 minutes and for good reason. Freshmen simply do not have the attention span to play a piece of music longer than 15 minutes. The fact they can rehearse that piece of music is nothing short of miraculous.

14. How does music articulate time?

— I love this question. It is asked so simply yet can be hard to articulate. I like how there are so many questions related to time in this list.

— I think this question points at the continuous flow of time, and at music’s ability to structure it through meter, tempo, form, etc. and makes time feel more tangible or perceptible.

— So fascinating! Yes, the big one is tempo. BUT! I love when composers create tension and releases, because it can be so exciting to feel where the music is going. The anticipation can feel like it takes forever! Another way that composers can make time go by faster is through smaller rhythmic durations while keeping the same tempo!

15. To what extent is the success of a joke, the effectiveness of a drama, and the ultimately convincing quality of a musical composition a matter of timing?

— This is interesting that this is included. Timing is of course, everything, especially in jokes, or in a musical or play, and most definitely in music. From the actual performances to the actual composition of the thing. If something is composed and presented at a time that doesn’t fit, it may not even be successful, but if the timing is right, it is well-received.

18. What similarities can we find between music and the cinema as temporal experiences?

— This question intrigues me, since many new listeners to classical music idioms have encountered them in the scores of movies and TV shows. This association leads many students to attach narratives to familiar or unfamiliar musical experiences. My students have commented on the cinematic or storytelling nature of pieces of music we have played and listened to.

— Music and cinema go hand in hand. Music helps drive the stories we become engrossed in when watching a film.

19. In any specific piece of music (or film), how does real time differ from experienced time, or from remembered time? Why?

— This reminds of the gym question, “what’s longer a treadmill minute or a plank minute?” Obviously 1 minute is 1 minute but its all about perception. I think about when I’m on stage with the symphony and we are

playing a piece that is 40 minutes long, but I certainly don't feel every 40 of those minutes. They seem to pass in a distorted way. However, when I'm at the gym doing a plank, I definitely feel every single one of those minutes.

20. How does (musical) structure determine our perception of time? Does it make any difference if we are conscious of that structure?

— I found this interesting since I sometimes dread the repeat of an exposition or the return of a rondo theme (particularly when I don't much enjoy the piece) and I wonder if my perception of the piece being 'too long' is influenced because I have some understanding of the structure.

21. How does being able to anticipate something in a piece differ from its being predictable?

— Another really fun question, in my opinion. For me, this is all about feelings. I think there are really good perspectives about what makes anticipation and prediction different. It can be very difficult to define one without using the other. It also leads into the question is it bad to anticipate something in a piece? Is that better/worse than it being predictable?

— Distinguishes between artistic foreshadowing and predictability. How do composers balance surprise and expectation?

— I think anticipating something is a feeling of excitement or curiosity, so when you anticipate something happening and it does, it feels good. Predicting something doesn't necessarily have a sense of excitement, so when you predict something to be correct, it doesn't evoke a large feeling.

— This gets at the idea that certain music can create through anticipation a sense of engagement in where it might go, or how it might unfold, while predictability is passive and does not give the same sense of discovery as anticipation.

24. How can a composer participate in an established style of cultural invention and yet maintain individuality?

— This question can be posed to students even in the contexts of the music they listen to and are familiar with. Whatever genre they may personally enjoy, they could likely explain what the specific artists they listen to uniquely contribute to the genre.

25. How is it possible for one hundred paintings of a sunset, or one hundred sonnets on eternal love, or one hundred sonatas in G major, to be each a unique aesthetic experience?

— I thought this was beautifully put. Art differentiates humans from other animals. This is why I love being a music teacher, because in math, for example, students all have one concrete answer ($2+2=4$). In music, on the other hand, it all depends on how someone interprets a piece. Not one person will play something exactly the same!

— I found this one particularly interesting, and so true. Different people could paint the same thing and it would still look different. Same for writing sonnets about love, everyone would experience and express it differently. Sonatas can be in the same key, but still create something truly unique.

— Watching the sunset is a favorite experience of mine. I thought it was an interesting comparison.

26. A major triad in the midst of a composition by Penderecki would elicit a different response from that caused by the same triad in a Mozart symphony. Why?

— The thought of a G major chord appearing in the middle of "Threnody" was a bit jolting.

27. If music is a symbolic language, what do its symbols symbolize?

— Some symbols are universal; others mean different things to different people, cultures, etc. Sharing these ideas of what symbols symbolize can open new ideas and perspectives.

— This one was tough for me to think about. The easy answer is "they symbolize the notes that are to be played on the instrument or sung." Should we equate notes to letters form words and sentences and eventually a whole book?

29. When a composer thinks in sound, is he translating?

— Absolutely. Music and language are similar in that they're patterns of sounds that we eventually come to recognize. When composers write, they're translating one form of pattern of sound into another.

31. Is the aesthetic whole equal to the sum of its parts?

— There are pieces of music where I gravitate to a specific part and then don't really listen to the rest.

38. [Comparing performances of the same work, in what sense is performance an analysis of a work?]

— I love this because it overlaps with what we talk about in the theatre with putting on a play. You can have 1000 different versions of the same script—just look at any Shakespeare play! I love the idea with a music piece, if it is executed perfectly with each performance, how do decide which one is the very best? The answer is very subjective....or is it?

— I think culturally we have decided on some of the important aspects but to a large degree this is a personal decision.