

Topic: Absolutism vs. Referentialism
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Definitions (Meyer):

Absolutism: *"Musical meaning lies exclusively within the context of the work itself."*

Referentialism: *"Musical meanings refer to the extramusical world of concepts, actions, emotional states, and character."*

Formalism: *"The meaning of music lies in the perception and understanding of the musical relationships set forth in the work of art and that meaning in music is primarily intellectual."*

Expressionism: *"The expressionist would argue that these same relationships are in some sense capable of exciting feelings and emotions in the listener."*

Description:

Absolutism and Referentialism are two approaches to assessing the significance of a musical composition. The views are contradictory; however, one may analyze music through both perspectives. Formalism and Expressionism are another complementary pair of philosophical stances commonly associated with absolutism and referentialism. From the formalist view, meaning derives from the physical composition (as in absolutism). On the other hand, expressionism can either be absolute or referential, where referential expressionism is synonymous with referentialism as the extreme extramusical lens in which all meaning is expressed and derived from references existing beyond the tangible composition. Absolute expressionism is the compromise between intra-musical and extramusical dominance, where the meaning derives from musical relationships as in absolutism, however, this meaning is expressed in the provocation of human emotions.

What I learned from the two additional references:

Music listeners have utilized absolutism and referentialism, or similar philosophies, in published discussion of music dating back to ancient Greece. Plato could be considered a referentialist, characterizing music as carrying mood-provoking and action-provoking meaning. Leonard Meyer underwent a transformation of philosophical stances, from absolutist to referentialist, citing the fact that all somatic activity is accounted for mentally while not all neurological activity is accounted for somatically, such that music elicits mental behavior. Aaron Copland describes three planes of listening: sensuous (non-analytic or simply qualitative), expressive (emotion, describable or not), and sheerly musical (the actual notes).

Demonstration (describe in one to two sentences):

In a video excerpt from Leonard Bernstein's *Young People's Concerts: What Does Music Mean?*, Bernstein describes the meaning of music from the absolute expressionist viewpoint. He states that meaning is derived primarily from the notes, and while extramusical meaning may simultaneously exist it is of less significance than the absolute music.

<https://youtu.be/JIZdXS2Tbus?t=85> (1:25 – 3:47)

References

Copland, A. (1957). *What to listen for in music* ([Rev. ed.]). New York: McGraw-Hill

Eitan, Z. (2008). Leonard B.Meyer, Referentialist. *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 25(5), 479-481. doi:10.1525/mp.2008.25.5.479

Meyer, L.B. (1956). *Emotion and meaning in music.*: University of Chicago Press: Chicago.