

## FUNCTION BEYOND FUNCTION? REFLECTIONS ON THE FUNCTIONALITY OF THE AUTONOMOUS

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**Izvleček:** Med vsemi umetnostmi je bila glasba vselej videti najbolj avtonomna, prosta vezi in meja reprezentacije. Od tod je znotraj te avtonomije ali nefunkcionalnosti izhajala njena funkcionalnost: njena zveza s svetim, dvig nad ekonomijo preživetja, njena ritualna vrednost. Ta tradicionalni pogled je v devetnajstem stoletju z avtonomijo umetnosti znotraj avtonomizacije različnih družbenih sfer zadela kriza, ki je terjala redefinicijo glasbene avtonomije in funkcije, to redefiniranje pa je skozi radikalizacije naposled privedlo do modernizma.

**Ključne besede:** funkcija glasbe, ritual, aura, moderna.

**Abstract:** Of all the arts, music has always seemed to be the most autonomous, free from the bonds and limits of representation. Hence its functionality within this very autonomy or non-functionality: its link with the sacred, elevation over the economics of survival, its ritual value. This traditional view was brought to a crisis in the nineteenth century with the autonomy of art within the autonomization of different social spheres. This demanded a redefinition of autonomy and function which, through a radicalization, eventually led to modernism.

**Keywords:** function of music, ritual, aura, modernity.

What purpose does music serve? The question is no doubt as old as music itself, having been posed since time immemorial. The origins of music are elusive, just as the origins of being human are elusive, and the two belong together: the ancient proposal to define the human being as “the speaking animal” or “the tool-making animal” comes no closer to solving the enigma than to call him “the music-making animal”. In the latter instance, the enigma seems even greater, for one can immediately grasp the expediency of making tools for the improvement of the economics of survival, for bettering our existence; and one can see the usefulness and efficacy of speech for enabling communication, or at least facilitating it and raising it to a new level: but music? On the face of it, music is not linked to survival at all, or not in any palpable or immediate way; and if it communicates, it poses all the more strongly the question of what it is that it communicates. Its message is elusive and cannot be pinned down in any conventional way. So, in the first instance, the function of music presents itself precisely as a break with any conventional notion of the “function”, the notion that is tacitly based on utility and the economics of survival. This is, of course, true of all art, which has always been placed in a realm beyond utility and survival – the realm of a surplus that does not immediately serve any definite purpose. But music has always encapsulated art at its purest and most enigmatic, through being free, by its very nature, from the bounds and restraints of representation.

So the first function of music appears from the outset as its dysfunctionality, its rupture with any ordinary function that could be ascribed to it. It is not useful in the world of survival of the species (and there are great problems with the evolutionist account of what evolutionary advantage music could possibly bring), and, so far as communication goes, it seems to be devoid of a definite meaning: it does not “make sense” – and making sense appears to be essential to the human condition. Music is allotted a time and space of its own; or, rather, the moment that it appears, it creates its own time and space – it immediately entails a different sense of temporality, and it dislocates the sense of place – it occurs, quite literally, in a “place” of its own. But in the terms of this very rough description, this is equally true of all art; and not only of art – also of religion, and even of something as innocuous as the game. What these practices all have in common is the establishment of a separate space and a separate time detached from the space and time in which the ordinary activities of survival take place. There is a dividing line between what serves the usual purposes and what does not, and this dividing line reaches down into the core of what being human means. Johannes Huizinga has demonstrated, in his classical and provocative book *Homo ludens* (1938), how the three realms of game, religion and art may well share a common origin, although playing games comes across as trivial and trifling in comparison with the sublime endeavours of religion and art, even if, structurally, they all belong together. This is a radical thesis that we need not espouse for our limited purposes, but it highlights in a poignant way the division – and music appears as the most prominent harbinger of this division. Not only does it represent art *par excellence*: it also displays marked affiliations with the other two realms, the sacred and the profane versions of the division: religion and the game. Those two pursuits seem to lie at opposite extremities – what can be further from the elevation of the sacred than the frivolity of games? – but the function of music was always related to the two, or, rather, suspended between the two. On one hand, it represents an elevation above worldly concerns, worries and everyday utility: it immediately rises above the mundane and creates its own stage. With the voice of music, all other sounds and voices are silenced: they are relegated to the background; the musical voice drowns all other noise and makes it sound profane. It interrupts the ordinary flow of voices and sounds; it cuts into them and creates a rupture. It establishes another world within this world, and its otherworldly nature is, formally, the stuff of the sublime, the elevated. But, on the other hand, this break may be seen, or rather heard, as a step into frivolity, a pure play with voices and sounds and thus another “game people play”; it becomes downgraded to a pleasure-seeking effect, an embellishment, an ornament, a decoration, a pure futility. So its separation is laden with the oscillation between the highest and the lowest: the sublime and the sacred on one hand, the titillation of the senses and frivolity on the other. Insofar as it reaches the sublime and the sacred, it seems endowed with the highest sense: that is, with a sense that cannot be expressed through mere words, a sense beyond any usual sense, a sense divorced from common sense – hence the prominent function of music in religious ritual; and one can speculate whether ritual, any ritual, at its point of origin, can be devoid of music at all, whether rituality is inseparably linked to musicality. Music appears as the practice of transcendence. Insofar as it lends its other hand to sensual rapture, the sensuous, pleasure for pleasure’s sake or mere entertainment, it seems to court an inherent danger pertaining to its nature: it is threatened with being engulfed by sensuality, with the loss of all higher

sense or, indeed, of any sense at all – transcendence run amok. Music is dangerous at the same time as it is salutary; it reeks of both salvation and damnation; it is the sound of a shofar on Mount Sinai but also the merriment around the Golden Calf. It is the poison and the cure – witness Plato, witness Aristotle, witness St. Augustine, witness Rousseau, and many others, who have, throughout music's history, followed its development with their stern philosophical ears, deeply concerned by its ambivalence.

The separate realm that music has established, and which is more pronounced and extreme than that of any other art, is a place of profound ambiguity. It is dysfunctional, but this very distance that separates it from functionality opens a space to which a host of functions can be ascribed. The oscillation embraces the highest and the lowest functions as its twin traditional poles, and although the ascription of function need not go to those extremes and can be content with various compromises, it is also true that music has hardly ever provoked indifference. Passion is the stuff of which it is made, and passion has a proclivity for the extreme. Passionate judgments about music have tended to be the rule, not the exception. The fact that music serves no ordinary function opens up a space for ascribing to it a function of another order: a function beyond function, the function of its very dysfunctionality. The fact that music is in itself devoid of sense opens up a space for ascribing to it a sense of another order, a higher sense, a sense beyond sense – and since sense is a linguistic property, for only language can make sense, this leads to tricky problems concerning the relation between music and language or, rather, concerning their non-relation. The ambiguous space, non-functional and non-sensical as it is, becomes for that very reason a space occupied by multiple functions and multiple senses, none of which can be easily pinned down. A host of functions and senses crowd in, but their multiplicity and elusiveness serve as proof that they cannot exhaust the object to which they are ascribed. The object appears all the more inscrutable and enigmatic.

If music could not be given any conventional sense, it was not for that reason viewed as a senseless activity – quite the opposite, this being what singled it out as the harbinger of the emphatic sense. This is where its problematic relationship to language was always essential: it can produce sense in a manner superior to language; it can yield a sense not limited by words and particular content, a sense in its own right. But by virtue of being a sense that one cannot spell out, this is also a sense over which one cannot easily pronounce judgements and which is wholly elusive. This is why precepts about the nature of music and singing have always repeated the same advice: keep music close to the words, never let it stray off on its own, for when it loses its anchorage in a text, there is no telling what will happen: this can lead to the vilest damnation, to a dangerous, boundless enjoyment that threatens to engulf reason and the senses – many mythological stories are adduced as a warning, from the Sirens to the Pied Piper and the Lorelei. So the fact is that music can attain a sense that is more fundamental than what words can create; but at the same time one should not let oneself be simply led by it or surrender to it body and soul, for the force of its elevation is perilous. Paradoxically, it is only in relation to language that music can function as a realm beyond it.

Separation of music from life has endowed it with a ritualistic character; this is where, traditionally, its function was assigned a symbolic place and value. Separated from life, it could present life in its true and highest form. One can use different vocabularies to describe

this, but let me stick with the ritual as the most neutral. The senses of the ritual could be widely different, even opposing. Ritual was put to religious use on a massive scale, and every known religious practice has utilized it, placing its seemingly transcendent nature at the service of the sacred. Nothing can overwhelm, can flood the soul and the body, so directly as music; and it has seemed self-evident that this force can be used as a conduit to the divine. Yet, on the other hand, the force is endowed with a powerful sensuality, so its religious use has always been controversial and has presented a long history of problems. It seems that music engenders, at the same time as elevation, also sensuality at its purest: pure carnality, all the more insidious for being sublime, fleeting and impalpable – non-material, hence invincible carnality, the most perfidious manifestation of the flesh.

This enabled another type of ritual, that of dancing, festivities, feasts and the celebration of worldly affairs, wherein the ritual character of music was submerged in the economy of survival, enhancing the profane, glorifying the profane and thus bringing it to its utmost, its radical form: a profanity distilled by the ritual to its essence. Part of this took the form of the music, the song, that accompanied work, in which some theorists have discerned the origin of music – where, again, music functioned as the element of ritualization of a strenuous physical activity, investing it with an additional symbolic overlay. Then there is the erotic function of music, music as the strategy of seduction, as it were – that was, incidentally, Darwin's theory of music's origin, for this was the only function he could see that this weird activity could possibly possess in the evolutionary process, conferring a certain evolutionary advantage: to acquire "ein Mädchen oder Weibchen" by a musical ploy (one could call this the "Papageno theory" of music). And one can see there that the very absence of function can function as the best strategy for a situation where every other "functional" strategy fails in its pursuit of an impossible goal: to provoke love. Music as carnal seduction, precisely because it seems beyond carnality: this is what makes it irresistible. Then there is also music as lamentation, bewailing a death or a loss, where the sheer impossibility of coming to terms with it is best addressed by the ritual character provided by music. In all cultures, one can hardly conceive of a funeral without music. The exceptions to those general rules are very few.

So the absence of function was immediately translated into a ritual function, where ritual does not pertain simply to the realm of the sacred but is understood in the wider sense of codifying an activity, overlaying it with a surplus – a "magic", an additional value beyond functional value. There are various ways of describing this: one can speak of the magical function of music in early times, the surplus enabling the appropriation of the indomitable forces lurking in the world at large by means of magical efficacy. One can speak of the symbolic value that divorces activities from themselves and transforms them, intensifies them, assigns them a symbolic place beyond their immediate function. Or one can speak of the auratic function, in the terms introduced by Walter Benjamin, where the aura endows certain activities and objects with a special kind of presence, a presence beyond the usual presence – where the thing "looks back at us", as Benjamin put it. Music has always seemed to present this aura in an extreme form precisely by virtue of being so fleeting, transient, conveyed only through minute undulations of air, its sound being perpetually and immediately lost, irretrievable, at the very moment when it is produced – and for that very reason absolute. The aura emerges precisely in the difference between the many meanings and

functions that one can ascribe to the realm it creates, and the rupture that constitutes its dysfunctionality, its surplus over and above meanings and functions. Or one can speak of the “cult value” of traditional art, to employ another of Benjamin’s terms.

The point of Benjamin’s famous description (which was not focused on music but which functions even better with music than with his own mostly visual examples) was to circumscribe a certain mechanism that defined the scope and the framework of the traditional function of art – but to circumscribe it and define it at the very point when it went astray. It could be seen as the general framework only after it became lost, and from the point of view of its loss. We no longer live in the era of auratic art: this framework has been dismantled, together with the societies that once provided its social underpinning. What is at stake is far more than the question of mechanical reproducibility, as discussed in the most famous of Benjamin’s essays: this is only one side or aspect of it; what is at stake is the ending of the era of auratic art – and this can serve as the briefest diagnosis of modernity, its predicament brought about by what was proclaimed as its emancipation.

The idea of the autonomy of art is a modern one. The idea of music for music’s sake, of autonomous music or absolute music, hardly had any status before the nineteenth century, and if it enjoyed currency earlier, this was always in a far more subservient way, as a subsidiary element governed by its cult value. This may well sound paradoxical, since, as we have seen, nothing can seem more autonomous than music, with its power to define the realm of its own, its break with utility and survival. So what is at stake with the modern idea of autonomy is a rupture within this autonomy itself, precisely the break with the ritualistic surplus value that always adhered to music. Once one starts to speak of art for art’s sake, music for music’s sake, one is confronted with the surplus in its pure form, that is, divorced from the ritualistic underpinning that formed its background. If the surplus was traditionally overlaid by ritual, by the auratic function, it emerged in its pure dysfunctionality the moment it was accepted on its own, in its autonomy. The function beyond function, the meaning beyond meaning, could reign so long as it could be seen as a higher function, a higher meaning in a system that was sustained by a certain distribution of symbolic places, functions and meanings, although in a way that was always ambiguous and perilous. Modernity means that this system has been dislocated and can no longer hold sway: the symbolic has broken down. So what function can music serve once it has been established for its own sake? No doubt, there is still music written for religious purposes, and, at the other extreme, in rather massive quantities, for entertainment; no doubt, there are still love songs, dance music etc., but the essence of the development of modern music lay elsewhere. Modernity meant that music had to come to terms with its own autonomy, with its auratic character, in isolation; and this is where the turn to the modern could ultimately follow only the path of dismantling its own aura. The age when Hanslick could promote Brahms’s symphonies and chamber music as the paradigm of absolute music quickly passed: the autonomy of music, once asserted, had to confront a very different fate in the twentieth century.

The advent of modernity coincided with many other processes. I will leave aside, for the present purposes, the question of nationhood, of emergent nation states with their newly discovered traditions and national feelings, always tied up with music. One can remember the ways in which music played a great part in establishing the new national consciousness in the nineteenth century in such large places as Germany, Italy or Russia, or such small

places as Slovenia, the Czech lands or the Scandinavian countries. Music, reputedly a universal language, started to speak in national idioms, in many ways vastly different from the previous “national” schools. Its functionality in relation to power, its ritual staging of the scene of power, particularly within the genre of opera, found an entirely new use in association with the new feeling of nationhood. But I will leave aside this question, although it has many interesting repercussions for music’s capacity to build collectivities and the sense of belonging to social groups. The most salient and palpable feature of modernity was, for sure, the market economy, and this affected music not just in its external distribution and availability, but in the intimacy of its internal production. Partly, this was due to the massive influx of technical possibilities that made music universally accessible and omnipresent to the point of nausea. A century after those inventions, one cannot enter a café, a restaurant, a lounge, a waiting room, a shop, an airport, a bus or almost any public space without being massively invaded by music. Music used to be rare, and this rarity endowed it with special value, but now that it has become an exceptional state to be free of music; its absence has turned into a very precious commodity, uncommon and in short supply. Someone like Pascal Quignard, a music lover with a thorough musical education, was able to write a book called *The Hatred of Music* in order to vent his feelings in this brave new musical world. Quignard explains why his own desperate and paradoxical response to this overwhelming musical intrusiveness was to stop listening to music altogether, to retreat into silence. Music sells hugely, and not only itself: it can help with selling all other things. Its supposedly universal entertainment value has been brought to the point of torture. Its autonomy is cashed in on the market; the underside of its autonomy is that it is ubiquitously marketable. In this respect, it shares the fate of universal commodity production, where everything is ultimately accorded value on the market – and the entertainment market is the most hugely expanding market there is. The market is also a great equalizer: Mozart and Beethoven can be played in supermarkets just as much as any ephemeral commercial product. It is as if the surplus that pertained to the ritualistic value of music can be turned into another kind of surplus, so that music espouses the surplus of surplus value: a marketable surplus, a cult value turned into profit. The advent of modernity also means that the aura can be cashed in – which entails not simply its loss but, rather, its omnipresence to the point where it loses any traditional significance. Aura has become trivial.<sup>1</sup> Or, to use the terms that were so dear to Adorno, the fetishism that pertained to the aesthetic realm, the specific form of aesthetic fetishism, has tendentially coincided with commodity fetishism *tout court*. Without advocating the use of particular terms in preference to others, one might see there a paradoxical state where music, which has always defined itself in opposition to utility and functionality, has reached a stage, precisely with the assertion of its autonomy, where it has become fused with utility and the market, to a point where it cannot be distinguished from it. Its dysfunctionality has become all too functional, easily incorporated. More music is made than ever in its history,

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin is also the author of a brief and enigmatic fragment called “Capitalism as Religion”, where he argues that capitalism is based not on universal secularization or profanation but, rather, on its opposite – the auratic, the religious and the symbolic having become ubiquitous and trivial. The auratic and the religious are practised within the commodity economy and the market, not beyond their confines: the dysfunctional is incorporated in the function.

more music is copiously available and listened to than was ever the case earlier: but its value as a surplus, its symbolic and ritual efficiency, has never stood so low. If the function of music once appeared as an enigma, if one was always baffled by its “other-worldly” nature, which could not be squeezed into the mould of functionality, then the question has perhaps turned into its opposite: is there any purpose that music could not serve? Is there a function that it could not fulfil? Does its omnipresence, often suffocating, not testify to its increasing, most commonplace utility? It is no longer its dysfunctionality that is mysterious, but rather its “surplus functionality”, the inexhaustible utility of the futile.

One of the other outcomes of this constellation is the sharp division between “serious” and popular music. This divide, to be sure, has always existed to some extent in one shape or form, but it never before had the massive significance that it has acquired in the past couple of centuries, and which is still increasing. Popular music is a modern invention (just as, strictly speaking, the concept of the “people” is). Mozart’s *Magic Flute* seems, in retrospect, the last moment when the two species could happily coexist within a piece written according to the highest standards of musical development of its time but nevertheless retaining massive popular appeal. The cleft between the two has kept growing, spectacularly, despite some exceptions. The result of this is that “serious” music, music written according to the strict standards of inherent musical development, has become non-marketable, or at least its market value has become marginal. The guardians and defenders of intrinsic musical value have dwindled to a negligible minority, a rather small elite. And although this development is widespread in modern culture, it has happened with music in a far more poignant way than with any other form of art, as if music, always paramount among the arts, has to embody their modern fate in an emblematic way.

This situation can give rise to a number of different attitudes. One can have the figure of the defender of the grand tradition, keeping alive the memory and the practices of the happy times when auratic music was still possible: not only through the noble endeavours of musicology, which keeps the archive in order and scrutinizes it with its strict methodology, highlighting its ever-new facets, but also through concert practice, abetted by the recording industry, which has come to serve as a new agent of social distinction and indicator of social status, education, taste and “cultural capital”, with its congregation of connoisseurs and its own star system. Alternatively, one can adopt the opposite attitude: that popular music, on the contrary, is a good thing to have happened – a democratic redeployment of music to bring it, finally, within reach of everyone, chaotic and messy though it may be; a music despised only by snobs, assertions of its inferiority being indiscriminate and of dubious validity. One can, if one is willing to lend it an ear, find in popular music some aspects of dignity, originality and authenticity, commercial as it is; and many portions of it cannot be so easily dismissed. Or, thirdly, one can adopt a strict modernist stance, according to which any adherence to the great tradition, its practices and its symbolic underpinnings, its cult value, can only be false in the era of the general degradation of music, its vilification, its commodification. To produce “dysfunctional” music has never been so hard, now that the traditional functions have lost their sway and the new functionality has become the rule. Fidelity to tradition would amount to its betrayal; any attempt to produce auratic art would have the ring of deceit; so what remains is to fight the auratic, the fetishistic object with its own weapons, to dismantle it, to produce a musical object recalcitrant to the aesthetic and

symbolic premises that upheld it throughout history. To turn music into hard labour instead of entertainment. One can recognize here the accents of a Schönberg or a John Cage: the militant elite making a stand against mass production, the extreme gesture against extreme commodification, a message in the bottle to be recovered in the future, but finding only a scant audience in the present.

I am not trying to advocate any of these attitudes, although I am not opposed to any of them and can find a certain sympathy for all of them, contradictory though they are. They are, rather, sketched as a few simplified, clear-cut possibilities in response to a perceived predicament: that of the loss of the traditional functions of music, where its seeming dysfunctionality could be used precisely as a pledge of its symbolic, ritual, cult or auratic value – or whatever word one prefers to use – coupled with the advent of the new, massive utility that has dispensed with the enigma by making it trivial. I am not trying to lament this sad state of affairs, nor to rejoice over the happy profusion of possibilities that characterizes the function of music today. I would prefer to finish on a note of passion. Music has always provoked passion, and has been seen as the best way to give vent to passion, so perhaps one should take this universal property seriously and invest some hopes in it. For the passion it provoked and expressed was an elusive quality that could never quite be covered by the traditional functions of music within the symbolic and ritual universe it inhabited, and this was seen as the source of its possible danger and intractability, its capacity to be simultaneously the poison and the cure. The passion it carried never quite fitted the mould. And one can hope that in a period of its universal utility, ubiquity and multi-functionality there remains a passion that sustains it and can never quite fit the new moulds – or, rather, the invisible mould or the seeming absence of any mould, which is all the more obtrusive. This is a passion worth fighting for, and perhaps music's ultimate function beyond function.

FUNKCIJA ONSTRAN FUNKCIJE?  
RAZMISLEK O FUNKCIONALNOSTI AVTONOMNEGA

Povzetek

Med vsemi umetnostmi je bila glasba vselej videti najbolj avtonomna. Njena posebnost je bila v tem, da je bila prosta vezi in meja reprezentacije in se je zato kazala kot najprimernejša za to, da reprezentira čisti dvig nad posvetnost, nad ekonomijo preživetja. Od tod je znotraj te avtonomije ali nefunkcionalnosti izhajala njena funkcionalnost: njena zveza s svetim, njena vloga v religiji, njena ritualna vrednost, ki se je kazala tudi v posvetni rabi s plesom, ceremonijami itd. To ritualno vrednost je mogoče na kratko povzeti z Benjaminovim izrazom aura. Ta tradicionalni pogled na glasbo je v devetnajstem stoletju zadela kriza, ko je avtonomija umetnosti nasploh postala določena socialna struktura znotraj avtonomizacije različnih družbenih sfer v meščanski družbi. To je obenem sovpadlo z razvojem tehničnih možnosti njene reprodukcije in na drugi strani s širitvijo tržne ekonomije, kjer je glasba postala tržno blago. Ta kriza je terjala redefinicijo glasbene avtonomije in funkcije, glasba je postala splošno dosegljiva in vseprisotna, množično se je razširila tako imenovana popularna glasba itd., obenem pa je to redefiniranje skozi inherentni proces radikalizacije naposled privedlo do modernizma, ki je svoje poslanstvo videl v uporabi zoper klasično auratično funkcijo glasbe znotraj na novo pridobljene avtonomije. Uporabnost glasbe se je tako neznansko razširila in trivializirala, resna glasbena prizadevanja pa so postala čedalje bolj omejena na majhno elito ali pa na nostalgično ohranjanje njene izgubljene auratične funkcije. To stanje pa nas ne sme navdajati z jadikovanjem, temveč z zaupanjem v moč glasbe, da ohrani iskro svoje strasti v vseh različnih pojavnih oblikah in znotraj novih funkcij, ki jih je privzela.