

[About CA](#)

[Journal](#)

[Contact CA](#)

[Links](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Permission to Reprint](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Webmaster](#)

WHAT TITLES DON'T TELL

A Lecture-Performance by Arnold Berleant
with the assistance of Onur T rkes, flautist

A B S T R A C T

This paper is concerned with titles, more or less descriptive, of musical works. It does not deal with titles that are generic forms or categories, such as sonata or symphony. But while I discuss titles, the point of the paper is not titles but what they obscure, what lies behind them. Thus the title of this paper is itself misleading, since it leads one to think that the paper is about titles, whereas it is rather about music when freed from their influence. While this may sound confusing at first, the musical examples I shall play will make the case more clearly than an exclusively verbal explanation.

Introduction

"...[In] an experience as intense as playing [the piano]...the intensity of feelings [is] only made factitious by being diluted with words."¹

I want to say something about the art of music and have chosen to approach the subject by means of titles. I have misgivings about doing this through the questions titles raise, for titles have many aspects and it is easy to get side-tracked by peripheral, relatively insignificant issues. I hope I can steer my discussion through them, however, to the center of the matter. I have decided to approach my subject by means of titles because, by showing what titles do not do as well as what they do do, we can come closer to the heart of music. For despite the title of this paper, it is not about titles; it is rather about what lies behind titles. What the heart of that art is, is truly the matter before us.

Titles

Titles of musical works come in many different types and from many different sources. Publishers and listeners as well as composers have bestowed titles on musical works based on a large variety of things, such as the mood the music evokes, a narrative the music supposedly describes in sound, or some object or sound the music supposedly imitates or otherwise depicts. It is the last of these that will provide the means to carry us closer to understanding where the peculiar power of music lies.

I have chosen three sorts of titles to help me do this and, in exploring music, I should like to move this inquiry away from the conceptual and dialectical level and into what Justus Buchler has called the exhibitiv mode of judgment. To do this I would like to play for you instances of these different kinds of titles, not to illustrate the titles but rather to lead us to the kind of direct grasp that Plato attributed to the highest stage of knowledge. What I hope this musical journey will reveal is an ontology of a radically different sort from Plato's. The kind of apprehension I hope to arrive at is not the grasp of a supersensible realm of forms but exactly the converse.

The first kind of title is among the most obvious and amusing: titles that seem to indicate what the music is describing or imitating. One of the most well-known

examples of this is Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" (1874), a set of pieces inspired by paintings and designs of the composer's friend, Victor Hartman. The titles of the individual pieces are taken from the titles of the paintings and include 'The Old Castle', 'The Tuileries Gardens', 'Bydlo' (a farm cart), 'Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks,' 'Limoges - the Market,' 'Roman burial ground - the Catacombs,' and the 'Great Gate of Kiev,' the music of each piece relating to the subject of a particular painting.

This inventive and entertaining work is a relatively late example of a practice that had begun long before and that gained great popularity among eighteenth century French composers such as (François) Couperin (1668-1733), (Jean-Philippe) Rameau (1683-1764), and (Claude) Dauquin (1694-1772), who wrote short characteristic pieces for the harpsichord with descriptive titles such Couperin's *Les papillons*, *Les p...lerines*, and *Les vieux seigneurs*. Birds were often used as titles for these pieces, and I begin with one of the most popular of these, a work by Louis-Claude Dauquin, still occasionally played today, "The Cuckoo."²

Pieces such as this can be entertaining, and it is easy to ascribe more verisimilitude to their imitative features than is actually present. In this work the cuckoo's call is suggestive more than accurate, for while the European cuckoo's call may be close to a two-note descending minor third, it may also be a descending second and is always reiterated at the same pitch. Here, however, the minor third quickly becomes a second, a fourth, a fifth, and a sixth, and even an ascending second, and one section of Dauquin's piece is built around the interval of a major third. Moreover, the two-note figure is usually an accompaniment, not the principal part. This is one versatile cuckoo! Whatever the composer's intention, it is clear from the music that he does not attempt to imitate the cuckoo's call literally but that the call only suggested a musical idea to him. One might recognize the cuckoo's call, but it is a historical cuckoo, as well, for the melodic and harmonic usage of the piece identify it clearly as eighteenth century French. An eighteenth century French cuckoo? I wonder if this title could be inferred just from the piece itself?

Cuckoos are not the only musical birds. They exhibit one of the most distinctive and easily transcribable calls, but there are other birds whose songs or behavior have also offered musical suggestions to composers. Illustrations can be found in other pieces of the same period, such as "The Cuckoo" that show similar avian characteristics: "The Turtle-Dove," "Canaries," "The Swallow," and "The Hen." I suspect, however, that few birds could be identified from their music. It is most likely that the bird's song or behavior suggested a musical idea that took flight in the composer's imagination in directions the bird never flew. It is reasonable to suggest that, in such cases as these, titles do not designate the imitative goal of the piece; rather they identify its point of departure. One might say, using Aristotelian terminology, that the titles designate the piece's efficient cause, not its final cause.

Musical works that purport to recount a narrative in musical sounds show another use of descriptive titles. Famous examples of this use range from Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, with its march to the gallows and the beheading that follows, to the adventures in Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. These draw on the listener's imagination as well as on the composer's, and one of their charms lies in trying to identify where specific narrative events occur in the ongoing musical sounds. It is important to note, however, that we recognize the story *in* the piece and not *from* the

piece. If we did not know the narrative beforehand, we could never infer it from the music alone. As we shall see later, this is part of the larger case I am trying to make.

One can cite a long list of titles that may seem to convey imitation or narration, but descriptive titles have been used in still other ways, such as to refer to moods, feelings, objects, situations, or events. A lovely work that shows all of these is Schumann's *Kinderszenen*. Let me illustrate how. Here, too, the resemblance is detected from knowing the title and is *ex post facto* and not *ante-facto*. This becomes evident by first listening to each of these short pieces and identifying its title only afterward.

Kinderszenen (Scenes of Childhood, Scènes d'Enfants)

1. Von fremden Ländern und Menschen (From Foreign Lands and People, Hommes et pays nouveaux)
2. Kuriose Geschichte (A curious Story, Histoire curieuse)
3. Hasche-Mann (Catch me, Cache-cache)
4. Bittendes Kind (Entreating Child, L'Enfant qui prie)
5. Glückes genug (Perfect Happiness, Bonheur parfait)
6. Wichtige Begebenheit (An important Event, Grand événement)
7. Träumerei (Revery, Rêverie)
8. Am Kamin (By the Fireside, Au coin du feu)
9. Ritter vom Steckenpferd (Knight of the Rocking-Horse, Sur le cheval de bois)
10. Fast zu ernst (Almost too serious, Presque trop sérieux)
11. Furchtenmachen (Frightening, Faire peur)
12. Kind im Einschlummern (Child falling asleep, L'enfant s'endort)
13. Der Dichter spricht (The Poet speaks, Le Poète parle)

As with the bird pieces, it is unlikely that one could have identified the mood or event in any but the most indeterminate way without knowing this music beforehand. Here, again, it seems most likely that Schumann chose childhood experiences to stimulate his extraordinary musical sensibility and playfully inserted musical features that suggest aspects of those occurrences.

Feelings, objects, and situations are obviously different from one another and, indeed, we could amuse ourselves by attempting an exhaustive classification of titles, but that is exactly what I want to avoid here. What I want to do instead is lead this inquiry toward something neither superficial nor especially amusing for, as I implied at the outset, this presentation is not about musical titles but about the ontology of music. By suggesting ideas that stimulated the composer's imagination, these titles tell us something about the *origin* of the composition, as I suggested earlier, but they do not establish any imitative purpose or object of imitation. In fact, titles, instead of directing us to what the music is about, tell us what it is not about. The works of music are not the auditory reflection of the cuckoo, the hen, or children's moods and behavior. Indeed, they are not about anything at all. Regardless of how a musical work originated, we must take it on its own terms and descriptive titles only invite confusion. Understanding this confusion can also help us grasp not only the self-sufficiency of music but also its distinctive standing in the human world. That is why I have chosen to approach this issue using titles as the means of bringing us to that understanding.

But let me now turn to a different use of titles, their use in naming actual or imaginary personages. The portrait is an important genre of painting and sculpture, and it also occurs in music. Schumann himself provided some examples of this in his piano suite, *Carnival*. But probably the most well-known example of this, however, is Elgar's *Enigma Variations* (1898-1899), each of whose fourteen variations is a musical picture of one of Elgar's friends. However, the composer (wisely) left us only incomplete information on the identity of those individuals, so that what we have are, so to speak, portraits without a sitter, "invisible" portraits. We know they were musical portraits of some sort, but their identity is indicated by their initials only. (It is unlikely that most of his listeners would know to whom they referred, and today all we can know is a historical account of them.) In their place there is only the music.

There are other examples of musical portraits. Despite the intriguing puzzle about the identities of the individuals "portrayed" in the *Enigma Variations*, this is actually an extra-musical question and a distraction from the music itself. Their identity is a question only for a sleuth or a music historian, not for the listener. I want to show in the case of musical portraits, as in the other titles we have considered, that what is musically relevant is the music alone. That is to say, the music is the portrait, not the clue for identifying the subject of the portrait.

The third work I should like to consider³ may also a group of musical portraits. This is a work for flute and piano by the French composer Albert Roussel, his set of four pieces called *Joueurs de flûte* or *Flute Players*, op. 27, written in 1924. I hope that it will both clarify and demonstrate the self-sufficiency of music and, at the same time, lead us beyond titles toward the ontological proposal that underlies this paper. Its titles, moreover, introduce greater complexity and raise some curious questions that can assist us in our quest.

Joueurs de flûte (Flute Players), op. 27 (1924) Albert Roussel (1869-1937)

1. Pan
2. Tityre
3. Krishna
4. M. de la P. jaudie

Each of the four movements is entitled after a mythical or fictional character who was known as a flute player: "Pan," "Tityre," "Krishna," and "M. de la P. jaudie." The goat-footed Greek satyr Pan, lusting for one nymph after another, is said to have invented the syrinx or reed pipes. Tityre is one of the shepherds in Virgil's *Eclogues*, known as a dissolute young scapegrace who loved to lurk in the dark and make mischief, and was sometimes described as playing the flute. Krishna, who lends his name to the third movement, is a Hindu demi-god who, in his youth, played the flute. Finally, M. de la P. jaudie is the flute-playing hero of the novel *La P. cheresse* by Henri de R. gnier, published a few years before *Joueurs de flûte*.

Because we may know something of the character after which it is named, each of these movements may be thought to reflect that particular flute player. The flute in "Pan" plays a sensuous, melismatic line, rhythmically free and enticing, the sort of melody Pan might have used to seduce the

objects of his amorous intentions. The flippant staccatos in "Tityre" could be taken to reflect the flippant character of that shepherd, scampering about on his mischief-causing rounds. "Krishna" evokes the exotic sounds of the Orient and, in fact, is based almost entirely on the Hindu mode form 'Shri'.⁴ The last movement is more of a puzzle, for *La P cheresse* is not as familiar as the other referents and we must be content to know about M. de la P jaudie whatever we can glean from the music.

These titles, like the seventeenth century descriptive harpsichord pieces with which I began, may have been stimuli for the composer, perhaps suggesting the stylistic character of each piece. As in my earlier examples, however, the resemblance is after the fact; that is, whatever resemblance we can detect can be recognized only after hearing the music and can not be anticipated beforehand or inferred from the music alone. And so the title merely puts a handle on the piece by associating the music with the character, incident, or mood identified in the title.

But *Joueurs de fl te* introduces a further dimension to the use of titles. Each movement is not only named after a mythical or fictitious flute player but is also dedicated to an important French flute player active at the time the work was composed: "Pan" to Marcel Moyse (1889-1984), "Titre" to Gaston Blanquart (1877- 1963), "Krishna" to Louis Fleury (1878-1926), and "M. de la P jaudie" to Philippe Gaubert (1879-1941). These pieces, then, are not only musical portraits of four fictitious flute players; at the same time they may be thought to reflect something of four actual ones: Moyse, Blanquart, Fleury, and Gaubert. Unless the listener is a music historian, a flutist, or a concert goer in France (Paris) in the first half of the twentieth century, it is unlikely that one would have heard any of them play or even know much about them. Yet it is reasonable to assume that Roussel had some reason for coupling a particular flutist with each movement: we might think that there is a further association of the music with the personality of that flutist or of his playing. But all we can know of *these* flute players from the music is the music itself. The players are, in a significant sense, entirely in the music. The music alone incorporates their musical being, and establishing any external tie is a historical question, not a musical one.

We have, then, two parallel sets of portraits, one of fictional flutists and the other of real ones. But in a sense, all the portraits are real: they are real as *portraits*. We have Krishna only insofar as we have Roussel's music, and we have Louis Fleury only insofar as we have the piece Krishna.⁵ Indeed, all we know here of Fleury's flute playing is this music. Similarly, we know the flutist Pan only insofar as we have *his* music and Marcel Moyse only from the music of Pan. The music does not get its significance or its meaning from an actual flute player about whom we may know little or nothing. *Joueurs de fl te* presents us with both Krishna and Fleury, Pan and Moyse, Tityre and Blanquart, M. de la P jaudie and Gaubert.

The Significance of Titles

What I want to say, then, is that all music is about nothing but itself; indeed, music is not *about* anything at all. It simply *is in itself*, what Hanslick called "tonally moving forms." We cannot therefore turn to other things such as emotion, language, or symbol to understand music. Stravinsky said it clearly: "Music can express nothing.... It can express itself only."⁶ This principle is exemplified even in music to which a composer has given a descriptive title. The title is ascribed to the music and is not inherent *in* it: its meaning is wholly

embodied in the music itself. *Instead of titles telling us something about the music, the music tells us something about the titles. Instead of titles telling us what the music means, the music tells us what the titles mean.* Indeed, titles can be indirectly instructive by helping us know what music is not, for in their variety, titles include most of the surrogates that mistakenly translate music into something that is more easily conceptualized but that, by that translation, loses the music. What, then, is music? This brief presentation cannot provide a full answer but can indicate the direction in which to proceed.

It may help to identify two concerns here, two different inquiries: knowing music and understanding music. Knowledge, of course, is the object of inquiry, and its cognitive concerns have had a central place in the history of Western philosophy: to render our experience in the world in conceptual terms, ontologically, metaphysically, epistemologically. Indeed, since Kant the cognitive quest has been at the heart of philosophical inquiry. Yet we do recognize that, as important and powerful as conceptual cognition is, *knowing* has greater breadth. At various points in history philosophers have indicated the way toward grasping non-conceptual knowing. We can think of Plato's account of the ultimate apprehension of the Forms, a state to which we may be led but cannot know other than by direct apprehension. In recent times there is what Bergson called 'intuition,' knowing an object from within, directly. There is G. E. Moore's sensory intuition of the color yellow, an intuition that cannot be described to anyone who has not perceived that color. Then there is Wittgenstein's famous advice to discard the ladder by means of which one has climbed to the understanding that his propositions are senseless: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."²

And there is music, an art that is beyond words, whose connection with recognizable features of the broader world, unlike painting, sculpture, literature, and theater, is never direct, even when titles seem to suggest otherwise. Not by translation, not by comparison, not by conceptualization is music grasped, but directly from the musical experience and without any intermediary. Indeed, I would argue that because of such direct apprehension music may be considered the exemplary art, for it is in this respect that all the arts give us their unique understanding, an understanding that does not consist of conceptual objects but of a kind of resonance, to use a musical metaphor. It is an understanding achieved through an empathetic participation in aspects of the world that we grasp by acquaintance and not through concepts, definitions, or proof.

But I want to talk about more than meaning or knowledge: I want to talk about *being*. Where can we find the flute players in this work of Roussel? The music of Pan is not Roussel's idea of what Pan sounded like; it *is* Pan: it is *Roussel's* Pan. So, too, the music of Pan does not necessarily reflect the flutist Moyse or resemble his playing. Roussel has given us *his* Moyse, the flute player Moyse. In so far as the music is concerned, it *is* Moyse. So too with Tityre and Blanquart, Krishna and Fleury, M. de la Paudie and Gaubert. The work *is* the flute players and the character of each player lies in it. Whether the name and characteristics of the person were an inspiration to the composer is an historical question only. For the listener, the name simply gives each movement its identity: it is only the musical experience that gives each name its meaning. The art lies in the amalgam of the sound, the performer, and the listener.

Musical Presence

But we are left with a question: Is this connection between the music and the flute players more or less definite, comparable to the images in representational painting or the characters and situation in a realistic novel? Or is it, on the other hand, nothing more than a linguistic stipulation by the composer? To suggest a third alternative, is the object, character, person, situation, or mood something that is wholly present, wholly contained in the work of musical art? I should like to maintain the last of these, and I hope that I have established my point by the musical examples we have been considering. For music to "be" one must participate in the living sound, a kind of environmental experience; as someone once observed, "To live in the music is like walking on a woodland trail."⁸ Music gives us a wordless sense of things.

Here is where musical understanding lies. Understanding music is different from establishing cognitive meaning, for musical understanding has no cognitive pretensions. What it identifies, I believe, is an organic grasp of the music, a full, human engagement in the musical experience. It resembles the sense of sympathetic connection with another person that we grasp in unspoken communion, rather like what Moritz Geiger, following Edith Stein, called 'empathy.'⁹ Merleau-Ponty grasped this difference well:

From the writer and the philosopher...we want opinions and advice. We will not allow them to hold the world suspended. We want them to take a stand; they cannot waive the responsibilities of men who speak. Music, at the other extreme, is too far beyond the world and the designatable to depict anything but certain outlines of Being -- its ebb and flow, its growth, its upheavals, its turbulence.¹⁰

If music is about itself, what of works like Roussel's whose titles make connections between the music and something else, such as mythical or actual flute players? Do their titles have any function at all? Several plausible explanations are possible. (1) The title could identify the piece's origin in the object or situation that stimulated the composer's musical response, as a title might in impressionist painting. Then, again, (2) the title could be a guide to listening, suggesting what the listener might hold in consciousness as a focal point in attending to the progression of musical sounds.

But these explanations are external to the music, and the question remains: Is there an internal connection between the title and the music, a clear reference? (3) Is the title, as I asked earlier, merely an arbitrary stipulation by the composer? Or as I also suggested, (4) Is the object, person, situation, or mood something that is wholly *embodied* in the work of musical art? I hope that I have shown the plausibility of the last of these, and have established my point not so much by verbal argument as by reference to musical experience.

Perhaps we can adapt Merleau-Ponty's characterization of language and thought to music, where music would operate as a "second flesh." "It is as though the audibility that animates the world of music were to emigrate, not outside of every body, but into another less heavy, more transparent body, as though it were to change flesh, abandoning the flesh of the sensible body for that of music."¹¹

Where, then, are the flute players? The music is not *about* them: this music is not about anything. It has no referent independent of the music; indeed, the music has no referent at all. What we would like to call the referent is the music itself; that is, the music is its own referent, so to ask for its referent is actually a meaningless question, a tautology of sorts. For this music is not *about* the flute players; it *is* the flute players, not the mythical or historical flute players but the flute players that are the music. In whatever sense flute players are involved, they, so to speak, are present as the work. This is how music resonates with the human world:¹² The music exists in and through the flute players and they exist only as the music in the ongoing sound, the execution, and the listening conjoined. For music to *be*, one must participate in the living sound. This is the being of music, neither subjective nor objective but its own body.

So where, finally, *are* the flute players? They are the work; they are embodied as the work. The title merely inscribes an identity for each movement. The being that it identifies is the amalgam of the sounds, the performer, and the listener. These are inseparable, and together they are the music *and* the flute players.

ENDNOTES

¹ Charles Rosen. *Piano Notes. The World of the Pianist*. New York: Free Press, 2004. p. viii.

² For this example and for all the others in this paper, the title of the work is projected on a screen above the stage immediately following the performance of that piece.

³ This work was performed with the generous participation of the flautist Onur Tırkes.

⁴ With the unimportant exception of an auxiliary note and two modulating bars, Roussel restricts himself to the Hindu mode form 'Shri', which uses a scale of A, Bb, C#, D#, E, F, G#, A.

⁵ It may be no coincidence that Roussel dedicated this exotic music to Fleury. Debussy himself wrote an equally exotic piece for Fleury, *Syrinx*, for solo flute.

⁶ Stravinsky made this statement as recorded on *Balanchine*, Kultur DVD D2448, UPC Code: 32031244894, ISBN: 0-7697-2448-5. His full statement was: "Music can express nothing. That's my conviction. It can express itself only."

⁷ "He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."
Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922) (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), 6.54, p. 189.

Wittgenstein's comment to recognize the limits of propositional knowledge in its inability to conceptualize the transcendent. My interpretation of the passage concurs with Diffey's but, whereas he gives it a Kantian turn, I follow David Novitz, whom he quotes, in saying "Art ceases to comment on, to refer to, to imitate and to represent. Instead it presents us with an imaginatively crafted but entirely real object which is to be attended to in its own right." Terry J. Diffey, "Works of Art and the Transcendent," in *Od» amki rozbitych luster. Rozprawy z filozofii kultury estetyki i sztuki (Pieces of Shattered Mirrors, Essays in Philosophy of Culture, Aesthetics and Art)* in honor of Prof. Alicja Kuczyl'zska, ed. Iwona Lorenc (Warsaw: Wydza» Filozofii i Socjologii, 2005). Cf. also David Novitz, "Art, Life and Reality," *British Journal of*

⁸ Anon.

⁹ "L'empathie esthétique chez Moritz Geiger et son application à la littérature," *Bulletin de la Société Française d'esthétique*, Juin 2006, pp.11-12.

¹⁰ M. Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Alden L. Fisher (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), p.254.

¹¹ "[I]t is as though the visibility that animates the sensible world were to emigrate, not outside of every body, but into another less heavy, more transparent body, as though it were to change flesh, abandoning the flesh of the [sensible] body for that of language." M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 153. Quoted in Steven Rosen, *Topologies of the Flesh* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006), p. 48.

Perhaps we can adapt Merleau-Ponty's characterization of language and thought to music, where music would operate as a "second flesh." "It is as though the audibility that animates the world of music were to emigrate, not outside of every body, but into another less heavy, more transparent body, as though it were to change flesh, abandoning the flesh of the sensible body for that of music."

¹² Using 'resonance' as a way to describe the quality of such a situation is more than fortuitous. It is a word that derives its metaphorical significance from a literal musical one, conveying something of the intangible yet pervasive being of music.