

**Running the Gamut:
Music, the Aesthetic, and Wittgenstein's Ladder**

Lawrence Kramer
Fordham University

Ludwig Wittgenstein's thinking about musical aesthetics (a small but persistent strain in his writings) focused primarily on questions of demonstration and proper performance: how should this waltz or march sound? These emphases were part of a modernist-inspired effort to move aesthetics down from the heights of Kantian contemplation onto the plain of quotidian practice. But Wittgenstein does not so much escape Kant's formulations as he extends them. The result opens the possibility of elaborating ordinary, even banal, comments about music into complex accounts of musical meaning.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's thinking about aesthetics returned continually to the question of expression, especially in music. The topic was an on-and-off preoccupation that dovetailed with his more persistent puzzling over how we manage expression in general, whether on faces, in melodies, or in language. Sometimes he focused on expressive gestures, sometimes on expressive utterances; sometimes he dealt with forming expressive acts and sometimes with recognizing them; sometimes he asked about expression through art and sometimes about expression in response to art. This constructive equivocation was principled, not casual. It was a way of demonstrating that there is no clear difference between the terms in any of these pairings—terms that needed to be dealt with demonstratively because they were above all demonstrative themselves. For Wittgenstein, both early and late, expression in all its venues occurs as the excess of showing over telling. It always either makes a demonstration or demands one or both.

It will be useful to begin with a few samples:

We think we have to talk about aesthetic judgments like “This is beautiful,” but we find that . . . we don't use these words at all. (LA 11) . . . In music [we say]: “Does this harmonize? No. The bass is not quite loud enough. I just want something different. . . .” (LA 7)

If you ask me (Fragst du): How did I experience the theme? – perhaps I will say “As a question” (Als Frage), or the like, or I will whistle it with expression, etc. (CV 51, my trans.)

A theme has no less an expressive countenance (Gesichtsausdruck) than a face (Gesicht).

“The repeat is *necessary*.” In what respect is it necessary? Just sing it, and you’ll see that only the repeat gives it its tremendous power. (CV 52, my trans.)

I have a theme repeated to me and each time played in a slower tempo. Finally I say “Now it’s right,” or “Now at last it’s a march” or “Now at last it’s a dance.” (PI 206)

Consider also the expression: “Tell yourself it’s a *waltz*, and you will play it correctly.” (Brown Book)¹

This interest in the demonstrative has recently been revived by the literary theorist Charles Altieri in his Wittgenstein-inspired essay “Tractatus Logical-Poeticus.” Altieri is primarily concerned with utterances, but what he says can apply just as well to Wittgenstein’s repertoire of gestures, and in what follows the terms “demonstratives” and “demonstrative utterances” should be understood to cover both verbal and nonverbal expressions. “The fundamental demonstrative claim,” writes Altieri, “is that I am showing you how I do something so that you can do it, or appreciate it, or at least understand its motivation.” He goes on to give a series of typical demonstrative utterances, several of which have a distinctly Wittgensteinian ring: “In English we use this expression,” “Try to perform the piece in this way,” “Try this on for size.”²

The value of demonstrating the aesthetic value of demonstration itself is to deflate the usual paraphernalia of aesthetic judgment and the associated inference of meaning. “A whole world of pain is contained in these words,” writes Wittgenstein, citing a well-worn formula; “How *can* it be contained in them?” (CV 52). The metaphor

of containment—of the pain as a kind of secret or strange treasure that the reader can find by unlocking the text like a coffer—is not so much false as it is surreptitious, a little seductive, a little mystifying. By shifting the venue of aesthetic judgment away from psychologizing and transcendentalizing descriptions toward the humble field of practice, the standard formulas of aesthetic appreciation can be made to appear as post-facto rationalizations, inevitable, perhaps, but of dubious reliability. The formulas look somewhat defensive in this light, as if they were a means of disguising the repeated experience that our pleasure in what is most expressive aesthetically tends to make us, at least immediately, stumble over what is least expressive in ourselves.

A demonstrative theory of the aesthetic diverts interest from the universalizing claims associated with terms like “the beautiful” toward the contingencies of social negotiation over what works and what doesn’t. “It is remarkable,” Wittgenstein was once heard to observe,

that in real life . . . aesthetic adjectives such as “beautiful,” “fine,” etc. play hardly any role at all. Are aesthetic adjectives used in a musical criticism? You say: “Look at this transition,” or “The passage here is incoherent.” Or you say, in a poetic criticism: “His use of images is precise.” The words you use are more akin to “right” and “correct” (as these words are used in everyday speech) than to “beautiful” or “lovely” (LA 3). . . . We don’t find these [latter] words at all, but a word used something like a gesture, accompanying a complicated activity” (LA 11).

As speech acts, the kinds of description that Wittgenstein exemplifies here are instructions. They give directions for using certain terms; although they themselves are simple, they show how to participate in certain complicated activities. Their form is that of a simple constative utterance but in function they are above all demonstrative. In the production of the aesthetic, the role of these implicit demonstratives will prove to be notably out of proportion to their modest appearance.

There is surely some truth to the demonstrative theory. The truth is a practical one that arises at the very point where aesthetic theory and aesthetic practice fail to coincide—a point, as we will see, that is partly constitutive of the aesthetic itself, at least as the aesthetic is understood on the Kantian model “as used in everyday speech.”

(Used thus because art in the conduct of ordinary life tends above all to be dealt with in Kantian terms, which have become anonymous conventional wisdom. The aesthetic in this regard is a disguised historical artifact.) As Kant was the first to point out, aesthetic judgments formally require agreement from others but cannot actually expect that agreement in practice. Wittgenstein's account suggests that agreement with the aesthetic judgments involved is only incidental. What actually matters is that we recognize the practice of aesthetic appreciation by the kind of judgments—this works, this doesn't; this is right, that isn't—that the practice employs. "A person who has a judgment doesn't mean a person who says "Marvellous!" at certain things . . . That he is an appreciator is not shown by the interjections he uses, but by the way he chooses, selects, etc" (LA 7). The medium of aesthetic participation is not exclamatory but demonstrative. Aesthetic involvement is measured not by admiration but by a show of competence.³

But this curtailment of the aesthetic stories we tell to ourselves, and about ourselves, is far from the whole story about the aesthetic. To some degree, the curtailment is itself only an aesthetic fiction, meant, at a moment of high modernism, to counter what was felt to be a dubious history of idealizing and Romantic descriptions. Beneath the apparent opposition runs a strong current of continuity with the potential to affect in substantial ways what we understand by the aesthetic. In what follows I hope to explicate that potential by drawing on Wittgenstein to develop two theses about the force of aesthetic demonstratives. The core of both theses has already come up. Both rest on the recognition that the antagonism of the demonstrative theory towards traditional, normative, ultimately Kantian aesthetics is primarily a matter of rhetoric and not of what Wittgenstein might have called grammar.

First thesis: the demonstrative forms a threshold or medium for the transformation of inherited modes of aesthetic response and practice. Demonstratives assimilate the elevation of the aesthetic to the mundane. In so doing they offer an equivocal invitation: to stay one step above exclamation in the minimally articulate comfort zone of the demonstrative ("Look at this transition") or to take the demonstrative itself as the basis for something out of the ordinary, or at least less ordinary. Demonstratives in one usage are a kind of shorthand, but in another they are

an incitement to further action, in particular to description, which is in turn an incitement to interpretation. The passage from one position to the other, any of the others, is absolutely continuous, and any leaps or gaps can in principle be filled in (or out).

Second thesis: in particular, the demonstrative does not represent a break with the core Kantian principles of universality and non-conceptuality in aesthetic judgment, although it appears to do so and even seeks to do so. Instead, the demonstrative embodies a reorientation of these criteria that preserves their foundational character in terms that subsume or sublimate, but never escape, Kant's own.

These theses are at bottom the same thesis viewed from different angles. The best way to approach their relationship is to take the Kantian criteria in turn.

Kant grounds aesthetic judgment not in subjective universality per se but in a certain fiction of it that the act of aesthetic judgment perpetuates: “[If one calls an] object beautiful, one believes oneself to have a universal voice, and lays claim to the consent of everyone”—but without actually expecting any proof of that consent. “The judgment . . . does not itself *postulate* the accord of everyone . . . [but] only *ascribes* this agreement to everyone, as a case of the rule with regard to which it expects confirmation not from concepts, but only from the consent of others. The universal voice is thus only an idea.”⁴

The Wittgensteinian demonstrative apparently declines the idea of the universal voice. Kant's scenario involves a sense of the consent of others that does not require the presence or participation of others. Wittgenstein replaces this with a scene of communicative action, a coming to agreement between a speaker and an interlocutor. (The speaker and interlocutor may in some cases be the same person, but the distribution of roles remains in force.) The result is certainly a difference in emphasis, even in ideology (loosely understood), but it is not a fundamental difference. Consent is still the issue, and so is its purely formal role in the process: Wittgenstein's interlocutors, like Plato's, always agree where they are supposed to. The Wittgensteinian dialogue is not so much a replacement for the Kantian universal voice as a surrogate for it.

Since it is impossible to survey the everyone in the world—past, present, and future—the ideal Kantian situation is best described by saying that an aesthetic judgment formally supposes consent from anyone who happens to be my interlocutor. Anyone becomes a surrogate or deputy for everyone. The ideal Wittgensteinian situation scales this condition down by no longer demanding the assurance of universality. Instead the aesthetic judgment is best described by saying that it supposes consent from *someone* who happens to be my interlocutor. But since this act of consent is in principle repeatable—I can always demonstrate my judgment to someone *else*—this scaled-down version is not different in kind from its Kantian prototype. The assurance of universality, never literal in the first place, is not negated but distanced or displaced. The agreement of someone to whom I demonstrate an aesthetic judgment becomes, not an instance or representation of universal agreement, but a metaphor of it.

The case with conceptuality is similar. Kant begins with the down-to-earth observation that the minute you deal with objects by means of concepts, “all representation of beauty is lost.” No one can be logically compelled to find something beautiful; “Whether a garment, a house, or a flower is beautiful: no one allows himself to be talked into his judgment about that by means of any grounds or fundamental principles. One wants to submit the object to his own eyes” (101). Eventually—to make a long story short—Kant will famously propose that aesthetic judgment will be coterminous with the recognition of purposiveness without purpose, which is coterminous from another angle with the experience of pleasure “without interest.”

Wittgenstein again scales these Kantianisms down to more modest modernist size. He grounds aesthetic judgment in contingent habits of pleasure, the implicit working knowledge of how to enjoy objects or artworks. Unlike Kant, he often insists that these habits are culture-bound (“The words we call expressions of aesthetic judgment play a . . . very definite role in what we call the culture of a period. To describe their use . . . you have to describe a culture” [LA 8].) But since the enjoyment fostered by these habits is non-utilitarian, it does not leave the Kantian orbit. Instead, once again, Wittgenstein repeats Kant’s terms in a metaphorical register, in displaced or distanced form. Non-conceptual judgment “by one’s own eyes” becomes the experience of practical self-evidence, the acquisition of the obvious.

The value of this way of reorienting the aesthetic is its pragmatic candor. The aesthetic demonstrative shows what it is actually, practically like to do things without concepts and to elicit the consent of others in the process. The demonstrative thus covertly meets Kant's criteria of subjective universality and non-conceptuality while overtly denying their elevated claims. But actually and practically things rarely end with this simple reorientation. The metaphors of agreement and self-evidence, as metaphors will, give the impetus to a proliferating network of other metaphors, tropes, and discourses, as well as to further demonstratives. This impetus may be held in reserve, as mere potential, or it may be given free rein, but it will always be present in principle.

But the principle is irrepressible; it changes (to speak like Wittgenstein) the whole language game. In principle, then, the demonstrative does more than simply show; it enjoins. In principle the demonstrative may become the descriptive may become the interpretive. The effects of aesthetic judgment run the gamut. (By what means we will soon examine.)

As a result, the universal—displaced, distanced—becomes the singular. The non-conceptual—distanced, displaced—becomes the cognitive. So the principle of the aesthetic, as received both from Kant and from Wittgenstein, must be recast again, and further: not only that the aesthetic qua universal and non-conceptual becomes the aesthetic qua singular and cognitive, but that this becoming is continually repeated within the vicissitudes of aesthetic judgment. The aesthetic is *that which* becomes singular and cognitive by means, and only by means, of originary demonstratives that are neither singular nor cognitive.

The consequences are perhaps surprising. They take the form of another process, another layer, of distancing and displacement. The elaboration of the originary aesthetic judgment (primitively, "this is beautiful"; more often, as Wittgenstein claims, "it's better *this way*") makes accessible the singularity housed in the object of judgment. Aesthetic judgments, as already noted, are in principle repeatable and hence non-unique; they often begin, and sometimes end, with banalities. But the aim of these judgments, and the demonstratives that carry them, is to link a *general* mode of pleasure to a *single*—not a specific, but a single—object. To take the famous Kantian example, any or every rose may provoke the judgment "this is beautiful," but the rose that interests me

is always *this* rose. The elaboration of the demonstrative makes possible the comprehension of the singularity of the singular. It reveals, retrospectively and retroactively, how the force of the singular penetrates even the minimal gestures and clichés (“What a beautiful rose!”) that initially conceal the singular in the act of recognizing it.⁵

In the long run, this recognition brings about a still further recasting of aesthetic judgment as a *reversal* of consensus. This is again a matter of transferred, not abolished, value. What is at stake is not a simple denial, but a distanced and displaced form of agreement that no longer needs to agree. Wittgenstein describes this in a passage with distinct Kantian overtones:

I give someone an explanation, tell him “It’s like when . . .”; then he says “Yes, now I understand” or “Yes, now I know how it’s to be played.” Above all he did not at all have to *accept* the explanation; it’s not as though I had, as it were, given him conclusive reasons for why this passage is comparable to this or that (*dem und dem*). (CV 69, my trans.)

This phenomenon of present but deferred agreement, or what we might adapt Kant to call consentingness without consent, may find a later resonance in Derrida’s classic description of what he called *différance*. Understood in communal terms, however—terms more or less mandated by the rooted role of consent in the aesthetic situation—the aesthetic reversal of consensus is a form of sharing or partaking. It exemplifies the attainment of commonality by division (as by breaking bread), that Jean-Luc Nancy untranslatably calls *partage*. In this relationship there is no need of any agreement except the agreement to partake.⁶

Partaking, moreover, implies a kind of common ownership or appropriation, and the opening into such “ownness” is another outcome of the elaboration of the demonstrative. At root this is a physical, or more exactly a corporeal, phenomenon, as we will see in an autobiographical narrative by Oliver Sacks that emerges as the final form of the test case taken up below. The agreement to partake, it will appear, is symbolized, or perhaps more accurately, incarnated, in the presence of a whole, specifically a healed, body.

First, however, we need to return to the question of means. I have been speaking freely of the “elaboration” of the demonstrative. What does that mean? And how should it be—demonstrated?

In drawing attention to the value of aesthetic demonstratives, Wittgenstein makes an important error, an error of practicality that is ironic given his concern with practical circumstances. I am thinking specifically of his musical examples, perhaps his favorite kind in this context, because he assumes both that music is non-conceptual and that a certain classical music (to which he as a scion of Viennese high culture is the heir) is the assured object of universal aesthetic agreement. Neither assumption is tenable, but that is a part of their interest, since the *apparent* non-conceptuality of music, which is a persistent element in music’s cultural construction, tends to promote a particularly vigorous form of demand for universal agreement (people who enjoy the same music form an immediate bond). So the best case for examining these questions would be a musical case.

Wittgenstein’s cases, however, are, to put it bluntly, just not musical enough. If, for example, it’s a question of playing, say on the piano, one isn’t likely to say simply “Play it like this,” or “The bass isn’t loud enough,” but something like this: “Don’t accent the cadences too strongly,” or “Bring out the high E^bs a little more,” or “Try to make the arpeggios more delicate. Make them weightless—use a very light touch and don’t over-pedal,” or even, “It’s smoother if you finger it 1-5-2-1.” These directives are a way of distributing attention, which, inevitably, becomes a way of establishing meaning.

When it comes to listening, the operative statement is likely to favor evocative over technical description, although as my “practical” playing instructions already demonstrate, the technical and the evocative regularly tend to blur together. In these situations a great deal depends on whether the description registers a general impression or a specific observation.

Take the general first. Loosely evocative statements are usually sufficient to cover general impressions, but their looseness is not free or unlimited. Wittgenstein’s “Tell yourself it’s a waltz” is an unlikely directive except for music that may not sound like a waltz, for example, the 5/4 second movement of Tchaikovsky’s *Pathétique* Symphony. With a waltz recognized as such—that is, with most waltzes—a directive

such as “Tell yourself the waltz is droopy” (or melancholy, or ironic) is more likely to come into play and inform what the listener hears (is able to hear, primed to hear). The standard lore that accumulates around classical composers and popular musicians consists primarily of such directives, which establish what one might call listening posts. These are frames of reference within which the non-verbal medium of music becomes compatible with (but not covered or exhausted by) the norms of verbal intelligibility that set the standards for intelligibility in general. One expectation commonly held of music is that it should exceed the verbal, but this can happen only when the occupation of a listening post makes a certain verbal framework available to be exceeded.

More specific observations move in a more complex and singular direction. One might, for example, say, or, more likely, write: “Listen to the way that the sound of the English horn, in the folk-like Largo melody of the slow movement of Dvorak’s *New World Symphony*, seems to maintain an acoustically piercing presence in the more dramatic second theme, where the oboes sound in unison with the flutes.” I’ve tried to make this instruction as descriptively neutral as possible, but heeding it (even if one deletes my “more dramatic”) postulates a complex mode of partaking. To hear on these terms is to assume both that a connection between the themes is important and that the medium of this connection is a timbral association that, though certainly perceptible, is indirect, almost subliminal. These assumptions then lead off further in the direction of a layered sensorium hovering somewhere between the music as acoustic presence and the music as melodic articulation.

Consider now, with this chain of demonstratives in mind, the opening of a particular classical work, Mendelssohn’s *Violin Concerto in E Minor*. The choice, as we will later see, is not entirely arbitrary. We might imagine someone introducing this music by saying something like, “It’s full of impassioned lyricism.” This is in fact the sort of general-observation statement often made about the concerto. It would be useful at this point to listen to the music, even if only as a ten or fifteen second excerpt on Amazon.com.

Now imagine someone who has absorbed the general demonstrative about impassioned lyricism and who has reaped the reward of focused attention. Imagine a dialogue between this listener and an interlocutor—or rather several: a Wittgensteinian

exchange but not limited to two voices, as it is not limited to “Play it like this” or “Tell yourself it’s a waltz.” The colloquy begins, as such colloquies often do, with a simple enough demonstrative—but one that, like the ladder famously invoked at the end of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, is thrown away after its purpose has been served.

So: a little group is talking after a concert, or perhaps after sitting together in private and listening to a recording. The talk turns to the concerto, which everyone agrees has been played well—“with expression,” as Wittgenstein would say. It goes about as follows.

Someone who listens closely—not an expert: At the beginning you could really hear the violin gleaming out.

A violinist: Yes. That’s because the soloist plays the whole passage on the violin’s E-string, the highest and most brilliant string, while the orchestral violins play on the lower strings.

Another instrumentalist: Yes; that creates a sense of separation so that the solo voice is very distinct; it has its own individual identity. I mean, it begins by claiming that identity and never relinquishes it.

Another (or the violinist again): Well, that makes me think of the premium people in Mendelssohn’s day placed on individuality—just on individuality as an ideal, not necessarily that of exceptional individuals. People were inclined—it was a new thing then—to celebrate the passions of individuals.

The second: Yes, but what’s interesting here is that this doesn’t produce a conflict between passion and restraint; the whole issue seems to be bypassed.

The original listener: Maybe that’s why the violin seems to be free and without any feeling of anxiety. That brings us back to impassioned lyricism.

Either of the others: Could be. But the violin’s freedom is a freedom within limits, just as the individual was supposed to be free within limits—enterprising, innovative, but not radical. The thing is that the soloist doesn’t seem to chafe at the limits.

And so on.

Meaning in this imaginary colloquy is not located in any one place. Instead it is distributed across the whole colloquy and also, like the listener’s attention, across the music—and not just the music as heard in the moment under discussion, but also as

scored, performed later or in the future, remembered, recorded, broadcast, cited, excerpted, and so on. Access to the whole network of judgments, descriptions, and meanings is possible from any point within the network.

Possible, and a little more than that: if not exactly necessary, then highly recommended. Without entry into the network sparked by the demonstrative, without some degree of elaboration of the initiating judgment, the condition of aesthetic *partage* will be achieved incompletely at best, leaving its participants caught in a crude consensus without genuine partaking—precisely the condition that Wittgenstein’s imaginary dialogues often rest with.

When *partage* succeeds, on the other hand, the result is a condition of complex translatability that does not have to be executed fully to be effective. For example, the description, “You could really hear the violin gleaming out” can be understood as the implicit demonstrative, “Hear it as gleaming.” In turn, the implicit directive also proves to be a compressed prescription (or admonition, or suasion): “Tell yourself that it’s gleaming and you’ll hear it correctly.” Most of the epithets used in making aesthetic judgments (especially in the early stages of the process) are demonstratives of this type. But just insofar as this type of demonstrative is heeded it also opens up the prospect of its own obliteration. The force of the injunction, “hear it as,” dissipates as a more complex discourse unfolds—a discourse in which the bare demonstrative quickly proves inadequate. The demonstrative in this situation has to be replaced by a more complex textualization, an interpretive intervention, that no longer requires compliance or agreement, but simply partaking. What has to be shared is at least the beginning, and therefore the possibility, of this movement beyond the demonstrative. Yet at the same time it is always possible to trace the contents of such textualized statements, which represent the music or other object of aesthetic enjoyment in the dimension of the singular, back to a possible demonstrative or a possible description. The only way to get the system wrong is not to trust one’s freedom of movement within it.

This process of incremental transformation is exactly what happens in my imaginary colloquy—which is not really imaginary at all, except in its dramatic form. To be sure, the conversation about the Mendelssohn concerto was invented in order to illustrate a possibility, but if it has succeeded in doing so, it has also rendered its own

invented status irrelevant. Itself a higher-order demonstration, the illustration is not easy to distinguish either in principle or practice from a “real life” example. Its statements about the concerto are not dummies or place-holders, but genuine claims.

To prove the point, consider the Mendelssohn concerto in an unimpeachably “real life” context. This context is that of a memoir, and it will prove doubly illuminating: of the failure of trust adumbrated above and of a possible corrective. The failure in this case belongs to the author, the corrective to his readers—or to the text that exceeds the author’s grasp in the readers’ hands.

Oliver Sacks owes a peculiar debt to the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, and he has told the story many times. The most detailed account is in his book *A Leg to Stand On*. After an alpine skiing accident, Sacks discovered that he had lost all feeling in one of his legs. Perhaps this had to do with the fact that he had literally crawled down the mountainside, but in any case the feeling—or lack thereof—was very specific: it was as if the leg was dead. While he was recuperating, which proved a long and frustrating process, Sacks was given a recording of the concerto, which he listened to repeatedly, perhaps even obsessively. The results were unexpected, to say the least:

I had never been a special Mendelssohn lover, although I had always enjoyed the liveliness and exquisite lightness of his music. It was (and remains) a matter of amazement to me that this charming, trifling piece of music should have had such a profound and, as it turned out, decisive effect on me. . . I felt, with the first bars of the music, a hope and intimation that life would return to my leg. . . . I felt—how inadequate words are for feelings of this sort!—I felt, in those first heavenly bars of music, as if the animating and creative principle of the whole world was revealed, that life itself was music, or consubstantial with music; that our living moving flesh, itself, was "solid" music.⁷

Sacks’s impression became therapeutic when after many hearings (“Every playing was a refreshment and renewal of my spirit. Every playing seemed to open new vistas” [119]) and many exhausting bouts of physical therapy, the dead leg abruptly came to life, almost as if it were dancing, of its own will, to the music of the concerto, which was also in some seemingly indescribable sense its own music: “Mendelssohn *fortissimo!* Joy, life, intoxicating movement!” (144).

Sacks's account is most valuable, perhaps, for extending the performative network of aesthetic judgment. It shows—demonstrates—that the object of judgment, here the music, is not only the occasion of a demonstrative act but can also itself act as a demonstrative. For the injured Sacks, the Mendelssohn concerto eventually became a direct utterance saying, “Feel your leg as alive,” “Feel your leg as music,” “Feel your leg as me!” Musical rhythm and the impression of musical movement became physical rhythm and the potential of bodily movement. In so doing, a certain corporeality revealed itself epiphanically. Sacks feels this in the idea that the flesh is solid music, but it is equally possible to feel it in the idea that music shares the solidity of the flesh, for all that it seems bodiless in its own right. The soaring of the opening measures on the E-string of the solo violin seems like a natural vehicle, a natural embodiment, for that perception.

But Sacks does not have that perception. What he has instead is the sense of a perplexing gap between the music and its effect on him. In part perhaps that gap is installed in his text by the text's therapeutic or even redemptive genre. Sacks wants to present what happened to him as a kind of miracle, and so the causes of his healing may not be found within the music that healed him, but in some mysterious X that was superadded to it. But in part the gap is there because Sacks does not trust his own ears, or, more exactly, because he invokes the standard cliché about the inadequacy of words in order to avoid the demand that trusting his ears would impose, the demand, that is, to give an account of what he heard. Hence he remains stuck in a listening post that insulates him from the very music that has touched him so closely. The epithets he uses, “charming” and “trifling,” are not only inconsistent with his perception of the music as the principle of “Joy, life, intoxicating movement!” but also a poor description of the music itself. Sacks's descriptions are guilty, disguised demonstratives beyond which he is unable or unwilling to go.

Yet here the principle of translatability steps in (I use the term pointedly) in a big way. Sacks may be halted, as are the participants in Wittgenstein's imaginary dialogues, in a state of mute consensus and conceptual refusal. But Sacks's text is not. It has already gone where he refuses to follow it. We can get there with a hop, skip, and a jump.

Sacks typically avoids dealing with religious questions, although he has an avowed affection for his own Jewish heritage, so it is all the more impressive that his account of the ideas sparked in him by the Mendelssohn concerto are explicitly sacramental. When he speaks of the “heavenly bars of music” he is simply invoking a cliché, but the dead metaphor involved comes back to life as remarkably and as decisively as Sacks’s leg did. Recall the subsequent elaboration: Sacks felt, he says, “as if the animating and creative principle of the whole world was revealed, that life itself was music, or consubstantial with music; that our living moving flesh, itself, was “solid” music.”

Sacks may or may not be alluding here to a mystical-theological tradition, with ancient roots, that identifies the creative Logos with the music of the heavenly spheres. But he is most certainly alluding, even perhaps without meaning to, to the mystery of the Incarnation, as the presence of the term “consubstantial” declares: the living, moving flesh makes the creative principle of life present in the form of a sacrament, just as the living, moving flesh of Christ was God incarnate and, through the miracle of con- or transubstantiation, the sacramental means of finding union with the divine. That the passage from incarnation to sacrament came through suffering, death, and resurrection, a mortification of the flesh parallel to that suffered by Sack’s leg, gives the music a yet more singular quality in Sacks’s apprehension of it. The “joy, life, intoxicating movement!” he hears in the Mendelssohn makes the concerto, and especially its beginning, into his own private “Et resurrexit.”

Sacks’s elaborations may bring us, by way of conclusion, back to Wittgenstein’s occasional observations that aesthetic practices are culture-bound. The point seems obvious nowadays, when referring aesthetic matters to their cultural contexts has become so normative that merely making the point no longer carries much weight. But it was not always so, and even now is not always remembered. Sacks in particular understands perfectly well that both the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto and the ability to enjoy it are specific cultural artifacts. But insofar as they represent the experience of art as art his text endows them with a status as universal as Kant could have wished: from the animating principle of the world, which includes everyone, to the living body, which everyone living has.

These universals, however, are themselves culture-specific tropes, and their significance as such lies not in their content alone, but in the way they are invoked. Sacks derives them from banalities, clumsy descriptions verging on exclamations, which become the means of demonstrating his “amazement” at the music’s healing power. His elaborations are secreted away in these forms of speech, the small change of demonstrative engagement (“Tell yourself it’s *trifling* and you’ll hear it correctly”). But they are thus sent into exile on the implicit understanding that these awkward, inadequate gestures will sooner or later return, at least by some indirect route, in more elevated form. Sacks’s text makes that return especially transparent, even while clearly remaining anxious about it. But what the text demonstrates (another higher-order instance) is that the aesthetic, as a cultural formation, is, precisely, that which is bound to the elevated by means of the banal. The aesthetic both helps to constitute the sense of banality, or, more kindly, of inarticulate amazement, and helps to free us from it. Or at least it has done so since the mid-eighteenth century, when the concept of the aesthetic emerged in response to the cultivation of just this combination of fumbling speech and freedom of the imagination. For Wittgenstein, that still essentially Kantian freedom remained largely unspoken, one of those many things one could show but not say. For Sacks, the freedom is, strangely but truly, *constrained* to become articulate.

With Sacks, and not just with him, the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto kicks over Wittgenstein’s ladder and runs the gamut.

¹ Texts by Wittgenstein: *Culture and Value* ed. G. H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), hereafter CV; *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), hereafter LA; *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the “Philosophical Investigations,”* ed. Rush Rhees (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd edn., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), hereafter PI.

² “Tractatus Logico-Poeticus,” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2007): 527-42, at 531.

³ Wittgenstein does, however, allow a very Kantian exception to this rule: “When we talk of a Symphony of Beethoven we don’t talk of correctness. Entirely different things enter. One wouldn’t talk of appreciating the *tremendous* things in Art. . . . [I]n the case of a Gothic cathedral what we do is not at all to find it correct—it plays an entirely

different role with us” (LA 7-8; the instance of the cathedral probably derives from Goethe). The exception, in short, is the sublime, which Wittgenstein tacitly seems to identify with the exceptional as such and accordingly to leave out of consideration most of the time. The exception immediately raises the question, which I can only note, not pursue, here, of whether the sublime properly belongs to the discourse of the aesthetic at all.

⁴ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 200), trans. Book 1, Section 1, Paragraph 8, p. 101.

⁵ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 100, notes the singularity of aesthetic judgment “in regard to logical quality.” Thus “the judgment that arises from the comparison of many singular ones, that roses in general are beautiful, is no longer pronounced as a merely aesthetic judgment, but as an aesthetically grounded logical judgment.” My interest here is more in an ontological than in a logical mode of singularity, but the topic is obviously impossible to pursue in this space, so I am content to let the term retain a certain deliberate indeterminacy.

⁶ See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 197-204.

⁷ Oliver Sacks, *A Leg To Stand On* (New York: Summit, 1984), 119.