What makes Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet what it is?
An unexpected meeting between Aristotle and Schumann

Research Objectives
Dr John MacAuslan applies philosophical theories to music to better our understanding of how we think about it.

References

Personal Response
Has this research changed the way you listen to music?

A philosophy claiming to enhance musical appreciation sounds dodgy to me! But – to give a personal response – being steeped in Aristotle is like having your sinuses cleared: everything is more vivid, lively and interconnected. It’s as though the world’s springs flowed freely between otherwise blocked-off compartments – one of which is music. Feeling how music interpenetrates a living world, and lives itself, brings out the union of its utterly physical nature – the scraping of gut, for instance – with something in a quite different dimension, its intense inner personal significance; and it makes the transience of each work as performed something achingly precious.
What makes Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet what it is?

**An unexpected meeting between Aristotle and Schumann**

What makes a great work of music what it is? What integrates a given piece as one coherent whole? It may help to stop and ask what makes any given thing essentially itself. Fortunately, Aristotle can help us understand this question and its surprising ramifications. No less surprising are the parallels between Aristotle’s ideas and what Robert Schumann says about the essence of music. John MacAuslan’s research explains this search for a thing’s essence and how philosophy can help us gain further understanding of our thinking about music.

**Music uplifts the soul, enchant the imagination and stir our emotions.** Famous pieces of music have been celebrated for years and their quality discussed. But what makes a piece of music what it is? What makes it?

When Schumann, the composer, pianist and critic, explores what makes a great work of music what it is, he uses certain terms and ideas. Dr. John MacAuslan highlights how similar these terms are to those Aristotle uses to define what living human beings are. Aristotle’s approach, which MacAuslan describes as ‘complex, subtle, ambitious and modest’ aims to clarify what we do when we make apparently simple statements such as ‘That’s a chair’. What Aristotle asks, makes the chair a chair? Rather than a few pieces of wood, for Aristotle, three tasks should dovetail. If you can define what a chair is, you’ll also have explained why those bits of wood belong together, and why the chair is one thing, not a jumble of properties, and you’ll have implicitly placed it in conceptual structures we use for instance, a chair—a piece of domestic furniture—an artefact—a physical object.

Surprisingly, these three achievements come, if at all, as one package. To create this single package, the definition of what a chair essentially is must lie in a different dimension from the bits of wood that constitute it—as does a tune from the sounds that constitute it and must be irreducible to them. Only so can it be as coherent and powerful as is required to define a chair, and to explain why all the materials are needed in such an arrangement, and why a chair is one thing, and has such-and-such properties. Those requirements, Aristotle argues, are unavoidable if we are to think coherently, and though things would be what they are regardless of our defining and explaining that way, we could not see things any other way.

THE MAGIC IN THE MUSIC

MOZART’S CLARINET QUINTET

Aristotle’s requirements can be aptly applied to music too—to understanding what makes a great work what it essentially is, and one work.

Take the Quintet. What it essentially is as music is not given by, for instance, labels like ‘K581’ or a piece that makes me cry; nor by the work’s history, economics or social-cultural role. Such aspects may contribute to what makes the work itself, but in this context are subsidiary. Nor is it enough to show that the Quintet has the same features as other Mozart works written in what is called sonata form. That would be like explaining what a human is by saying that a human has a spine and a head, and fish that too.

For MacAuslan, adapting Aristotle, what makes the Quintet what it is, is its own coherent aesthetic nature. He takes that as lying in a different dimension from the myriad musical features that constitute the Quintet; only so can it pull off these three interdependent achievements. Schumann too looked for something, which he called ‘Geist’, in a different dimension from the technical analyses he gave: he often used a poetic metaphor, image or scenario. But these easily lose touch with analysis. We can instead cap analytical descriptions of the work’s features with closely related aesthetic terms—like ‘instinct’, ‘inspiration’, ‘lyric’, ‘turbid’, ‘flowing’, ‘eternal’, ‘familiar’, ‘unfathomable’, ‘unpredictable’, ‘the most beautiful and terrible’. Schumann used ‘expression’, ‘impulse’ and many others. These are neither analytical descriptions nor emotional or imaginative, but benefit from transparent relations to both. They may function together as such in a particular aesthetic nature: our task is then to give a coherent account of that. The accompanying podcast https://researchoutreach.org/arts-humanities/what-makes-mozarts-clarinet-quintet-what-it-is illustrates this for the Quintet.

**INSTINCT INTO SCIENCE**

But Schumann never quite said what makes a work of music what it is. Nor had he. MacAuslan’s notes, did Aristotle try seriously to pin down what being a human is? Perhaps in his day, scientific knowledge and theories were too immature; anyway, his purpose here was to illustrate the structure of our thought, and for that even a dummy definition sufficed. He explored how we can start from a pre-theoretical sense, rooted in observation and experience, of what something essentially is. That can be enough to guide initial explanations of why it’s one thing and the thing is, getting as close as possible to what it is. It is set on a long march towards more fully articulated scientific theory.

A similar process in music has led to developing and applying aspects of music theory, and still could. Musical works may be, as was commonly held in Schumann’s day, indefinable; but even so we needn’t stop with the power of the music we work on without wondering how. Aristotle’s approach, and the greater the essentially early 19th century critic, E. T. A. Hoffmann, in effect used a similarly broad sense in speaking of ‘a powerful indefinable sense of inspiration, awe, foreboding’ as what pervades Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony and informs the multifarious technical features he analyses. To illustrate the process in music, MacAuslan draws on Aristotle, and his successor of six centuries later, Plotinus. An initially untheorised sense of the work’s nature, rooted in playing, listening and experience, may act like an unseen magnet. Its field orients the otherwise incoherent iron filings of our experience of the music; picking out particular musical features to represent the work as a whole, it shapes how we begin to describe and relate them, and eventually to theorise them. Or to change the metaphor, think of a vanishing point, a work’s aesthetic nature, whether felt or theorised, explains and connects its musical features. Alternatively, from these features, as explained and connected, a point on which they converge, however notional, can be extrapolated. Musicologists can explore how such perspective or field lines, diverging or radiating from an unseen point, govern and explain the otherwise incoherent and their coherence, and guarantee the work’s unity, or can work back along those lines towards features, so described and related, converging on a coherent account of an aesthetic nature, or both together.

So in an Aristotelian approach, an aesthetic nature can capture what it is to be a particular work, explaining its nature, coherence and properties, and relating it in conceptual and theoretical structures. And it can do so even while a definitive formulation necessarily remains beyond our grasp.