Vasili Kandinsky’s brief essay “Art without Subject,” first published in Swedish in 1916 in the periodical Konst, tells of a recital given by an imaginary string quartet. ( Conjuring up in the mind of the reader some imagined scene or event is a literary device Kandinsky used repeatedly, often to great effect. For example, in Über das Geistige in der Kunst, his most important theoretical text of the period before 1914, he describes a throng of visitors going round an exhibition “with their noses in the catalogue,” reading the names of the artists and the titles of the pictures – visitors who then leave “just as rich or poor as when they came in.”) The uncomprehending listener sits patiently while four players “with serious faces” draw various sounds from their instruments, only to stop as suddenly as they had started. To his astonishment, they offer no explanation for the seemingly random sounds that have just been produced. In bed that night, tossing and turning, he gives vent to his frustration: “Could they even play together properly? It could be interpreted any way you liked! What did they want to say? And what was the subject of what they played? Love? Sorrow? Happiness? Despair? Hope? This is illogical! Arbitrary! In this manner you can continue to play indefinitely or stop at will. Without beginning! Without end! Such music even I can make! Ha!”

The published Swedish version of “Art without Subject” was preceded by an explanatory note, written by the periodical’s editor, telling his readers that he had received “from the distinguished Slavic artist Kandinsky . . . the following spirited statement about his art, which has been fiercely debated abroad.” But in fact, Kandinsky says not a word about his own art, nor does

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he mention painting at all. His article is concerned exclusively with music, the emphasis being upon the apparent meaninglessness of music when unaccompanied by any verbal element. If his remarks are relevant to other forms of art, it is left to us to decide what that relevance might be.

If this were an isolated instance of Kandinsky writing at some length about music, we might be tempted to dismiss his essay on "objectless" art as a fit of aberration. But that is not the case: apart from repeated allusions to painting and to the "spiritual" aims of art generally, few other topics occur as frequently in his early writings or occupy as much space as does music. We also know that Kandinsky was a competent (though scarcely expert) cellist, that he was on friendly terms with the composers Arnold Schönberg and Thomas von Hartmann, and that he took a close interest in musical matters. How close is shown by the draft table of contents for the almanac Der Blaue Reiter of 1912, which was meant to include no fewer than eight articles or essays about different aspects of music, compared with only six on painting. 4 Although this imbalance was redressed in the almanac as eventually published, the volume still contained a considerable quantity of musical material, including an appendix in which short compositions by Schönberg and his two most notable pupils, Alban Berg and Anton von Webern, were reproduced in facsimile.

Why was music of such importance to Kandinsky? Why did he and his fellow editor Franz Marc allocate so much space to it in Der Blaue Reiter? And why, in particular, do musical topics occupy such a prominent place in his early writings – not only his published writings, but also his hitherto unpublished fragments, notes, and jottings?

As an artist Kandinsky was not, of course, unique, as regards his musical interests and inclinations. Among his contemporaries, that fine musician Paul Klee showed just as intense a preoccupation with musical themes and concepts both in his writings and teachings and in his pictorial work. 5 Many nineteenth-century painters also devoted considerable attention to music, among them Paul Gauguin and Paul Signac; in his manuscript notes and in the published version of Über das Geistige, Kandinsky refers specifically to both artists. Some of his own observations about music have a distinctly "Romantic" – that is, nineteenth-century – flavor, as when he describes music as "the resounding soul of nature," a remark that echoes the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer's view of music as the form of art best suited to revealing

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