PLATONISM IN MUSIC:
A KIND OF DEFENSE

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The title of my paper is meant to suggest two things, obviously: that I offer here a defense of what I shall be calling musical "Platonism," and that I offer it in a far from confident tone. I have two reasons for wanting to defend it: first, because it offers a way to understand the relationship between musical works and their performances that, I believe, captures a great many of our intuitions and musical façons de parler; and, second, because I think some of the objections brought against the doctrine — those, in particular, that claim it is musically or aesthetically counterintuitive and contrary to the way we want to speak about music — are answerable. That I am neither confident, nor altogether happy in defending this Platonism is because, like any other well-brought-up student of philosophy, at least in the Anglo-American tradition, I have a healthy skepticism with regard to Platonic metaphysics, and the multiplying of entities (particularly problematical ones) beyond need.

I should also say, at the outset, that I have no intention whatever of presenting any arguments in favor of Platonism in music; I shall confine myself solely to defending it against some objections, and assume that my readers know the arguments in its favor, and the details of the position, in its various forms. As a result, I shall be keeping the concept of musical Platonism, for the purposes of this paper, open, and distressingly ill-defined. I shall not, for instance, try to distinguish among such candidates for Platonic realism as universals, kinds, and types (assuming one wants to construe types Platonicistically at all). The critics that I will be considering will always make it clear which form of the doctrine they are belaboring; and I leave it to the reader to determine what other of its forms the objection in question might touch.

In the first section of my paper I will be considering what I take to
be three of the most important "traditional" objections to musical Platonism, in the second section two of the newer ones. (None of them, actually, is all that old.) That the "traditional" objections keep cropping up in the literature shows, I think, that they are far from impotent with age, and still deserve an answer. That new objections continue to arise certainly is an indication, if any were needed, of how problematical Platonism of any kind will always be.

I.

(1) Let me begin with a criticism that has been advanced by, among others, Joseph Margolis, in Art and Philosophy. Margolis claims that a work of art "cannot be a universal because [in part] ... it possesses physical and perceptual properties."¹ And with regard specifically to music, and to Nicholas Wolterstorff's claim that musical works are "kinds," he says later on, "The essential difficulty with Wolterstorff's proposal is that we wish to say that we hear the music..., that the music sounds sweet...; in short, we wish to attribute certain properties to the work itself and, on Wolterstorff's view, we literally cannot," because, Margolis urges, we cannot hear a kind nor can a kind (therefore) sound sweet.²

The obvious response to this is that to say "I hear the music" may be taken as short for, "I hear a performance of the music"; that, in other words, the performance might be the bearer of the properties that, Margolis insists, a universal or kind cannot be the bearer of. I mean here, of course, the performance taken to be the sound-occurrence, not the act of producing it, both of which can correctly be referred to in ordinary usage as the "performance."

The initial difficulty with this response is that there do seem to be properties of works that are heard properties of them, and cannot just be fobbed off on their performances. The unity of the Goldberg Variations, or the passion of Haydn's Sturm und Drang symphonies,

². Ibid., p. 75. See, Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Toward an Ontology of Art Works," Nous, 9 (1975), and his more recent Works and Worlds of Art, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1980, of which more presently. Margolis is criticizing the earlier view; but the criticism can be directed with equal force at the later version.