# Distinguishing Between the Objective Reality of Music and Its Phenomenological Essence

**By**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the distinction between the objective reality of music and its phenomenological essence, exploring how music exists both as a measurable structure and as a lived human experience. The objective reality of music refers to its tangible, quantifiable aspects—sound waves, acoustic properties, mathematical structures, instrumentation, and universally recognizable elements—existing independently of personal perception. Drawing from the works of Ahanotu (2001), Copland (2002), Kamien (2022), and others, the paper outlines music's fundamental elements (melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre, and form) and its various functions across emotional expression, communication, cultural identity, entertainment, and therapy. In contrast, the phenomenological essence of music—rooted in philosophical traditions of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty—centres on the subjective, embodied, and temporal experience of music. It is concerned with how music is perceived, felt, and interpreted in consciousness, shaped by intentionality, embodiment, inter-subjectivity, worldhood, and temporality. This perspective emphasizes music as a meaningful temporal flow that engages emotion, memory, and physical sensation, creating a unique resonance with human existence. The study demonstrates that while the objective reality of music is grounded in universal and scientific principles, its phenomenological essence captures the ineffable, personal significance music holds for individuals and communities. By integrating both perspectives, the paper argues for a holistic understanding of music that recognizes its dual nature—as an organized, measurable art form and as an immersive, lived experience embedded in cultural and existential contexts. Ultimately, the distinction underscores that music's deepest impact lies not merely in its

structural composition but in the transformative experiences it generates, making it both a universal and profoundly personal human phenomenon.

**Keywords**: Distinction, Objective, Reality, Phenomenological, Essence.

## Introduction

Music, as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, can be understood and appreciated in various ways. Music can be either a deeply personal experience or a shared cultural expression. It is an art of organizing sound in a regular manner to express ideas and emotions in significant forms through the elements of rhythm, melody, harmony, and tone colour incorporated therein. It is an organised sound that is pleasant to the listening ears unlike noise, which is both acoustically unorganised and unpleasant. It encompasses the composers strong feelings expressed through a vocal or an instrumental medium with acoustic effect perceived, understood and responded to by the listeners or recipients. Music as an art and science involves organised sound. "With emphasis on organized, it means that sheer noise cannot pass for music (Ahanotu, 2001:1).

This paper however, looks at music beyond its objective reality. The pressing crux of the matter that follow suit are: What do we mean by objectivity, reality, and of course, objective reality of music? Next, what does phenomenology of music and its phenomenological essence imply?

An overview of the aforementioned constitute a stepping stone to the disparity between the objective reality of music and its phenomenological essence.

## The Basic Elements of Music

According to Copland (2002) and Kamien (2022), the integral facets of music are as itemised:

i) Melody: This involves notes sequentially arranged and perceived as a single, cohesive entity. It is often the most recognizable part of a piece of music.

ii) Harmony: The combination of different musical notes played or sung simultaneously. Their chords in progression add depth and context to the melody.

iii) Rhythm: The pattern of beats (or timing) within a piece of music, which gives music its structure and movement. Rhythm is often driven by elements like tempo, meter, and syncopation.

iv) Timbre: (also known as "tone-colour") This characteristic quality of sound distinguishes different instruments or voices, even when they play the same pitch.

v) Form: This is the structure of a piece of music, which identifies its organization and development over time.

**Some Paradigmatic Functions of Music**

Music plays many a role. These roles are aptly captured by Southern (1983), Stige, Ansdell, Elefant and Pavlicevic (2010), Pritchard (2015) and Horden (2016) which includes:

A. Emotional Expression: Music often serves as a vehicle for conveying and evoking emotions ranging from joy and excitement to sorrow and introspection.

B. Communication: Across cultures, music has been used as a means of communication, whether through its lyrics, semiotics, or even in form of coded messages.

C. Cultural Identity: Music is a vital part of cultural heritage as it helps to define and express the identity of communities and nations. It often plays a role in rituals, celebrations, and social gatherings.

D. Entertainment and Art: Music is a primary source of entertainment and a highly developed form of artistic expression. It does so by offering pleasure, inspiration, and intellectual engagement.

E. Therapy and Well-being: Music therapy is an established field of study where music is used to promote emotional health, manage stress, and improve cognitive function.

**Genres of Music**

Music encompasses diverse genres and styles, each with its own characteristics and history. Examples include classical art music, jazz, rock, pop, hip-hop, electrically generated sound, folk, among many others.

**Musical Experience**

The experience acquired from music is deeply personal and subjective. It can be influenced by such factors as individual taste, cultural background, the context in which the music is heard, and the listener's current emotional state. To some, music is a source of profound spiritual experience; for others, it may be a means of social connection or a tool for intellectual exploration.In essence, music is both a universal artistic language and an individual experience, connecting people across time and space while also resonating uniquely with each listener.

Objective:The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'objective' as "the judgement of a person not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing facts".

Its synonyms include: impartial, unbiased, unprejudiced, non-partisan, non-discriminatory, equitable, fair, fair-minded, just, open- minded, and dispassionate.

Reality: Similarly, the Oxford English Dictionary defines reality as "the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them". The state or quality of having existence or substance. To this end, "objective reality" therefore refers to anything that naturally exists independent of any personal or general awareness of it (via perception, thought, etc.)

From the foregoing, the concept of the "objective reality of music" presupposes the idea that music possesses certain inherent, autonomous, and universal qualities

besides individual perception or socio-cultural context of its existence. This perspective is in contrast with the view that music is entirely subjective, shaped by personal experience, and cultural influences.

Limits and Evidences of the Objective Reality of Music

While the idea of an 'objective reality in music' highlights universal elements, it is equally important to recognize that much of what we experience as music is deeply subjective and culturally specific. The interpretation of music, its meaning, and value can vary dramatically among cultures and individuals. This subjectivity suggests that while there may be objective aspects of music, they are intertwined with and often overshadowed by subjective experiences.

The objective reality of music encompasses the physical, mathematical, and potentially universal aspects of music that exist independent of human perception. The full reality of music is therefore, a blend of objective elements and subjective interpretation. Understanding both aspects provides a more complete picture of what music is and how it functions across diverse contexts.

i) Acoustic Properties: Music consists of sound waves, which have measurable physical properties such as frequency (pitch), amplitude (volume), and duration (note values). These properties are objective in the sense that they can be quantified scientifically, regardless of the listener(s) and how they interpret the very piece of music.

ii) Mathematical Structure: Music is often structured according to mathematical principles. For example, musical scales, rhythms, and harmonies can be described using mathematical ratios and patterns. The relationship between the frequencies of notes in a scale or the division of time in a rhythm is governed by rules that are universally consistent, whether a listener is aware of them or not.

iii) Neuroscience and Perception: Research in neuroscience has proved beyond reasonable doubt that certain aspects of music processing are consistent across different individuals and cultures. For example, humans generally perceive

intervals like octaves similarly, and there are common patterns on how the brain processes harmony and rhythm. This suggests that some responses to music might be rooted in our biology, which invariably points to an objective basis for musical experience.

iv) Universal Emotional Responses: Certain musical elements can evoke similar emotional responses in people from different cultures. For example, a fast tempo might be associated with an excitement or agitation, while slow, sustained tones may evoke calmness or sadness. These emotional responses suggest that there could be an objective connection between musical features and emotional states.

v) Cultural Universality in Music: While music varies greatly across cultures, some elements are nearly universal. Most musical traditions have relatively similar rhythm, melody, and some form of repetitions. The existence of these common features across diverse cultures may point to an underlying objective reality on how music is created and experienced.

**Major Concepts in the Phenomenology of Music**

Phenomenology is a broader field of study within which phenomenology of music seeks to understand the experience of music as it is perceived and lived by a society as a whole or based on an individual's opinion or feeling towards music. Rooted in the philosophical traditions of people like Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology focuses on the subjects of experience and consciousness. When applied to music, this involves exploring musical encounter or knowledge, subjectively, its manifestation in consciousness, and how it is embedded in the world of human meaning.

i) Intentionality: Central to phenomenology is intentionality, which refers to the way consciousness is always directed towards something. In music, this could involve how listeners direct their attention to various aspects of a musical piece—melody, rhythm, melorhytym, diverse texture, overlapping, parallelism, harmony—or how a performer focuses on the act of music making. It also emphasizes the importance of lived experience; why music is not just an object but something that flows in time. This involves the flow of music, how it unfolds

progressively moment by moment, and how listeners or performers alike are immersed in its temporal progression. Music, in its essence, is experienced as intentional sound directed towards meaning, emotion, and expression. The listener experiences music as something purposive, whether it gears to convey emotion, tell a story, or create a particular atmosphere.

ii) Embodiment: The experience of music is often embodied, meaning it is not just heard but felt physically and emotionally. This can include how listeners might tap their feet to the rhythmic pattern, how a performer feels the instrument or its sound how music can evoke bodily sensations.

iii) Inter-subjectivity: Music often involves a shared experience, whether in a live performance, communal listening, or in the connection between composer and audience. Inter-subjectivity in music phenomenology explores how these shared experiences are constituted and collectively contribute to a general understanding of music. The way music connects people, creating shared experiences and communal understanding, is part of its phenomenological essence. This is not something that can be measured or observed objectively but is felt within the interactions and shared experiences of individual listeners.

iv) Worldhood: Phenomenology also considers how music is part of a larger "world" of meaning. This can involve cultural and historical contexts that shape the understanding of music, the social practices around music, and musical contributions towards the formation of personal and communal identities.

v) Time and Temporality: Music is inherently temporal, and phenomenology pays special attention to how time is experienced in music. This includes how one perceives the passage of time while listening, how music can alter sense of time, and how past, present, and future moments of a piece of music are intertwined in the listener's consciousness.

vi) Horizon of Experience: Each musical experience is influenced by the listener's prior knowledge, expectations, and cultural background, and this influences how we perceive and interpret

**The Phenomenological Essence of Music and Its Key Aspects**

The phenomenological essence of music refers to the fundamental qualities of music as they are experienced in consciousness, void of external or objective explanations. It involves understanding what music really is in its purest form, as it appears to a listener or performer. This essence is not about the technical components of music (such as notes, rhythms, or instruments) but rather about the experience and meaning that these elements evoke.

Phenomenological approaches to music often involve detailed, descriptive accounts of how music is experienced rather than explaining music in terms of external theories or concepts. Scholars in this field might analyze how a specific piece of music is perceived, how its structure unfolds in time, or how it creates particular moods or atmospheres (McClellan, 2002).

By focusing on the subjective experience of music, phenomenology opens up a rich field of inquiry into the ways music impacts individuals and societies, how it is felt and understood, and how it resonates with human existence on a deep level.

Embodied Experience: The essence of music making is not just for it to be heard but also to be felt. Music often evokes physical and emotional responses, such as the urge to move, dance, or react to feelings. This embodiment of experience is a crucial part of what makes music meaningful and powerful.

Expressive Quality: Musical experience expressively conveys emotions, ideas, and states of being that may be difficult to articulate in words. This expressive quality is what makes music come across, be received, vibrate, and be understood by listeners, as it taps into the non-verbal aspects of human experience.

Sense of Presence: Music often creates a strong sense of presence. Whether it is, the immersive experience of a live performance or the personal engagement with a piece of recorded music, this presence is a key aspect of its phenomenological essence. Music ushers the listener into a place where he or she is fully engaged and absorbed.

Resonance with Being: Music pragmatically affects human condition, for it touches on themes of mankind's existence, identity, socio-economic, political and cultural affairs. This resonance goes beyond the surface of sound elements and structure, by tapping into the listener (s) sense of self and place in the milieus. This existential connection is essentially a crucial part of music.

In phenomenology, the essence of music is understood not just by breaking it down into its constituent parts, but by exploring human holistic experience of music as it is lived and felt. It is about capturing the encountered musical experience in its entirety, where sound becomes more than mere auditory input — a meaningful, temporal, and emotional experience embedded in human life.

Distinguishing between the objective reality of music and its phenomenological essence involves separating the tangible, measurable aspects of music from the lived, subjective experience of it.

**Objective Reality of Music**

The objective reality of music refers to its physical and measurable aspects. These are the elements that can be analyzed, quantified, and described independently of any individual's experience.

i) Musical Structure: This includes the notes, scales, rhythms, harmonies, and other theoretical components that make up a piece of music. These elements can be notated, studied, and understood within the framework of music theory.

ii) Sound Waves: Music, in its objective form, consists of sound waves that can be measured in terms of frequency, amplitude, and duration. This is the physical reality of music as sound energy that travels through air and is detected by the ears.

iii) Instrumentation and Technology: The instruments used to produce music and the technology involved in recording or amplifying sound are also parts of music's objective reality. This includes the materials and construction of instruments, the electronic components of synthesizers, and the digital encoding of music files.

iv) Cultural and Historical Context: While culture and history influence how music is created and perceived, these contexts can also be studied objectively. For example, the historical development of musical genres, the cultural significance of certain instruments, and the role of music in society can all be analyzed from an external perspective.

**Phenomenological Essence of Music:**

In contrast, the phenomenological essence of music focuses on how music is experienced by a listener or performer. This is the subjective (human feeling and opinion), lived experience of music as it is encountered in consciousness (Sunderland *et al* 2018).

i) Subjective Experience: The phenomenological essence of music is about how it feels to listen to or perform music. This includes the emotions, memories, and associations that music evokes, which are deeply personal and vary from person to person.

ii) Temporal Flow: Unlike the objective reality, which might focus on the precise timing of notes, the phenomenological essence is concerned with how music is experienced as a flow of time. This includes the perception of rhythm, tempo, and how the unfolding of a piece creates a sense of anticipation or resolution. Music is essentially tied to its temporality. It is experienced as a passage of time, by connecting past, present, and future moments. This temporal structure brings about tension, resolution, anticipation, and memory, all of which are essential to its impact.

iii) Emotional and Expressive Content: While certain emotions might be universally recognized in music (such as a minor key being associated with sadness), the exact emotional impact is phenomenological. It depends on the individual's interpretation and personal connection to the music.

iv) Embodiment: The physical sensations and movements that music evokes, such as tapping a foot to a beat or feeling chills during a powerful passage, are part of the phenomenological essence. These experiences go beyond the sound itself and into how it is lived in the body.

**Conclusion:**

Objective Reality of Music deals with the measurable, external aspects —structure, sound waves, instrumentation, and cultural context.

Phenomenological Essence concerns the subjective, internal experience of music— how it is perceived, felt, and lived by different individuals.

Understanding this distinction helps to clarify that while music has a concrete, objective existence globally, its true significance and meaning are found in the personally lived experiences it generates. The phenomenological essence further captures the profound, often ineffable impact that music has on human consciousness, thereby making it more than just a collection of sounds but a highly resonant form of human expression.

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