

The Social Ontology of Musical Works
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Musical ontology is a subfield within the philosophy of music that is concerned with the mode of existence of musical works and their performances. The paradigmatic examples of musical works come from the Western classical music tradition from around 1700 onwards: Mozart's string quartets, Beethoven's symphonies, Brahms's concertos, and so on. The task of providing a satisfactory theoretical analysis of the musical work-concept gives rise to a number of metaphysical puzzles. Do musical works exist as Platonic entities? Or is their existence exhausted by their physical instantiations in musical scores and performances? Are musical works created or discovered? What conditions must be satisfied for some sound-event to count as a performance of a work? Why is it that only a very limited number of musical cultures in human history, primarily the tradition of Western classical music, have had an explicit work-concept? And to what extent can we call musical entities 'works' in musical traditions that lack an explicit work-concept?

In this paper I present a theory of musical works that applies Searle's social ontology to the domain of music. At the heart of my theory is a distinction between what I call *musical pieces* and *musical works*. I use the term *musical piece* to apply to a wide range of musical entities that involve some element of repeatability: from pop songs and jazz tunes at one end of the spectrum, to music from the Western classical music tradition at the other. I use the term *musical work*, on the other hand, to apply to a small subset of musical pieces at the latter end of the aforementioned spectrum, roughly corresponding to music written in the Western classical music tradition from around the mid-eighteenth century onwards. In my usage of these terms, all musical works are musical pieces, but not all musical pieces are musical works. For example, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is both a musical piece and a musical work, whereas the jazz standard 'Autumn Leaves' is a musical piece but not a musical work.

I then analyze these two terms using concepts from Searle's social ontology. I argue that musical pieces are *imperative speech acts* that provide instructions for repeatable musical performances, and that musical works are *institutional facts* – that is, status functions imposed upon musical pieces by collective intentionality, giving rise to certain rights and obligations. The primary obligation associated with the status function of musical work is the performer's obligation to aim for an ideal of perfect compliance with the composer's instructions. In addition to this primary obligation, I tentatively suggest some rights and obligations imposed on composers and listeners, although the status of these deontic powers may be more controversial. I argue that under a practice governed by the musical work-concept, composers have an obligation to write music in a manner that facilitates the performer's ideal of perfect compliance, typically by minimizing ambiguity and indeterminacy wherever possible. These closely intertwined obligations placed upon composers and performers help explain the reluctance of musicologists and critics to assign the status of 'musical work' to musical pieces that involve a very high degree of improvisation or indeterminacy in performance, such as popular music and jazz, music from non-Western traditions, and contemporary music involving an element of randomness.

I argue that my theory has a number of advantages over competing views. Traditional approaches to musical ontology can be roughly characterized as Platonist or anti-Platonist. The Platonist argues that musical piece and/or works are Platonic objects ‘instantiated’ in scores and performances; the anti-Platonist has a number of options open to him in opposing such views, but typically takes the line that a musical piece and/or work is identical to its class of compliant performances. I argue that both approaches have counterintuitive consequences that can be avoided by emphasizing the speech act dimension of musical pieces. Once we see the strong parallel between musical pieces and imperative speech acts in natural language, the temptation to ask questions about ‘existence’ is undermined. The question of whether Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony ‘exists’, and will continue to exist after the human race is wiped out, should be no more compelling than the question of whether natural language directives such as “Give me a hamburger” have similar modes of timeless existence. I also argue that neither of the two traditional paradigms of creation or discovery is entirely appropriate for describing what a composer does when he or she composes a musical piece or work. The composer should instead be seen to be *doing* something – more specifically, the composer *issues an order*; he or she *gives instructions* for performers to ‘do such-and-such’.

My approach is intended to be compatible with the strongly ‘anti-reificationist’ attitudes of many contemporary musicologists, while retaining a sense of how our musical practices are constrained and rule-governed. On the view that I am recommending, musical pieces and musical works are, first and foremost, part of a social practice of music-making; my commitment to abstract objects is minimal, if any such commitment can be detected at all. The theory also brings into sharp relief the historical and cultural contingency of the musical work-concept. The status function of ‘musical work’ in my theory is intended to be closely related to the conception of the ‘autonomous’ musical work that emerged in nineteenth-century post-Kantian Romantic aesthetics. I aim to give an account of the logical structure of this concept while remaining as neutral as possible about its cultural, social, and ethical value. Like any other institutional fact, the musical work-concept is an emergent concept, dependent upon the continued collective acceptance of composers, performers, and listeners for its sustenance; we should therefore be wary of extending its application to musical traditions in which the corresponding rights and obligations are not operative. I conclude by stressing that although some notion of the musical piece is an inevitable outgrowth of the combination of our natural capacities for making music and performing imperative speech acts, the ‘thick’, normatively loaded, and culturally hegemonic musical work-concept is the product of a particular historical moment, and could be dismantled if our practices were to change in suitable ways. If we are in agreement with those musicologists who suggest that the musical work-concept has had a deleterious effect on musical and musicological practice, then there is nothing in my theory that suggests that we cannot take steps towards its dissolution.