Text of a talk delivered at a doctoral seminar in the Royal College of Music on 9 May 2007

Effing the ineffable:

The futile quest to define the essence of music, and the implication of this for the concept of research

I will start with a disclaimer: this is not an account of a piece of research. It's rather a bringing-together of strands of thought that have been with me for many years. Three factors have brought them together for this talk. First, I am, amongst other things, a practical musician functioning as a composer and a performer, and my thoughts on the philosophy behind my title are essentially pragmatic. Secondly, at the RCM I work in a climate where the notion of "research" within a conservatoire is everywhere amongst the postgraduate population whereas twenty years or so ago the idea was much less prevalent. Thirdly, the invitation to talk at this evening's meeting has caused me to concentrate a bit more on what I think about putting musical matters into words.

The word "ineffable" is defined in OED as "unutterable, too great for words". I realize that the implications of this are in marked contrast to the somewhat frivolous title I've given this talk. However, my point is that it is in trying precisely to "eff the ineffable" that commentators of all sorts have fallen flat, leaving behind a trail of assertions unsupportable on

logical grounds and based on unprovable premisses. The commentators include composers, performers, musicologists, critics, novelists and so on.

My argument is accompanied throughout by extracts taken from writers whose words on music, or on art in general, have struck me as significant. I'll start with the earliest reference, from the letter written by Felix Mendelssohn to Marc-André Souchay in 1842 in which he outlines his well-known view on music and expression.

> **(1)** *There is so much talk about music, and so little is really said. I do not think words are at all adequate for the subject, and if I found they were, I should end by writing no more music. People usually complain that music is so ambiguous, that it leaves them in such doubt as to what they are supposed to think, whereas words can be understood by everyone. But to me it seems exactly the opposite. Not only with whole speeches, but with individual words as well – they too seem to me to be so ambiguous, so vague, so capable of misinterpretation, in comparison with real music, which fills the spirit with a thousand better things than words do. A piece of music that I love does not give me too <u>vague</u> ideas for being expressed in words, but too <u>definite</u> ones. So in every attempt to express those ideas in words I find something that is right, but always something insufficient as well, and so it is with yours too. This is not your fault, it is the fault of words, which simply cannot do any better. If you ask me what I was thinking about at the time [of composing], my answer will be – about the tune, just as it is. And if now and then a particular word or words were in my mind, I cannot repeat them to*

> *anyone, because a word does not mean the same thing to one person as to another; only the tune says the same thing, awakens the same feeling, in both – though that feeling may not be expressed in the same words….[p 170]*

Igor Stravinsky famously asserted in 1934 that "Music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all". He is quoted thus in Eric Walter White's 1966 book on the composer [p566]:

> **(2)** *Music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature etc. "Expression" has never been an inherent property of music. That is by no means the purpose of its existence. If, as is nearly always the case, music appears to express something, this is only an illusion and not a reality. It is simply an additional attribute which, by tacit and inveterate agreement, we have lent it, thrust upon it, as a label, a convention – in short, as aspect which, unconsciously or by force of habit, we have come to confuse with its essential being.*

Many years later Stravinsky amplified this statement in a conversation with Robert Craft:

> *That over-publicised bit about expression (or non-expression) was simply a way of saying that music is supra-personal and super-real and as such beyond verbal meanings and verbal descriptions. It was aimed against the notion that a piece of music is in reality a transcendental idea 'expressed in terms of music', with the "reductio ad absurdum"*

> *implication that exact sets of correlatives must exist between a composer's feelings and his notation….it did not deny musical expressivity, but only the validity of a type of verbal statement about musical expressivity. I stand by the remark, incidentally, though today I would put it the other way round: music expresses itself. [Eric Walter White, p 566]*

This view was stated a hundred years earlier in 1854 by the writer and critic Eduard Hanslick, in his book *The Beautiful in Music.* Morris Weitz, editor of the 1957 Liberal Arts Press edition, describes Hanslick as a representative of what he calls the "autonomist" school of writers on the aesthetics of music. Weitz says in his introduction:

> **(3)** *"The Beautiful in Music" deals with the major problems of musical aesthetics: the aim of music, its intrinsic nature, the relation between music and reality, and the role of the listener. Throughout, Hanslick's main objective is the refutation of the popular and still-prevalent theory that feelings or emotions are the substance of musical sounds, and that the composer expresses his affective life in his music so that the listener shares it. He denies that music is a language of the emotions or, by implication, of persons, places, things, events, or ideas. In the famous controversy between the autonomist and heteronomist views on the meaning of music, which has exercised musical and philosophical aesthetics for the last hundred years, he sides, therefore, with the autonomists."*

And from Hanslick's text, in the second chapter entitled *Does music represent feelings?,* thus:

(4) *The ideas which a composer expresses are mainly and primarily of a purely musical nature. His imagination conceives a definite and graceful melody aiming at nothing beyond itself.*

(This recalls Mendelssohn's remark: 'If you ask me what I was thinking about at the time [of composing], my answer will be – about the tune, just as it is.')
Hanslick continues:

Every concrete phenomenon suggests the class to which it belongs or some still wider conception in which the latter is included, and by continuing this process the idea of the absolute is reached at last. This is true also of musical phenomena. This melodious adagio, for instance, softly dying away, suggests the ideas of gentleness and concord in the abstract. Our imaginative faculty, ever ready to establish relations between the conceptions of art and our sentiments, may construe these softly ebbing strains of music in a still loftier sense, e.g., as the placid resignation of a mind at peace with itself; and they may rouse even a vague sense of everlasting rest.

The primary aim of poetry, sculpture, and painting is likewise to produce some concrete image. Only by way of inference can the picture of a flower girl call up the wider notion of maidenly content and modesty, the picture of a snow-covered churchyard the transitoriness of earthly existence. In like manner, but far more vaguely and capriciously, may the listener discover in a piece of music the idea of

youthful contentedness or that of transitoriness. These abstract notions, however, are by no means the subject matter of the pictures or the musical compositions, and it is still more absurd to talk as if the feelings of "transitoriness" or "youthful contentedness" could be represented by them….What part of the feelings, then, can music represent, if not the subject involved in them?

Only their dynamic properties. It may reproduce the motion accompanying psychical action, according to its momentum: speed, slowness, strength, weakness, increasing and decreasing intensity. But motion is only one of the concomitants of feeling, not the feeling itself. It is a popular fallacy to suppose that the descriptive power of music is sufficiently qualified by saying that, although incapable of representing the subject of a feeling, it may represent the feeling itself – not the object of love, but the feeling of love. In reality, however, music can do neither. It cannot reproduce the feeling of love but only the element of motion; and this may occur in any other feeling just as well as in love, and in no case is it the distinctive feature….No instrumental composition can describe the ideas of love, wrath, or fear, since there is no causal nexus between these ideas and certain combinations of sound. [Hanslick pp 23-24]

This view is stated also by Paul Hindemith in his book *A Composer's World*, the Norton lectures of 1949-50. Within a chapter headed "Perceiving music emotionally", he writes:

(5) *There is no doubt that listeners, performers, and composers alike can be profoundly moved by perceiving, performing, or imagining music,*

> *and consequently music must touch on something in their emotional life that brings them into this state of elation. But if these mental reactions were feelings, they could not change as rapidly as they do, and they would not begin and end precisely with the musical stimulus that aroused them. If we experience a real feeling of grief – that is, grief not caused or released by music – it is not possible to replace it at a moment's notice and without any plausible reason with the feeling of wild gaiety; and gaiety, in turn, cannot be replaced by complacency after a fraction of a second…The reactions music evokes are not feelings, but they are the images, memories of feelings. [pp 44-45]*

Is there an echo here of Wordsworth's famous phrase from the Preface to his *Lyrical Ballads,* "Poetry…[it] takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity"? (It must be pointed out however that that statement is rather countermanded by its immediate predecessor, which is that "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"; probably not a sentiment with which Hindemith would have agreed.)

The question of what constitutes the essence of art occurs not infrequently in works of fiction. In this passage from E.M.Forster's *Howards End* of 1910, the author's description of the characters' unsophisticated responses to a performance of Beethoven's 5th Symphony would seem to represent an unashamedly subjective approach. It's not quite clear whether Forster is lampooning his characters or whether his description reflects his own response to the work. The two characters in this extract are the young adults Helen

Schlegel and her brother Tibby. The novel is prefaced by the famous motto which has come to represent Forster's guiding and passionate philosophy: "Only connect…".

(6) *Helen said to her aunt: 'Now comes the wonderful movement: first of all the goblins, and then a trio of elephants dancing'; and Tibby implored the company generally to look out for the transitional passage on the drum….'No; look out for the part where you think you have done with the goblins and they come back', breathed Helen, as the music started with a goblin walking quietly over the universe, from end to end. They were not aggressive creatures; it was that that made them so terrible to Helen. They merely observed in passing that there was no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world…Helen could not contradict them, for, once at all events, she had seen the reliable walls of youth collapse. Panic and emptiness! Panic and emptiness! The goblins were right.*

Her brother raised his finger: it was the transitional passage on the drum.

For, as if things were going too far, Beethoven took hold of the goblins and made them do what he wanted. He appeared in person. He gave them a little push, and they began to walk in major key instead of in a minor, and then – he blew with his mouth and they were scattered! Gusts of splendour, gods and demi-gods contending with vast swords, colour and fragrance broadcast on the field of battle, magnificent victory, magnificent death! Oh, it all burst before the girl, and she even stretched out her gloved hands as if it was tangible…The goblins really

> *had been there. They might return – and they did. It was as if the splendour of life might boil over and waste to steam and froth…Beethoven chose to make all right in the end…amid vast roarings of a superhuman joy, he led his Fifth Symphony to its conclusion. But the goblins were there. They could return. He had said so bravely, and that is why one can trust Beethoven when he says other things. [pp 32-33]*

The sentence "He [Beethoven] had said so bravely, and that is why one can trust Beethoven when he says other things" seems to position Forster firmly amongst those who believe music possesses unlimited powers of expressing things, things moreover that can be either true or false. I have to confess that to me that sentence is meaningless, presupposing as it does a set of assumptions about how music functions that are undemonstrable. (I'd like to add that taken as a whole I think the book is a masterpiece.)

Paul Hindemith addresses the phenomenon of the multiplicity of evoked emotional responses in *A Composer's World*. Within the same chapter from which I previously quoted, entitled "Perceiving music emotionally", he writes:

> *If music did not instigate us to supply memories out of our mental storage rooms, it would remain meaningless, it would merely have a tickling effect on our ears. We cannot keep music from uncovering the memory of former feelings and it is not in our power to avoid them, because the only way to "have" – to possess – music, is to connect it with those images, shadows, dreamy reproductions of actual feelings, no*

matter how realistic and crude or, on the contrary, how denatured, stylized and sublimated they may be. If music we hear is of a kind that does not easily lend itself or does not lend itself at all to this connection, we still do our best to find in our memory some feeling that would correspond with the audible impression we have. If we find nothing that serves this purpose, we resort to hilarity - as in the case of oriental music, mentioned above – and have a "funny feeling ", but even this funny feeling is merely the image of some real funny feeling we had with some former nonmusical experience, and which is now drawn out of its storage place, to substitute for the memory of a more suitable feeling.

This theory gives us a reasonable explanation for the fact that one given piece of music may cause remarkably diversified reactions with different listeners. As an illustration of this statement I like to mention the second movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, which I have found leads some people into a pseudo feeling of profound melancholy, while another group takes it for a kind of scurrilous scherzo, and a third for a subdued pastorale. Each group is justified in judging as it does. The difference in interpretation stems from the difference in memory-images the listener provides, and the unconscious selection is made on the basis of the sentimental value or the degree of importance each image has: the listener chooses the one which is dearest and closest to his mental disposition, or which represents a most common, most easily accessible feeling.

> *We may ask: what is the relation of the reaction to music as described here to the form of perceiving or imagining music, discussed in the second chapter?*

The second chapter is entitled "Perceiving Music Intellectually", and it immediately precedes the chapter from which I am quoting, which is entitled "Perceiving music emotionally". The kernel of the "intellectual" chapter is in this passage:

> *While listening to the musical structure, as it unfolds before his ears, [the recipient] is mentally constructing parallel to it and simultaneously with it a mirrored image. Registering the composition's components as they reach him he tries to match them with their corresponding parts of his mental construction. Or he merely surmises the composition's presumable course and compares it with the image of a musical structure which after a former experience he had stored away in his memory. In both cases the more closely the external musical impression approaches a perfect coincidence with his mental expectation of the composition, the greater will be his aesthetic satisfaction. [p20]*

Resuming now the quotation from the "emotional" chapter:

> *The intellectual act of building up in our mind a parallel structure of a piece heard or imagined, simultaneously with its performance or with its imagination [see p20], is not to be confused with the emotional reaction to music as described now. Although the presence of both is the indispensable condition for our mental absorption of musical impressions, they are not interdependent. They are independent, and*

> *their independence may go so far, that a piece which we relish emotionally may have a very discomforting, even disgusting effect on us while we are producing its parallel form mentally; and a piece which gives us the highest satisfaction intellectually may have only a minor effect on our emotions. Examples for the first category [emotionally relished, mentally rejected] can be found in many of Tchaikovsky's, Dvorak's, Grieg's, and other composers' pieces, in which the audible structure frequently is enchanting and is apt to release easily and pleasantly all the images of feelings as mentioned before, but intellectually sometimes makes us ask; "Do these fellows really assume that we are so naïve as to take their jesting for serious creation?" For the second category [intellectually satisfying, minor emotional effect] we find examples in many supercontrapuntal or otherwise overconstructed compositions, when our intellectual faculty of understanding may be carried to very high spheres, but emotionally we are left with dissatisfaction, because these structures are so involved or overburdened or unpredictable, that our activity of reconstructing them intellectually absorbs all our attention and prohibits emotional enjoyment. [pp 46-48]*

Perhaps Hindemith's observations go some way to explaining Noël Coward's line in his 1930 play *Private Lives*, "Extraordinary how potent cheap music is". Each person will have his and her own examples of "cheap music", emotionally relished and mentally rejected – I don't necessarily go along with Hindemith in respect of Tchaikovsky, Dvorak and Grieg, but the explanation stands.

The extracts so far have implied the ineffability of music by refuting the notion that music expresses something outside itself. The next one questions whether it's possible to say anything meaningful at all about an art-form in its essence.

In 1930 W. Somerset Maugham published his novel *Cakes and Ale*, about the contrast between the persona of a famed author after his death and the complexities of his bohemian life during which his talent remained unrecognized. At one point, within a passage about the affected attitudes and pretentious utterances of the acquaintances of his fictional author, Maugham discourses on beauty:

> *I do not know if there are others like myself, but I am conscious that I cannot contemplate beauty long. For me no poet made a falser statement than Keats when he wrote the first line of "Endymion". ["A thing of beauty is a joy for ever"] When the thing of beauty has given me the magic of its sensation my mind quickly wanders; I listen with incredulity to the persons who tell me that they can look with rapture for hours at a view or a picture. Beauty is an ecstasy; it is as simple as hunger. There is really nothing to be said about it. It is like the perfume of a rose: you can smell it and that is all: that is why the criticism of art, except in so far as it is unconcerned with beauty and therefore with art, is tiresome. All the critic can tell you with regard to Titian's "Entombment of Christ", perhaps of all the pictures in the world that which has most pure beauty, is to go and look at it. What else he has to say is history, or biography, or what not. But people add other qualities to beauty – sublimity, human interest, tenderness, love –*

> *because beauty does not long content them. Beauty is perfect, and perfection (such is human nature) holds our attention but for a little while. The mathematician who after seeing "Phèdre" asked: "Qu'est-ce que ça prouve?" was not such a fool as has been generally made out. No one has ever been able to explain why the Doric temple of Paestum is more beautiful than a glass of cold beer except by bringing in considerations that have nothing to do with beauty. Beauty is a blind alley. It is a mountain peak which once reached leads nowhere. That is why in the end we find more to entrance us in El Greco than in Titian, in the incomplete achievement of Shakespeare than in the consummate success of Racine. Too much has been written about beauty. That is why I have written a little more. Beauty is that which satisfies the aesthetic instinct. But who wants to be satisfied? It is only to the dullard that enough is as good as a feast. Let us face it: beauty is a bit of a bore. [[pp 105-106.]*

To those pairings of artists one might well have added the continuing fascination for the workings of Beethoven's mind against the more perfectly-rounded achievements of other composers of equal prominence.

To sum up so far: the ineffability of music's essence is set out or implied by these few authors either by direct assertion or through demonstration of the fallacious nature of one of the common and easily-made assumptions, namely that music's effect is achieved through its expression of the emotions.

I don't want to appear to deny the power of the word to run a *parallel* course when treating of music. Perhaps, in a manner similar to the parallelism between actual emotions and the morphology of a piece of music as described by Hanslick, the subtleties of a composer may be *mirrored* in the hands of a creative author of words. And E.M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, a series of lectures delivered in 1927 *[Penguin, 2000, pp 149-50]*, suggests another parallel:

> **(7)** *Music, though it does not employ human beings, though it is governed by intricate laws, nevertheless does offer in its final expression a type of beauty which fiction might achieve in its own way. Expansion. That is the idea that novelists must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out. When the symphony is over we feel that the notes and tunes composing it have been liberated, they have found in the rhythm of the whole their individual freedom. Cannot the novel be like that? Is not there something of it in "War and Peace"?*

The difficulty with an idea such as Forster's is that, although it has the sense of being an insight, when compared even with Hanslick's 'morphology' idea it's impossible to devise a methodology whereby Forster's idea might become a tool with which to define some essential fundamental which the two art forms share. Forster is saying something important about music and the novel; yet further activity based on his idea such as might constitute 'research' is difficult to conceive.

Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947) is an account of the life of the fictitious composer Adrian Leverkühn, told through the words of his friend Serenius Zeitblom. Here, as part of a letter from the composer

to Zeitblom, is a passage about Chopin that in fact displays Mann's own acute percipience where music is concerned:

> **(8)** *Playing much Chopin, and reading about him. I love the angelic in his figure, which reminds me of Shelley: the peculiar and very mysteriously veiled, unapproachable, withdrawing, unadventurous flavour of his being, that not wanting to know, that rejection of material experience, the sublime incest of his fantastically delicate and seductive art….There are quite a few things in Chopin which…more than anticipate Wagner, indeed surpass him. Take the C sharp minor Nocturne op. 27 no. 2, and the duet that begins after the enharmonic change from C sharp minor to D flat major. That surpasses in despairing beauty of sound all the "Tristan" orgies – even in the intimate medium of the piano, though not as a grand battle of voluptuosity; without the bull-fight character of a theatrical mysticism robust in its corruption. Take above all his ironic relation to tonality, his teasing way with it, obscuring, ignoring, keeping it fluctuating, and mocking at accidentals. It goes far, divertingly and thrillingly far…. [pp 140-141.]*

Even allowing for the fact that we (or I at least) are in the hands of the translator from the German – in this case H.T. Lowe-Porter – and are not reading the original, this is prose of high artistic quality responding to another artistic medium in the course of describing it. On the question of fundamental ineffability, of course, it doesn't help. A reader of this extract who doesn't like the music of Chopin may acknowledge Mann's – and Lowe-Porter's – fluency but it's unlikely to change his/her

view of Chopin. To such a reader, the poetry of Mann's description is no more persuasive concerning the poetry of the music than would be a tabular analysis of the music's harmonic structure. We may recall here the Somerset Maugham observation quoted a moment ago:

> **(9)** *No one has ever been able to explain why the Doric temple of Paestum is more beautiful than a glass of cold beer except by bringing in considerations that have nothing to do with beauty.*

There are many references to music in literature, of course; I have chosen the Thomas Mann because he is an author who possessed a degree of technical knowledge where music is concerned. Similar homage cannot be paid in reverse, of course; since music cannot be about anything, a composer can't sing the praises of poetry. This facet renders music of all the arts the most appropriate to consider if searching for an essence, as it is free of the distractions of subject-matter through which the verbal arts must function. The nearest equivalent if we were to look at the "effability" of verbal arts might by the point at which the prosaic takes flight and becomes the poetic.

How does our inability to "nail" the manner in which music works its effect – its essential ineffability – bear on the concept of "research" in music?

What is meant by "research"? We may start from a point that is reasonably uncontroversial. Research into the behaviour of chemicals on humans or of metals subjected to stress at low temperatures or whatever, has a clear path: a proposition is followed by observation of

experimentation followed by modification, confirmation (which may be proof or, at a lesser level, demonstration) or refutation of proposition. In support of this procedure is the tenet of science that no truth can be established unless its hypothesis contains the possibility within itself of being disproved.

That tenet is worth re-stating: no truth can be established unless its hypothesis contains the possibility within itself of being disproved. Can we not go on to say that "research" if it is worth the name must entail an outcome that either does or does not satisfy a burden of proof?

The objection may be raised that this definition of "research" reflects but one aspect of research, the "scientific"; that it cannot be expected to apply to the humanities. Yet is it not an integral characteristic of "research" that it must be "scientific", i.e. measurable according to criteria, by which measurements it might be deemed to have succeeded or failed?

No doubt the initial stages of research are indeed similar to those of artistic creation. Assuming it to be true, the incident of Isaac Newton and the falling apple indicates a single moment when an idea, or even an inspiration, occurred, not dissimilar to an idea occurring to a writer or composer. Having grappled as a layman with scientific concepts such as the theory of relativity in which time ceases to be a constant, and worked through explanations designed for laypeople, I venture to suggest that to the extent that scientific thought is reliant on the imagination, I can travel the distance with the scientist. It is at the point

where interaction starts between imagination and the testing of a theory by translating the concepts into algebraic terms that the scientist and I part company. This is because I don't sufficiently understand the "language" of mathematics. (We talk of the "languages" of maths and of music, but I suspect that the term is inaccurate equally in both cases. Languages can be translated into one another while carrying the same meaning, which is certainly not true of music, although it might be argued that as arithmetic and algebra deal in symbols they might on the contrary not mean anything without translation.) I suspect that the scientist and I start with similar powers of imagination, and that rendering a scientific proposition in algebraic terms and working it through can result in a conclusion that can exceed the imagination of the scientist. Speculation about the pre-Big Bang situation in the non-universe demonstrates this; for the moment, all speculators, scientists and laypersons alike, are on equal footing.

I want to look at some of the activities that occur under the heading of "research" within a conservatoire, and to consider to what extent the notion of "research" is appropriate to the pursuit of musical studies. To what extent is it linked with the specialist expertise of the performer or composer, in the way that scientific research is inextricably bound up with the scientist's methodology and specialist language?

One of the areas of music-related activity to which the concept of "research" has for longest been applied is what is termed musicology. In its earliest application this was historical activity, in which earliest available textual sources of musical works were compared and, where

necessary, deciphered or guessed at, in order to arrive at a version in which the earliest markings, be they the composer's or a copyist's, were distinguishable from the musicologist's.

In 1987 Hans Keller, musician, writer and teacher, published a book, *Criticism*, in which he questioned – and that's an understatement – the profession of music critic, and added a few more of what he called 'phoney professions', including broadcaster, musicologist, conductor, politician, psychoanalyst, and so on. Within his comments on musicology he wrote:

> **(10)** *One towering musicality amongst living musicologists, perhaps <u>the</u> most musical, and, significantly enough, a leading light in, and far beyond his profession, is H. C. Robbins Landon; and it was he who cordially agreed with me some years ago when I wrote in a musicological journal that the fancy term of 'musicology', suggesting a science where there wasn't any, was totally unnecessary to say the least; there was musical history, I said, there was textual criticism, and there was research into past practices of performance, but there wasn't anything else – so why call what there was musicology?*

In a footnote to this passage, Keller notes that:

> *Originally, it [the term 'musicology'] is, in fact, a translation of the German 'Musikwissenschaft' (literally, 'the science of music"), which was introduced by Hugo Riemann, much to the distress of leading Austro-German musicians, Franz Schmidt amongst them.*

The only science associated with the essential functioning of music that I can think of, that satisfies the criteria outlined above for "research", the activity that characterizes the pursuit of scientific knowledge, is that associated with the physical attributes of sound – acoustics. Information is received by us through our senses and our responses to it are ordered in watertight categories of different kinds of knowledge. For example, a scientist, functioning as a scientist, has no use for the word "ought" or "should"; ethical imperatives belong to a different category of knowledge. Nor has he/she, as a scientist, any use for the concept of "beautiful"; that idea belongs to aesthetic knowledge. Exactly how many watertight categories of knowledge there are, each defined by possessing its own methodology and criteria for testing, is not for here. I merely point out that the methodology and criteria for testing aesthetic knowledge are peculiarly difficult to define, a fact which lies at the heart of my thesis in this talk.

The peripheral nature of what Keller would call the "pseudo-activities" surrounding the practice of art, when considered *vis-à-vis* the essence of the art, was implied in the Somerset Maugham quote; here is the section again:

> **(11)** *Beauty is an ecstasy; it is as simple as hunger. There is really nothing to be said about it. It is like the perfume of a rose: you can smell it and that is all: that is why the criticism of art, except in so far as it is unconcerned with beauty and therefore with art, is tiresome. All the critic can tell you with regard to Titian's "Entombment of Christ", perhaps of all the pictures in the world that which has most pure*

> *beauty, is to go and look at it. What else he has to say is history, or biography, or what not.*

For Keller, the "pseudo", or displacement, activity is musical history, textual criticism or research into past practices of performance; for Maugham, writing about all the arts, it is "history, or biography, or what not".

However, if the essence of music is ineffable, how do you teach music? As I formed that question, I was going to phrase it "how do you teach about music?" It occurred to me that if I had, it would have been easier to answer. For it is exactly the "about it" that is the concern of Keller's list: musical history, textual criticism, practices of performance. One could add many practical "abouts", to do with playing instruments, singing, and even, *pace* Hans Keller, conducting. To his list of non-practical studies, analysis should be added. That the "it" as opposed to the "about it" may remain elusive, is testified in a passage I came across in Denis Donoghue's book *The Arts without Mystery*, which is in expanded form his Reith Lectures of 1982. The title *The Arts without Mystery* doesn't refer to a beginner's simplified guide to the arts, but is explained in Donoghue's introduction. I quote:

> **(12)** *A work of art is in some sense mysterious; but I see no evidence, in contemporary criticism, that the mystery is acknowledged or respected. Two reasons suggest themselves: one, that knowledge, the dominant force in our engagement with experience, cannot admit mystery or respect it; and two, that discursive practices don't recognise what can't be explained. While I was working on the Reith Lectures, [a*

> *passage] from St Augustine…. kept coming into my mind….: 'Whatever is understood by knowledge is limited by the understanding of the knowledge: even what can be called ineffable is not ineffable.'[pp 7-8]*

"Discursive practices don't recognise what can't be explained": if Donoghue's disturbing statement is true, it behoves us to bear in mind at all times the partial nature of each of the activities – the "discursive practices" – under whose headings music is studied, and, even more so, the inexplicable centre which is presumably the *raison d'être* of it all.

Further on in the book, Donoghue cites the experience of the American teacher and critic Lionel Trilling:

> **(13)** *Some years ago, Lionel Trilling taught the course in modern literature at Columbia College, choosing major works by Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Proust, Kafka, Lawrence, Mann and Conrad, works which meant much to him because of the questions they propose for one's moral life. But he found that teaching these works had the effect of calming them, drawing them into a process of recognition and acceptance. He found, too, that students were quite willing to take part in this process: they looked into the abyss opened up by Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" and came back undaunted. By the time these great works had been put through the routines of discussion, commentary, examination papers and grades, they had lost their power to hurt, and their power to sustain had become mechanical." [p72]*

There is, surely, a recognition here of something precious at the centre of a work of art that cannot be illuminated by "discursive practices" alone. This is not to say that the practices – Keller's list of musical history, textual criticism, performance practice, and all the other headings under which music is studied – are not essential in its pursuit. But I suggest that two things are happening currently in the study of music in the environment with which I am most familiar.

First, there is a spreading of what one might call "academicisation" to areas of performance. This may result in deflection of attention from excellence of execution to preoccupation with context. Although no-one would argue against historical awareness, it may become doctrinaire. The already much-quoted Hans Keller cites a fascinating example of what he calls a creative foreground, executed by the performer upon the score functioning as background. He describes a perfornance of Mozart's Clarinet Quintet by the English clarinettist Reginald Kell. Hans Keller writes:

> **(14)** *What Kell….achieved here in the way of creating a new foreground would not, in fact, have been accepted as a legitimate possibility by any of us without having heard the creative act. The most striking, meaningful contradictions of the background, i.e. the actual score, consisted in his doing dynamically the straight opposite of what Mozart had indicated or clearly implied.. A phrase's main accent, that is to say, would be replaced by an unexpectable 'piano subito' – sensitively introduced by an infinitesimal hesitation, of course – with the result that the implied stress, the phrase's centre of gravity, was defined*

> *far more weightily than in any performance that followed the letter of the score more conscientiously. [p159]*

Keller goes on to imagine Mozart writing to his father enthusiastically about Kell's performance,

> *…explaining, at the same time, why he could not insert Kell's dynamics and co-ordinated agogics in the score, for constant future use; his explanation, one feels equally sure, would have come jolly close to George Malcolm's reminder of the performer's compositional role.*

(George Malcolm, the pianist, harpsichordist, organist and conductor, who had conversed with Keller about how the act of composition does not end with the composer having put the score down on paper, but is continued by the performer.)

What Keller is suggesting here is that a most illuminating, creative and musical performance would have eluded those engaged in what was called "authentic" and is now is called "historically-informed" performance practice. As he says, "What Kell achieved…would not have been accepted as a legitimate possibility by any of us without having heard the creative act".

The performer, after all, is primarily there to bring the mystery into existence; and the mystery is ineffable. Furthermore, in the continuing pressure to render the practice of performance "research"-worthy, it becomes difficult to find a subject for investigation that is demonstrably

related to excellence in performance as well as meeting the criteria for sound research.

This leads to the second point: over recent years there has been a scramble to render as "research" activity that, as I have sought to show, barely meets the criteria for such activity as it is understood in the wider intellectual community. If we accept Donoghue's statement that "knowledge, the dominant force in our engagement with experience, cannot admit mystery or respect it", and scrutinize more critically what subjects are admitted under the mantle of "research", then there is the chance that a sense of seriousness and appropriateneness in musical studies may be reclaimed in areas where it has become slender.

The latter point is rather underlined by the definition of "research" provided for the Research Assessment Exercise. I quote:

> **(15)** *It [research] includes work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce, industry* ***and*** *to the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship; the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances,…*

Would it be too uncharitable to read this as being in order of priority, with the needs of commerce and industry placed first and scholarship fifth? After that come ideas.

When I started preparing this paper, I had thought that discussion of "research" would be angled towards composition. I have quoted from three composers addressing the subject of how music functions:

functions in essence, that is, not in respect of technical detail. The three composers – Mendelssohn, Stravinsky and Hindemith – are united in their unwillingness to take an easy line on the essential nature of music. They all insist on its being untranslatable, and they eschew the idea of music as the expression of anything. Composers write about music – their own or others' – at their peril. The contemporary academic stance again is the problem, resulting in expectations of explanations that cannot be met whilst creative vitality is maintained. Here is that very point, made by Thomas Mann in 1947, again in *Doctor Faustus*. Leverkühn, the composer, is being taunted by a character in his own head, who has the nature of the devil. The taunting takes the form of entirely coherent argument; the devil is as musically and culturally informed as the composer himself. The devil *is* part of the composer himself. This is the devil addressing the composer:

> **(16)** *Who knows today, who even knew in classical times, what inspiration is, what genuine, old, primeval enthusiasm…unparalysed by thought or by the mortal domination of reason – who knows the divine raptus?….*
>
> *Let us just for an instance take the "idea" – what you call that, what for a hundred years or so you have been calling it, sithence earlier there was no such category, as little as musical copyright and all that. The idea, then, a matter of three or four bars, no more, isn't it? All the residue is elaboration, sticking at it. Or isn't it? Good. But now we are all experts, all critics: we note that the idea is nothing new, that it all too much reminds us of something in Rimsky-Korsakov or Brahms. What is to be done? You just change it. But a changed idea, is that still an idea? Take Beethoven's notebooks. There is no thematic conception*

> *there as God gave it. He remoulds it and adds "Meilleur". Scant confidence in God's prompting, scant respect for it is expressed in that "Meilleur" – itself not so very enthusiastic either. A genuine inspiration, immediate, absolute, unquestioned, ravishing, where there is no choice, no tinkering, no possible improvement;…..no, that is not possible with God, who leaves the understanding too much to do. It comes but from the divel, the true master and giver of such rapture.*

The idea of "mystery" discussed by Denis Donoghue appears in this *Faustus* quotation as a manifestation of the devil, as perceived in the disordered mind of a creator of the thing of mystery, a composer. So, we have from St Augustine via Donoghue: "'Whatever is understood by knowledge is limited by the understanding of the knowledge"; and from Thomas Mann via the devil: "A genuine inspiration, immediate, absolute, unquestioned, ravishing, where there is no choice, no tinkering, no possible improvement;…..no, that is not possible with God, who leaves the understanding too much to do".

In conclusion, it may seem that I have been arguing against myself in this paper. On the one hand, I've been concerned to assert the unutterable nature of music, and to encourage a suspicion of accounts of music that assume it means something other than itself. On the other hand, I have been arguing for a more rigorous set of criteria in connection with the plethora of academic musical activity going under the name of "research", which certainly implies no reticence over utterances. There still exists a distrust of music as an academic discipline in some of the older British universities, and I have always felt, since I was a student at

one of them, that the arts sit uncomfortably in that environment. One studies fine arts, but doesn't paint or draw; one might take theatre studies, but one wouldn't act; one studies music, but only peripherally does one perform or compose. I have some sympathy for the distrust; my sympathy emanates form the same source as my misgivings about the uncritical use of the term "research" so liberally applied to activities associated with music study. And perhaps, behind the academic distrust, there is something of an unspoken acknowledgement of the mystery as described by Denis Donoghue. Of the things one can do with music, aside from write it, perform it and listen to it, there aren't many that don't fall within the province of a discipline other that music when it comes to their appropriateness for research. Keeping the distinctions clear will help to retain the rigour of the research as well as to preserve the mystery, without which, nothing.

TS
24 March – 18 April 2007

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