

# IF THERE'S NO MUSIC UP IN HEAVEN THEN WHAT'S IT FOR?:

MUSIC AS A VEHICLE FOR  
PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT



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## ABSTRACT

In this article, I advocate in favor of music as a method of conveying philosophical thought, in the process defending subjective, non-verbal feeling as a component of true philosophical discussion. I first invoke the Kierkegaardian concepts of subjective truth and the musical-erotic to support my position, then show how such a method could be employed through a case study of the Arcade Fire song “Here Comes The Night Time.” Finally, I confront and disarm the potential accusation that this method would over-intellectualize music through excessive interpretation, removing the erotic nature that empowers it.



For academic philosophers, dealing with the ideas presented in art is tricky. The art-piece itself, as a sociocultural object, is considered fair game for philosophical analysis in certain traditions. We see many philosophers talking about how a certain *form* or *topic* in art reflects the society in which it was created and consumed. But when assessing the philosophical ideas stated in art, things begin to narrow. Literature often makes the cut, especially with authors who are considered “philosophical,” such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Albert Camus, and Marcel Proust. While other authors are recognized for working with philosophical topics, they are not seen as philosophical thinkers in the same way academic philosophers are. Film has gained a bit of gravitas, but only in certain sub-disciplines.

Music, not so much. Although some analytic philosophers engage with philosophical ideas present in music, they often limit their discussion to the philosophical statements that artists make about music or about art. This includes literature about how Brian Eno’s music “asks you to think about the act of listening itself;”<sup>1</sup> or how John Cage’s *4’33”* “muted the site of centralized and privileged utterance, disrupted the unspoken audience code to remain unspoken.”<sup>2</sup> Rarely do we find a philosopher addressing music as vehicle for conveying philosophical ideas that are also conveyed in prose. Philosophical references found in music are viewed as a fun homage at best and, at worst, a categorical error.

We should reevaluate this tendency, and I believe we can build an appropriate basis for doing so through the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard asserted that “subjectivity is truth.”<sup>3</sup> He placed an emphasis on one’s relationship with their thought as opposed to merely the content of the thought. This emphasis suggests that forming an emotional attachment with certain philosophical ideas is vital. For all its virtues, academic prose is not conducive to emotional attachment, but music is. Kierkegaard also wrote effusively on music’s power to convey abstract ideas that exist outside of time. Music not only has the potential to fill the emotional and personal aspects of philosophical arguments that prose ignores, but it may be the superior mode of explanation for concepts that go beyond words. Kierkegaard’s assertion of subjective truth can be prominently and eloquently defended in contemporary popular music—in this case by

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1 April Hunt, “Philosophy professor’s new book explores Brian Eno’s ‘Music for Airports,’” *Emory News Center*, January 31, 2019, [https://news.emory.edu/stories/2019/01/er\\_eno\\_book/campus.html](https://news.emory.edu/stories/2019/01/er_eno_book/campus.html).

2 Douglas Kahn, “John Cage: Silence and Silencing,” *The Musical Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (1997): 560.

3 Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 175.

the band Arcade Fire. In this article, I show how the Kierkegaardian notions of subjective truth and the musical-erotic support using music as a vehicle for philosophical ideas. I will then expound an example of this process, relating subjective truth to the Arcade Fire song “Here Comes the Night Time.” The concept of subjective truth will first serve as a basis for conveying philosophical ideas through music, then as the philosophical idea itself that is being conveyed. I will conclude by addressing a possible objection to my argument, based on Susan Sontag’s essay “Against Interpretation.” Here I will address the fear that conveying philosophical ideas through music will lead to the over-intellectualizing of music, destroying the emotive and erotic nature that empowers it.

Søren Kierkegaard first made the claim that “subjectivity is truth” in his 1846 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*.<sup>4</sup> This claim relates intimately with his two greatest philosophical objectives: moving away from the abstract towards the practical and determining how to act as a true Christian. He posited subjective truth in response to the German Idealists, specifically Hegel, and their obsession with legitimizing their idealism by means of some supra-personal truth. To them, for an epistemology to be legitimate it must privilege the actual, intersubjectively understood content of a proposition above what they who propose it think. Kierkegaard disagreed. He believed subjective truth is more meaningful than objective, with the understanding that “the objective accent falls on *what* is said, the subjective on *how* it is said.”<sup>5</sup> That is, truth is not achieved by postulating something that aligns with objective actuality, but rather by postulating something with full agency and intention. As living humans, moving ourselves into a realm of abstract, objective certainty is not a viable option, and the only means of existential satisfaction we retain is living with total faith and passion. One who lives a truly Christian life “prays with all the passion of the infinite” despite “the certainty that objectively [believing in God] is absurd.”<sup>6</sup>

This is a bold claim. Most would agree that *how* one says something is worth our attention. Still, the truth or falsity of a claim depends only on its semantic content. Whether said confidently or meekly, sarcastically or earnestly, True words are True and False words are False. But “Kierkegaard goes so far as to argue that [subjective truth] is true *because* it is objectively false or objectively uncertain.”<sup>7</sup>

4 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 175.

5 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 170.

6 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 169, 176.

7 Robert Solomon, “Kierkegaard and Subjective Truth,” in *From Hegel to Existentialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 74.



The reason is simply that objective truth is in no way interesting or relevant. Searching for objective knowledge that neglects human affairs is a philosophical tradition for the Platonist and Hegelian, but Kierkegaard believed this tradition should pay attention to human affairs. He cited Hamlet in writing that our human “existence and non-existence have only subjective significance.”<sup>8</sup>

Subjective truth has a long history of supporters and dissenters. I will offer neither a defense nor a critique of the thesis in this article. However, I do hold to the claim that neglecting the emotional component of belief—with “emotional” construed broadly—in favor of lifeless, abstracted semantic content is a common shortcoming of academic analytic philosophy. A better practice would not only consider that one holds an objectively true belief, but that one holds such a belief with full passion and intentionality; the believer understands it as something to base at least part of their life on. In the vein of Kierkegaard, the most important philosophical position is not the most objectively correct one, but the one that informs your existence. If one sees life and philosophy as two separate things, the latter becomes trivial.

Perhaps we should seek alternative vehicles for philosophical dialogue that are more artistic and expressive and engage our emotions. That is not to say these forms would constitute complete philosophical arguments. We would still need to fill in gaps of logic and argumentation using more traditional methods. But it is equally valid to note that certain traditional arguments are incomplete because they do not permit the appropriate expression of emotions. When we bracket our critiques and accept presented ideas as sincere—allowing them to tap into our emotions and memories—those ideas can ring true in a deeper sense. This allows us to not only *think* the argument is objectively valid, but *feel* it deeply intertwined with our life as a moral agent. Moreover, this bracketing does not mean that false claims go unpunished. If an idea feels too far removed from our understanding of our relationship with the world, it will simply fail to tap into those emotions and memories.

Good music can make that connection to emotion and memory. There is no doubt that when we listen to certain lyrics in the context of a specific sonic background or album, we feel them differently. We may feel those lyrics differently in that context not because we believe them to be objectively true, but because we see them as integral to how we live our lives. I have evaluated many arguments and positions in traditional philosophical ways, but those that have had the greatest

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8 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 163.

impact on how I live are the ones conveyed with a certain vulnerable sincerity—for example, via music.

Kierkegaard would agree with this, based on his belief of the musical-erotic. To him, certain media are inherently better at conveying certain kinds of ideas. For abstract ideas, specifically the concept of “the sensuous” or “sensuality”—the type of immediate, de-intellectualized feeling Kierkegaard sees as central to his philosophy—“the only medium that can present it is music.”<sup>9</sup> In truly grasping this seemingly self-defeating idea of concreteness abstracted, our best tool is a good tune.

I will now relate the Kierkegaardian notion of subjective truth to the Arcade Fire song “Here Comes the Night Time.” My goal is not to solidify “Here Comes the Night Time” as a superior tool to understand the argument for subjective truth—listening to it will not substitute for reading *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* or supplementary texts. Rather, I intend to show that this song allows its listeners to grasp subjective truth in an emotionally expressive and concrete fashion, independent of whether they are familiar with Kierkegaardian writings underlying it.

“Here Comes the Night Time” highlights two central components of life in Port-Au-Prince: the largely electricity-less city’s transition from day into night, and Christian missionaries attempting to convert locals. It quickly becomes clear that there are divisions between those who are comfortable in the darkness and those who are afraid, between those who claim to know the path to heaven and those who will supposedly be shut out of heaven. Sociopolitical tensions are at play in both these divisions, but I argue that above all there is a philosophical tension of what it means to be faithful.

The setting of the song—the darkening city of Port-Au-Prince—nicely illustrates Kierkegaard’s argument for the unknowability of objective truths. Our knowledge and values cannot be proven right or wrong, and this puts us in a frightening state of darkness. There are two methods to combat this darkness. The first is to reject the lack of objective knowledge and argue that we can find an objective source of light in the form of religious knowledge. The second is looking inward rather than outward for guidance, positing that we can move forward despite, or even because of, the absence of objective light.

The first method is exemplified by the missionaries in the song, who claim that “if you want to be righteous get in line.”<sup>10</sup> That is to

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9 Søren Kierkegaard, “The Immediate Erotic Stages or The Musical-Erotic,” in *Either/Or: Part I*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 57.

10 Arcade Fire, “Here Comes the Night Time,” recorded 2013, track 4 on



say, we can find salvation in darkness simply by following instructions, as if in some sort of heavenly department of motor vehicles. Compare this to Kierkegaard's criticism of finding a subjective relationship with God through an objective understanding of it: "what must a human do to become [one who has a subjective and objective relationship to God]?[...] Does the magistrate give it away as he does the offices of sexton and grave-digger?"<sup>11</sup> With his typical dryness, Kierkegaard claimed that such a dual-natured relationship with God is ridiculous, as are those who think that attaining it is like attaining a job. The song furthers this theme with the lyrics "they say heaven's a place / yeah, heaven's a place, and they know where it is."<sup>12</sup> If gaining an objective relationship with God is as simple as being an appointed sexton, then finding heaven should be as simple as following a map. Waiting in line, sending in an application, finding a location on a map—according to Kierkegaard these are simply not the right types of things one would do to be pious.

Thus, we are left with the second method of looking inward. We find "God by virtue not of any objective deliberation but of the infinite passion of inwardness."<sup>13</sup> In the song, this passion is shown through dancing. For some, "when they hear the beat, coming from the street, they lock the door," but for others, "when I hear the beat, the spirit's on me like a live wire."<sup>14</sup> To clarify, it is not listening to music here that is holy—not simply a case of trading one objective, external God for another—but rather the dancing itself and the passion one feels when invested in the music. "It is only for a moment that the particular individual, in existing, can be in a unity of infinite and finite that transcends existing" wrote Kierkegaard, "this moment is the instant of passion."<sup>15</sup> The song also seems to imply this. The locals care little if they are unwelcome in the missionaries' heaven, for they attain moments of transcendence through music that objective knowledge could never provide. As the lyrics that I borrowed for the title of this paper state, "if there's no music up in heaven, then what's it for?"<sup>16</sup>

At this point in the song the refrain "here comes the night time" repeats, as if the blinding nature of objective uncertainty is suffocating the listener. The song builds to an explosion of noise that evokes the energy of the height of Carnival. It is also at this point that the

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*Reflektor*, Merge Records, online.

11 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 167.

12 Arcade Fire, "Here Comes the Night Time."

13 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 168.

14 Arcade Fire, "Here Comes the Night Time."

15 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 165-166.

16 Arcade Fire, "Here Comes the Night Time."

inward-outward distinction becomes especially clear. First, there is a description of missionaries up on satellites, saying “if you’re looking for hell, just try looking inside,” but soon the music calms and we hear the line, “when you look in the sky, just try looking inside/ God knows what you might find.”<sup>17</sup> To the missionaries, hell is inwardness, or as Kierkegaard puts it, because of its sensuous immediacy, “music is demonic.”<sup>18</sup> But we do not find heaven by listening to satellite voices. We find it by “looking inside”—that is the true location of what one searches for when they “look in the sky.”

In a sense, “Here Comes the Night Time” can be seen as a version of Kierkegaard’s comparison of two worshippers:

If someone living in the midst of Christianity enters the house of God, the house of the true God, knowing the true conception of God, and now prays but prays untruly, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol—where then is there more truth? The one prays truly to God though he worships an idol; the other prays untruly to the true God, and therefore truly worships an idol.<sup>19</sup>

“Here Comes the Night Time” is not implying that the Haitians’ form of religion is objectively illegitimate or idolatrous, but the moral to the story holds. It is a mistake to assume that the Haitians would become better worshippers if a missionary gave them new information about God. Lead singer Win Butler says the song highlights “the absurdity that you can go to a place like Haiti and teach people something about God.”<sup>20</sup> The missionaries see the knowledge of God as “a place and they know where it is,” but the knowledge of God is actually a wholehearted and passionate faith.

These parallels are not surprising. The Arcade Fire album title *Reflektor* is a direct reference to Kierkegaard’s article “The Present Age,” published in the same year as *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. “The Present Age” construes Kierkegaard’s era as “one of understanding and *reflection*, without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm and shrewdly relapsing into repose,” too busy bouncing around from interest to interest and group to group, hoping that it will be confirmed as the “right” one instead



17 Arcade Fire, “Here Comes the Night Time.”

18 Kierkegaard, “The Musical-Erotic,” 65.

19 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 169.

20 Patrick Doyle, “Win Butler Reveals Secret Influences Behind Arcade Fire’s ‘Reflektor,’” *Rolling Stone*, October 2013, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/win-butler-reveals-secret-influences-behind-arcade-fires-reflektor-83028/>.



of passionately and faithfully risking it all towards one end.<sup>21</sup> Butler interprets the article as such:

[...]if there was a piece of gold out on thin ice, in a passionate age, if someone went to try and get the gold, everyone would cheer them on and be like, “Go for it! Yeah you can do it!” And in a reflective age, if someone tried to walk out on the thin ice, everyone would criticize them and say, “What an idiot! I can’t believe you’re going out on the ice to try and risk something.”<sup>22</sup>

I have attributed a similar critique. While the invocation of a “reflective age” might be associated with phrases like “Don’t think about it, just do it!” the invocation of truth as subjectivity makes a deeper claim. It argues that reflective deliberation is not only paralyzing, it leads to falsity. It is not taking the risk that enables you to get the gold, it is the very act of taking the risk that *is* the gold. Those who listen to the missionaries and attempt to get the gold without walking on thin ice will never be able to attain it. Even tossing a rock out onto the ice to see if it supports weight is enough to falsify the act.

One criticism of this approach is that it will over-intellectualize music. This would turn listening to music into a practice of identifying philosophical themes and rob music of the intimacy that is its central strength. This argument was famously posed by Susan Sontag, who lamented the art world’s “overt contempt for appearances” and obsession with *interpretation*, which “digs ‘behind’ the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one.”<sup>23</sup> She asserted that “to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world” and that “in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”<sup>24</sup> This itself is a Kierkegaardian position. Remember, he believed that music succeeds in conveying certain ideas *because* it is erotic and *because* it does not rely on translation to words. Kierkegaard wrote that the moment the sensuality of music is turned into explicit thought “the soul becomes sad, [...] the magic is gone, and it can never again be evoked.”<sup>25</sup>

I cannot stress how much I agree with this principle. I am in no way advocating for a “philosophication” of music. If anything, I am advocating a “musicification” of philosophy. Or better, I am advocating that we stop dismissing the side of philosophy that is already musical—the side that worms its way deep into our psyche and influences our

21 Søren Kierkegaard, “The Present Age,” in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 260.

22 Patrick Doyle, “Behind Arcade Fire’s ‘Reflektor.’”

23 Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Susan Sontag: Essays of the 1960s and 1970s*, ed. David Rieff (New York: Library of America, 2013), 13.

24 Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” 14, 20.

25 Kierkegaard, “The Musical-Erotic,” 60-61.

lives independently of our ability explain it in words. This does not require a new philosophical discourse, as some have suggested, but only an acceptance of the media and discourses that have been doing it well for centuries.

How do we do such a thing? In the very act of explaining Arcade Fire's music in Kierkegaardian terms, have I not already stripped away some of its supra-linguistic "magic?" It does seem true that each explication of the "themes" and "meaning" of a song threatens to distance us from the emotional experience of listening to it. Yet that does not have to be the result of such an explanation. Countering Sontag, Alexander Nehamas argues that "hermeneutics and erotics [...] do not exclude one another."<sup>26</sup> Every description of a piece of art is in some way an interpretation. A listener who is not familiar with Port-Au-Prince will understand "Here Comes the Night Time" differently than someone who is. Just because the listener who is familiar with the city "interprets" an added level to the song that their counterpart misses does not mean they have sacrificed its emotional power. In fact, they would likely get more emotion out of it. "Interpretation doesn't push the manifest content of a work aside in order to reveal the real meaning hidden beneath," Nehamas writes, instead "it yields a better understanding of it, beginning from how it seems at first to how it seems once we have come to know it better."<sup>27</sup>

We still face the danger of a bad faith interpretation—an interpretation that cancels the musical-erotic in favor of the musical-intellectual. Such a methodology is likely worse than rejecting that music has any role in philosophy at all. Instead, we can turn to the type of interpretation that enriches our listening and our life. The type of interpretation that transforms "Here Comes the Night Time" from a song about lights and missionaries to one that is about finding holiness in inwardness. Better yet, we find a song that transforms subjective truth from the lifeless phrase "holiness in inwardness" to the erotic, passionate beat of bongo drums and explosion of the electric guitar.



26 Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 121.

27 Nehamas, *Promise of Happiness*, 123.



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