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Evaluating the Explanatory Adequacy of Schopenhauer's Theory of Music Through Music-Theoretical Analysis Within the Framework of Western Art Music

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Abstract. Music occupies a distinct status in Schopenhauer's philosophy, as he views music as a form of art that uniquely expresses aspects of human life and directly objectifies the Will. However, different compositional practices may raise questions about whether his metaphysical account remains adequate beyond the convention underlying his theory of music. This paper discusses Schopenhauer's music model in relation to his metaphysical claims of representation and the Will and examines its applicability across three musical compositions from distinct periods of Western art music. By analysing and comparing the corresponding musical elements in Schopenhauer's music model and compositions by Mozart, Bach, and Debussy, this paper evaluates the extent to which his theoretical framework correlates with musical works that differ in their adherence to its tonal convention. The analysis distinguishes between conformity to Schopenhauer's music model and the broader capacity that music has to objectify the Will. The findings suggest that while Schopenhauer's model of music provides a coherent explanation within the framework of tonal teleology, his metaphysical claim about music directly objectifying the Will may go beyond the particular musical model given by Schopenhauer, showing that the model should be considered as one, instead of the only manifestation of musical objectification of the Will.

Keywords: Music, Schopenhauer, Philosophy

1. Introduction

Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy of music presents an unusually strong claim about the metaphysical status of music. For Schopenhauer, music is not merely an art that imitates and represents objects in the phenomenon; rather, it has a uniquely direct relationship with the underlying reality of the world, which is the Will. He therefore places music in a different category from the other arts, arguing that while painting, poetry, and sculpture represent the Ideas through which the Will becomes perceptible in the phenomenal world, music expresses the Will itself. In *The World as Will and Representation*, he describes music as an immediate objectification and copy of the Will, rather than a representation of particular phenomena [1]. His later discussion further

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develops this claim by establishing analogies between musical structures and the hierarchical organisation of nature.

Schopenhauer's metaphysical claim, however, is closely connected in his writings to a particular conception of musical structure. His discussions of melody, harmony, and tonal departure and return suggest that he understood musical motion within a predominantly tonal, hierarchical framework. The central problem is whether these structures should be treated as necessary conditions for musical objectification of the Will. This paper does not attempt to establish the universality of Schopenhauer's theory across all music. Its scope is limited to selected works within Western art music from the Baroque period to the early 20th century. It evaluates the extent to which Schopenhauer's metaphysical claim about music depends on the specific musical model. The analysis distinguishes two levels. Level I, theoretical correspondence, asks whether a work exhibits the musical structures that Schopenhauer explicitly associates with the objectification of Will. Level II, metaphysical adequacy, asks whether a work can nevertheless provide a plausible musical manifestation of Will when it does not conform to those specific structures.

Three works demonstrate a progressive test of this distinction: the first movement of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor, K.466; the B-minor Fugue from Book I of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, BWV 869; and Debussy's *Nuages* from *Trois Nocturnes*. Mozart provides a case of strong correspondence with Schopenhauer's tonal model. Bach retains much of this tonal framework while challenging Schopenhauer's privileging of harmonic music through contrapuntal writing. Debussy presents a more substantial challenge, weakening conventional tonal teleology while retaining recurrence, transformation, instability, and musical continuation. This study contributes to the philosophical study of music by clarifying the limitations on the scope of Schopenhauer's theory. Additionally, it provides a future analytical framework for further research on the relation between music and its metaphysical representations.

2. Schopenhauer's philosophy of music

2.1. Representation, Idea, and Will

Schopenhauer's theory of music cannot be understood without first distinguishing three concepts: representation, Idea, and Will. The distinction is fundamental because his exceptional status for music depends upon its relationship to each of them. The world as representation is the world as it appears to a knowing subject. Individual objects and events are therefore phenomenal appearances rather than ultimate metaphysical reality. The Will, by contrast, is not merely an individual's conscious intention or psychological desire, but the metaphysical reality underlying phenomena and manifests itself throughout nature, including in organic and inorganic processes. Schopenhauer therefore describes Will as prior to consciousness rather than as an exclusively rational or intentional faculty.

Between ordinary representation and the Will stands the Idea. In aesthetic contemplation, the individual object can cease to be apprehended merely as an individual object and instead become an expression of its universal form or Idea. Music occupies a different position. Schopenhauer argues that music does not merely represent an Idea through which the Will becomes intelligible; rather, it has a direct relationship with the Will itself. As Goehr emphasises, this distinction does not mean that music offers a transparent or conceptually demonstrable presentation of metaphysical reality [2]. Music's relation to the Will remains non-conceptual and must be approached through analogical comparisons between musical processes and the structure of willing.

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This distinction is crucial for the present analysis. If Will is reduced to human emotion, then almost any expressive music could be interpreted as its objectification. Will must instead be understood as the metaphysical reality whose phenomenal manifestations can include striving, desire, resistance, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and renewed striving. These experiences do not exhaust the meaning of Will, but they provide a phenomenological and structural vocabulary through which its dynamic character can be approached.

Consequently, the question for musical analysis is not simply whether a passage "expresses desire" or sounds emotionally intense. A stronger question is whether its musical organisation presents a structure analogous to the dynamic conditions through which willing becomes manifest: movement toward something, resistance or interruption, temporary stabilisation, and renewed movement. This distinction also prevents the analysis from equating metaphysical significance with immediate aesthetic pleasure or emotional intensity. As Vandenabeele argues, Schopenhauer's account of aesthetic experience cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between pleasure and the absence of willing. Artistic experience may also involve tension, resistance, and forms of understanding that go beyond immediate enjoyment [3].

2.2. Why music directly objectifies Will

Schopenhauer's claim that music directly objectifies Will depends partly upon his conviction that music does not represent individual phenomena in the same manner as the other arts. A painting may represent a particular body; a poem may represent an action or event; a dramatic work may depict a human conflict. Music, by contrast, does not require a determinate object for its intelligibility. It can produce tension, motion, expectation, conflict, and release without referring to a specific object that causes these experiences.

Schopenhauer therefore develops analogies between musical organisation and the structure of Will. In section 52 of Volume I, for example, he compares the bass, tenor, alto, and soprano to different levels of natural existence, while also interpreting harmonic consonance and dissonance through the language of satisfaction and dissatisfaction [1]. He gives particular importance to the relationship between the bass and upper voices and to the way in which melody operates above the harmonic foundation.

His account of melody is particularly important. Melody is not simply a sequence of isolated notes; its significance arises from departure, movement, and return. The melodic line can be understood through its relation to the tonal centre, while harmonic progression provides a corresponding dynamic of tension and satisfaction. In this framework, tonal movement becomes a musical analogue for willing.

Yet this relationship should not be mistaken for an empirical proof of metaphysics. Lawrence Ferrara points out that Schopenhauer himself cannot logically demonstrate the metaphysical identification of music with Will [4]. His argument proceeds through a comparative and analogical analysis of music and nature rather than through empirical verification [2]. This distinction is essential to the present paper: music-theoretical analysis can test whether Schopenhauer's musical analogies remain explanatory, but it cannot independently prove the existence or metaphysical nature of Will.

2.3. From Schopenhauer's metaphysical claim to music-theoretical model

Schopenhauer's discussion can therefore be separated into two levels. The first is his metaphysical claim: music directly objectifies the Will. The second is his music-theoretical model: particular

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musical relationships—especially tonal hierarchy, harmonic tension and resolution, bass structure, and melodic departure and return—provide the musical basis through which this direct objectification can be understood.

These two claims are related but not identical. If a musical work fails to conform to Schopenhauer's tonal model, it does not automatically follow that music has lost its metaphysical relationship with Will. It may instead show that Schopenhauer identified one historically specific musical realisation of willing with the more general principle itself.

This distinction produces the two analytical levels used below. At Level I, the question is whether the musical structure corresponds to Schopenhauer's explicit model. At Level II, the question is whether the work can still be interpreted as an objectification of Will through more general musical processes.

The Level II criteria used in this paper are therefore not presented as a list explicitly formulated by Schopenhauer. They are an analytical reconstruction of what would have to remain explanatory if his metaphysical claim is to survive the limitations of his particular musical model. Four criteria are especially important: dynamic striving, resistance or conflict, temporary rather than absolute stabilisation, and renewed movement. A fifth criterion is the relative independence of music from determinate representation: because Schopenhauer's music does not need to imitate a particular object, these dynamics should be capable of operating without requiring a fixed narrative or referential meaning.

3. Testing Schopenhauer's framework

3.1. Mozart

The first movement of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor, K.466 provides a useful starting point because its musical organisation closely corresponds to the structures emphasised by Schopenhauer. Its tonal language allows the relationship between musical striving and tonal direction to be examined relatively clearly.

At Level I, the movement exhibits a strong relationship between tonal hierarchy and musical motion. The D-minor tonic provides a point of reference from which harmonic and melodic processes depart. Dominant-oriented harmony creates directional tension, while cadential returns establish temporary points of stabilisation. The distinction between tonal centre and departure from that centre therefore gives musical motion a teleological character: the listener can understand harmonic events not simply as isolated sonorities but as parts of a larger trajectory.

This relationship corresponds closely to Schopenhauer's conception of musical striving. A musical line does not remain permanently at its point of departure. It moves away, encounters instability, and eventually returns or arrives at a temporary point of rest. The same structure can occur at several levels simultaneously: individual melodic phrases can create local expectations, harmonic progressions can create larger trajectories, and formal sections can establish and later disrupt broader tonal stability.

Motivic development reinforces this process. A motive introduced in one context can be transformed, displaced, or harmonically redirected before returning in a new context. Its identity therefore persists while its immediate musical circumstances change. Such development can be interpreted through the broader structure of striving: musical identity is not static but maintained through movement and transformation.

The harmonic language is especially relevant. Dissonance is not merely an acoustical phenomenon; within tonal syntax, it creates expectations concerning continuation. Consonance can

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temporarily satisfy these expectations, but the completion of one phrase does not end the movement of the work. New material generates new instability. Thus, musical satisfaction is temporary rather than absolute.

This point corresponds particularly well with Schopenhauer's metaphysics. If Will is characterised by continuous striving, then a musical system in which every local satisfaction becomes the basis for further movement provides a compelling structural analogy. A cadence does not terminate willing; it closes one process while allowing another to begin.

The formal organisation of the movement strengthens this interpretation. Recurrence does not simply repeat identical material for its own sake. Material returns within changed harmonic and formal circumstances, allowing earlier events to be understood retrospectively. The listener therefore experiences both continuity and renewed striving.

At Level I, then, Mozart presents relatively little difficulty for Schopenhauer. Melody, harmony, tonal direction, cadential resolution, and formal recurrence can all be interpreted within the framework he provides. At Level II, the same features support his broader metaphysical claim: tonal teleology provides a particularly clear musical manifestation of a world characterised by movement, resistance, temporary satisfaction, and renewed striving.

However, Mozart should not be treated as proving Schopenhauer's metaphysics. It demonstrates explanatory correspondence, not metaphysical verification. The significance of the Mozart case is therefore methodological: it establishes what Schopenhauer's model can explain when the musical practice itself closely resembles the structures on which his theory was based.

3.2. Bach

Bach's B-minor Fugue from Book I of the Well-Tempered Clavier, BWV 869, creates a more difficult test. The work remains deeply connected to tonal organisation, so Schopenhauer's harmonic theory does not simply become irrelevant. Yet its contrapuntal texture challenges the adequacy of a hierarchical account in which musical significance is primarily organised around a foundational bass and a privileged upper melody.

The fugue is organised around several voices that enter successively and continue to participate in contrapuntal interaction. Rather than establishing one melody above a subordinate harmonic accompaniment, the texture gives multiple voices meaningful melodic identities. The subject's successive appearances and its interaction with countersubject material prevent the fugue from being reduced to a single foreground melody supported by accompaniment. Riemann's analysis makes this point more precise by treating the fugue's thematic and harmonic processes as internally directed rather than as a merely mechanical combination of contrapuntal devices [5]. His discussion of the theme's upward-reaching and descending gestures, together with the forward-driving function of its dissonant and appoggiatura-related events, provides a concrete basis for interpreting the fugue as a process of continued musical motion.

This creates a Level I problem. Schopenhauer's account of musical hierarchy assigns particular significance to the relationship between bass, inner voices, and the upper melodic line. In his later discussion, the bass represents a foundational level while the upper voices correspond to progressively higher levels of being, culminating in the soprano or melody. Such a hierarchy is easier to apply to homophonic textures in which one melodic line clearly occupies the foreground above a harmonic accompaniment.

Bach's fugue complicates that hierarchy because contrapuntal independence prevents the musical surface from being reduced to a single privileged melodic subject. The subject can appear in

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different voices, while countersubject material and independent lines retain structural significance. The musical argument is therefore relational rather than simply hierarchical.

This does not mean that Schopenhauer's theory completely fails. The fugue remains governed by harmonic relationships, tonal areas, cadential processes, and directed musical motion. Tonal structure continues to create relationships of expectation and stabilisation. At this level, Bach partially conforms to Schopenhauer's model.

But the problem is revealing. Schopenhauer's model can explain the tonal foundation of the fugue more easily than it can explain the equalised melodic agency of its contrapuntal voices. The difficulty therefore concerns not music as objectification of Will in general, but the specific mechanism by which that objectification is supposed to occur.

Level II provides another possibility. Instead of interpreting Will through a single melodic trajectory, polyphony can be interpreted through interaction among simultaneous processes of striving. Each voice possesses its own directional movement, but none exists in complete isolation. Voices intersect, imitate, resist, overlap, and temporarily converge. Musical conflict therefore occurs not only between harmony and melody, but between multiple simultaneous melodic trajectories.

This offers a different model of willing. If Will is fundamentally dynamic rather than merely intentional, then nothing requires its musical analogue to consist of one privileged subject moving toward one goal. Multiple lines can represent interacting tendencies within a larger system. The contrapuntal texture therefore shifts the analytical emphasis from hierarchical striving to relational striving.

This interpretation also avoids reducing Will to emotion. The significance of the fugue does not depend upon claiming that each voice represents a separate desire. Rather, the musical structure itself creates a field of simultaneous tendencies. Each voice follows its own trajectory while being constrained by the presence of the others. The resulting counterpoint produces tension, conflict, temporary coordination, and renewed movement.

Bach therefore exposes a limitation in Schopenhauer's music-theoretical model while preserving a possible route for his metaphysical claim. At Level I, the hierarchy of melody and accompaniment is inadequate to describe the contrapuntal organisation of the fugue. At Level II, however, the dynamics of interaction among voices provide another possible musical analogue of Will.

The Bach case consequently suggests that the objectification of Will does not necessarily depend upon a single melodic hierarchy. A musical work may embody dynamic striving through the interaction of multiple independent processes. Schopenhauer's theory is therefore more flexible at the metaphysical level than at the level of its specific musical analogies.

3.3. Debussy

Debussy's *Nuages* presents the most substantial challenge to Schopenhauer's music-theoretical model among the three works. As a musician who experienced evolution in music theory and was born much later than Schopenhauer, unlike Mozart, he's music does not organise musical motion primarily through conventional dominant-tonic relationships. Unlike Bach, its challenge is not primarily one of texture. Instead, *Nuages* questions the assumption that musical striving must be organised through functional tonal teleology.

The opening immediately establishes a different harmonic environment. The opening material combines diatonic and octatonic elements, while the cor anglais melody is itself octatonic, as shown below in Figure 1. The recurring pitch B functions as an important point of reference, but the music does not establish B as a conventional tonic through sustained dominant-tonic relationships.

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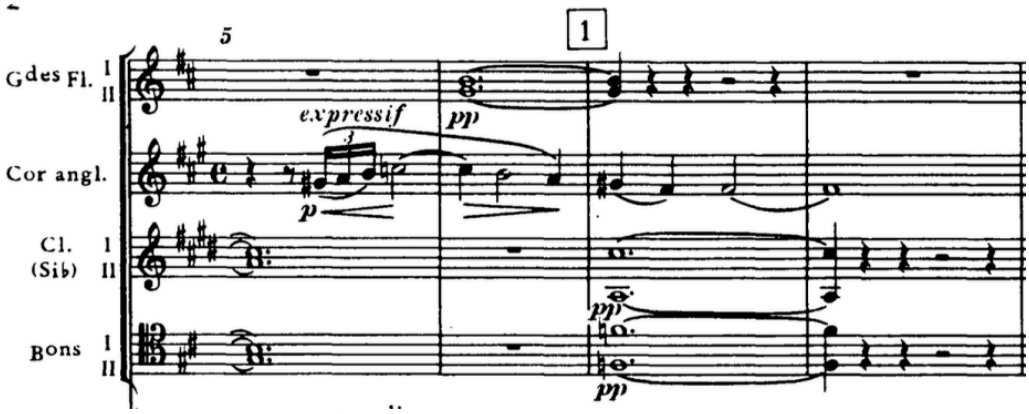


Figure 1. Melody incorporating octatonic element

This immediately creates a Level I problem. Schopenhauer's account of melody depends heavily upon departure from and return toward a tonal centre. His analogy between music and Will is therefore particularly well suited to music in which harmonic motion establishes recognisable directions and cadential arrivals.

In *Nuages*, however, harmonic direction is often suspended. Parallel dominant-type sonorities can appear without functioning as actual dominants. The supplied analysis specifically notes that the parallel chords in bars 14-20 are essentially colouristic and that their harmonic function is suspended. The movement therefore cannot be understood simply as an extended chain of dominant preparation and tonic resolution.

Yet describing *Nuages* as static would also be inaccurate. The movement contains substantial musical transformation. The opening material returns in altered forms; X and Y materials are recomposed; textures expand and contract; orchestration changes; harmonic environments shift; and recurring material is placed into new contexts. The supplied analysis describes the movement through Hepokoski's five rotations, in which each rotation begins with a variant of the opening material and is answered by the relatively stable cor anglais melody.

This is important for Level II because it demonstrates that the disappearance of conventional tonal teleology does not necessarily mean the disappearance of musical movement.

The musical process of *Nuages* can instead be understood through recurrence and transformation. Material returns, but rarely as literal repetition. The opening X material is progressively recomposed, while Y retains a more stable identity. The relationship between the two creates continuity without requiring a single goal-directed harmonic trajectory. The work therefore replaces one type of musical directness with another: rather than moving primarily toward tonal closure, it moves through cycles of reappearance, transformation, interruption, and continuation.

This is particularly visible in the later rotations. The supplied analysis notes that the original ten bars of the first rotation expand to eighteen bars in the second, while the ordered recycling of X and Y continues throughout the movement. Later, material is recombined through different harmonic and textural environments, including the juxtaposition of whole-tone and octatonic material.

From the perspective of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, this suggests that tonal teleology is one musical manifestation of willing, not necessarily the definition of musical objectification of Will. The work continues to generate instability and expectation, but the listener's expectations are not consistently directed toward a conventional tonic resolution. Instead, musical activity remains open through recurrence and transformation.

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The final result is especially significant. If Will is understood as a process of continuous striving rather than as a movement toward a final state of fulfilment, then the absence of definitive tonal closure does not necessarily weaken the metaphysical analogy. It may instead challenge the assumption that striving requires an identifiable final goal. *Nuages* can be interpreted as presenting persistence without conventional resolution: musical materials continue to reappear and transform, while the tonal system does not provide a final synthesis through dominant-tonic closure.

Timbre further complicates Schopenhauer's framework. The orchestration of *Nuages* is not merely decorative. The supplied analysis emphasises the distinctive orchestral colours of the opening, the use of clarinets, bassoons, oboe, and cor anglais, and the changing combinations of orchestral timbres. More broadly, the notes describe Debussy's use of divided and muted strings, low-register woodwinds, subtle harp colouring, and extended string techniques as central components of his musical language. This presents another limit to Schopenhauer's theory: timbre does not occupy the same theoretical position in his account as melody and harmony.

The programmatic association of *Nuages* with clouds creates a further complication, but it should not be treated as a straightforward refutation of Schopenhauer. Debussy explicitly associated the work with the changing appearance of clouds and the atmosphere over the Seine, and the original program describes the clouds' slow movement and changing colours. Nevertheless, Debussy's approach to programmatic music should not be reduced to literal musical depiction. The extra-musical title provides a context for listening, but it does not eliminate the internal organisation of the music. Indeed, the title can be encountered after the musical experience rather than functioning as a set of instructions that determines what every musical event must represent.

Therefore, the most important challenge *Nuages* poses to Schopenhauer is not that it has a descriptive title. The more fundamental challenge is that its musical organisation demonstrates that substantial musical continuity, expectation, transformation, and expressive coherence can exist without the dominant-tonic teleology that Schopenhauer treats as such an important analogue of Will.

At Level I, *Nuages* therefore exposes significant limitations in Schopenhauer's specific music-theoretical model. At Level II, however, the work preserves several of the more general dynamics associated with Will: persistent movement, instability, resistance to closure, recurrence, transformation, and renewed activity. These processes do not prove that Debussy's music literally objectifies the metaphysical Will. They show instead that Schopenhauer's metaphysical claim can remain philosophically intelligible even when one of his principal musical models no longer adequately describes the music.

4. Conclusion

The comparison of Mozart, Bach, and Debussy reveals a distinction between two claims that are often treated as though they were identical in Schopenhauer's philosophy of music. The first is the metaphysical claim that music directly objectifies the Will. The second is the music-theoretical model through which Schopenhauer attempts to explain this relationship, particularly through tonal hierarchy, harmonic tension and resolution, melodic departure and return, and the hierarchical organization of musical voices.

The result is not that Schopenhauer's metaphysical theory has been demonstrated to be universally applicable. The repertoire examined here is historically and culturally limited, and the metaphysical identification of music with Will is not a proposition that music theory can empirically prove. What the comparison does establish is a narrower but more defensible conclusion. Schopenhauer's specific music-theoretical correspondences are historically limited, particularly

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when they are treated as necessary conditions for musical objectification of Will. His model is most effective in explaining music organised around common-practice tonal hierarchy and teleology, less complete when confronted with contrapuntal textures that redistribute melodic independence, and substantially challenged by early modernist music that weakens functional tonality.

His broader metaphysical claim, however, need not disappear with that model. If Will is understood not as a synonym for emotion or desire but as the underlying dynamic reality manifested through striving, resistance, temporary satisfaction, and renewed activity, then music can potentially objectify Will through more than one structural mechanism. The distinction is therefore between the metaphysical principle and one historically specific musical realisation of that principle. Tonal teleology is one musical manifestation of willing, but it is not necessarily the definition of musical objectification of the Will. Schopenhauer's theory becomes more explanatorily viable when these two levels are separated: his particular account of "perfect music" is limited by the musical practice from which it was developed, while the broader philosophical question of how abstract musical processes can disclose the dynamic structure of reality remains open to forms of music that his original model could not fully anticipate.

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