Perspective and Culture

For how can it be explained what 'expressive playing' is? Certainly not by anything that accompanies the playing. – What is needed for the explanation? One might say: A culture. If someone is brought up in a particular culture – and then reacts to music in such and such a way, you can teach him the use of 'expressive playing'.

In the last chapter I have talked about the way that someone who responds to music does so because of his participation in a vocabulary of judgements; a kind of family of judgement. Now we want to know how this participation comes about. And there are two levels of answers we could give. The one we have already given, and discussed – namely, an answer in terms of the technical facility of organising sound under judgement according to the practice of a particular tradition. The other level of answer describes the tradition itself – that is, the collective practice and perspective which sustains the framework for reading and understanding – for individual understanding within it.

In the discussion of emotion, we noticed how easily taken for granted is the technical facility of organising sound, so that the cognitive nature of a reading is overlooked, leaving an apparently entirely emotional 'sympathetic' response on the part of the listener. In the same way, the practice of organising what we hear is itself easily taken for granted, overlooking the fact that this depends on our participation in a cultural perspective – the perspective within which music (and other special activities) have the role that they do: that is, the role of the expressive. For no object or event is expressive in a vacuum. The role of the expressive is furnished only amid many other kinds of activities, directed in different ways: the practical, the moral, the spiritual, the affective, the political and so on. If the expressive is a way of making sense of the often unsatisfactory and untidy nature of these other activities, as is sometimes claimed, then it performs that role in relation to the other activities, and not in isolation from
them. Of course I am not saying that every expressive action must be sandwiched between correlative practical or spiritual activities; rather that this relation must hold good on a more general level for the expressive to have the point that it has.

There used to be a programme on the radio called 'The Innocent Ear', in which the listener was invited to tackle a piece of music without the benefit of verbal 'programme notes' as it were. This was supposed to be extraordinarily taxing and stimulating. However, 'tackle' in this sense merely meant to supply, as if in a game or a quiz, the sort of information (composer, historical period and so on) that one would ordinarily get from the announcer. It is instructive to see how cautious and limited this game really is. It was taken for granted, for example, that the tonal system of the music would be entirely familiar to the 'innocent' ears which were tuned in around the country. Indeed, there would be no dispute about the nature of the activity in question, no problem in recognising instrumentation or formal structure; nobody was being asked to locate the purpose of this particular assembly of musicians, nor seriously to challenge which part of the presented sound was 'expressive' (it all is - that's part of the convention). In fact, the 'innocent' ear is 'innocent', if at all, in only an extremely attenuated sense, having been nurtured long since in all the larger aspects of the nature and purpose of the presented sounds. Indeed, it is only thereby that the listener is qualified to take part in the game. A truly innocent ear could not tackle the music as music at all.

As Hanslick observes,

What a Tyrolese peasant sings, though apparently uninfluenced by art-culture, is, beyond dispute, artificial music. The man fancies of course that he sings as Nature prompts him, but to enable Nature so to prompt him, the seed of centuries had to grow and ripen.²

That is a very pithy remark. Listening to music is a very specialised and highly developed form of attending to what we hear, and the Tyrolese peasant sings only to the extent that he can return what he has taken in. Musical experience is not transparent, but highly directed. And the form that this direction takes is learned as a part of the perspective of the society that we inherit. It is my present purpose to think about the implications of this. One obvious