

KAPITTEL 3

To Learn How to Die – A Philosophical Approach to Music as Medium Between Life and Death

Christina Kast

Department of Philosophy, Otto-von-Guericke University Magdeburg

Abstract: The assumption that music can be experienced in a religious way in non-religious contexts leads to the problem of what we can call religious. Arguing that music can have a religious effect beyond traditional religious contexts raises the question of what makes an esthetic experience religious. In order to find an answer to this question, we have to explore what is religious about music itself. This chapter aims to point out the religious nature of music, arguing that religiosity can be understood as the experience of transcendence characterized by forgetting all that is individual, and by a sense of oneness and unity with all being. Transcending this human condition means entering a space beyond language, form and individuation. This illuminates the link between music and religion: In the western hemisphere, classical music has often been granted superior access to, and the ability to represent, transcendence. The experience of transcendence, for its part, refers to the relationship between life and death. Overcoming the human condition can be interpreted as a form of dying: The detachment from the ego, from the individuation, represents the detachment from common life itself which can be impressively illustrated in the thinking of Arthur Schopenhauer and Emil Cioran.

Keywords: music, transcendence, death, life, Schopenhauer, Cioran

Citation: Kast, C. (2022). To Learn How to Die – A Philosophical Approach to Music as Medium Between Life and Death. In H. Holm & Ø. Varkøy (Eds.), *Musikk og religion: Tekster om musikk i religion og religion i musikk* (Ch. 3, pp. 37–49). Cappelen Damm Akademisk. <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.177.ch3>
Lisens: CC-BY 4.0

“Music is a more potent instrument than any other for education, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul.”

—Plato, 2005b, *Republic*

Introduction

In the novel *Der Untergeher*, by the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard, the great musician – the artist – aims to become one with his instrument: The pianist’s ambitions cannot be satisfied by him simply playing the piano, generating music on it – he yearns to be the piano, to transform himself into the music, nihilating the difference between himself and the melody (Bernhard, 2020). According to this idea, the will to give up and to give in to music can be understood as the will of self-abandonment: Being absorbed by the music entails the end of the self, of the ego, of time and space – and so in consequence of the human condition. This means that what the true musician longs for is to overcome the human condition – he strives for the experience of transcendence.

Since the experience of transcendence can be understood as a religious phenomenon, we might ask if the protagonist of Bernhard’s novel – intentionally or unintentionally – considers music to be religious itself. Overcoming the human condition means touching the absolute, leaving behind the central characteristics of human existence. In this sense, the musician aims to be affected by another world than the human one – he longs for wholeness instead of isolation, for unconsciousness instead of consciousness, for absoluteness instead of relativity. At this point, we can even go a bit further: Overcoming the human condition can be interpreted as a form of dying. The detachment from the ego, from the individuation, represents the detachment from life itself. Yet, the indicated death is not meant to be the end. In fact, the loss prepares a path to the ground of being and has to be understood as a transition to a superior life, becoming the music itself.

This article aims to explore the described link between classical music, religiosity and transcendence. In this context, two problems are to be

addressed: First, we take a look at the question of whether music can be considered genuinely religious, promising the experience of transcendence. This leads us to the second and central issue: The role of music as a medium between life and death, since transcendence can be understood as detachment from life itself or as the approach to death. We will tackle this question by referring to the Socratic sentence in Plato's *Phaedo*: "To philosophize is to learn how to die" (Plato, 2005a, Phaidon 61d).

We will proceed in three steps: First, the investigation focuses on the meaning of religiosity and its relation to the experience of transcendence. Then, the second chapter illustrates the relation between music and transcendence, referring to the philosophical thoughts of Arthur Schopenhauer and Emile Cioran. While the differences between their philosophies are not to be denied – the one systematic and the other an anti-systematic thinker *par excellence* – to both of them, experiencing music is more than an esthetic and sensual pleasure. For them, music represents a transcending power which makes the human being experience the ground of being: Life itself. The article concludes with some reflections on the question of whether the musical experience can be described as a process of learning how to die.

Religion and religiosity

The assumption that music can be experienced in a religious way in non-religious contexts leads to the problem of what we can call religious. Arguing that music can have a religious effect beyond traditional religious contexts raises the question of what makes an esthetic experience religious. In order to find an answer to this question, we have to explore what is religious about music itself.

This leads us to the following question: Can religiosity only be found in traditional religious contexts? Or, in other words, does religiosity in all its forms find an end in the decline of traditional religions? A materialist philosophy such as the one developed by Karl Marx would affirm that. According to him, the human being is not genuinely religious: Religion is the result of the alienation of man, caused by material exploitation and oppression. Thus, according to him, the religious need is the product of

a false economic condition. Once this oppressive and exploitative condition is destroyed, religion will become unnecessary and religiosity will disappear as well, depending on the phenomenon of traditional religion (Marx, 2005).

With this reference to Marx, we can illustrate a central thought: Since debating about religiosity means speaking about man, the question of religiosity is to be considered as a philosophical and anthropological one. This thought is crucial for the initial question of whether music can be genuinely religious, because there could not be genuinely religious music beyond traditional religion if there was no religiosity in human nature. Being genuinely religious, one can express this predisposition in different forms and spheres. Thus, there can be religious manifestations in atheist contexts, for example. In political theory, some experts (Voegelin, 2007; Talmon, 1963) designate totalitarian ideologies and regimes – fundamentally atheistic forms of power – as political or secular religions, arguing that they place typical religious qualities in earthly entities. Equally, one could ask if modern transhumanism is to be considered as motivated by genuinely religious needs, for example, the longing for immortality and the release from illness and pain. These examples show that we can assume a difference between religion and religiosity, and that religiosity beyond traditional or institutional religion is possible.

For our further discussion about the religious nature of music, it is necessary to clarify the terminology we are working with. In the context of this article, we focus on the religious experience as the experience of transcendence (see Loichinger, 2001). In philosophical and theological contexts, transcendence represents the opposite of immanence. Both concepts serve to point out the relation between the divine and finite realities: “Transcendence means going beyond a limit or surpassing a boundary; immanence means remaining within or existing within the confines of a limit” (Smith). However, and this is decisive, transcendence is not necessarily otherworldly in the sense of traditional religious systems. It simply expresses the act of overcoming human boundaries – of the human condition – and experiencing the absolute instead of the relativity of human existence characterized, among other things, by individuation. Transcendence is where all forms dissolve – the ego, space and time, and

language. Like a religious experience, the experience of transcendence has a specific effect: Leading beyond the human condition – making one forget oneself and the world – this experience has a unique depth, capturing man completely, not just on the periphery of his existence, where sensations, feelings, and moods arise and disappear from moment to moment (Wyss, 1991, p. 79).

At this point, it may already be clear why music is predestinated for experiencing transcendence: Among all of the arts, music is exceptional for its formlessness. In music, all forms are dissolved and its experience dissolves all forms. Thus, being a medium to the experience of transcendence, music can be considered religious, even in non-traditional religious contexts. In order to clarify this argumentation, the following chapter is dedicated to the ideas of two philosophers, one in the 19th century and the other in the 20th: Arthur Schopenhauer and Emile Cioran. Despite the differences in their philosophical views, music is a transcending power for both of them.

Music and transcendence in Schopenhauer's and Cioran's philosophy

As Arthur Schopenhauer was a systematic thinker, in order to discuss his thoughts on music, we first have to understand his interpretation of reality itself. According to Schopenhauer, the essence of things, the Kantian thing-in-itself (*das Ding an sich*), is the will (*der Wille*), an aimless, unconscious and blind desire to perpetuate itself, the basis of life. This blind and incessant impulse dictates the existence of both organic and inorganic matter; the will is the inner nature of each experiencing being, while the world as representation, the phenomenal world, is the “objectification” of the will. In consequence, existence is the expression of an insatiable will generating a world of suffering and futility. The “thing-in-itself” is the root cause of a painful existence, constantly urging the individual toward the satisfaction of successive goals, none of which can provide permanent satisfaction for the infinite activity of the life force, or will. The will points us toward a destination we can never reach, which we nevertheless continue to move toward (Schopenhauer, 2017a, p. 138–218).

Against this background, the pessimistic philosopher thought of ways to overcome the fundamentally painful human condition. In Buddhist fashion, he argued that we have to break with the will and the things that make up the human condition – via artistic, moral and ascetic forms of awareness. For the purposes of this discussion, we focus on the esthetic forms of redemption that Schopenhauer presents to us. He argues that temporary release from the will and the constant suffering born from its insatiability can be found in contemplation of the high arts. In contemplating beauty, one can free oneself from servitude to the will, losing and forgetting oneself in the object of esthetic contemplation. For a brief moment, the individual is able to escape the cycle of unfulfilled desire (Schopenhauer, 2017a, p. 221–321).

For Schopenhauer, music stands apart from all the other arts (Schopenhauer, 2017a, p. 322f.). Rather than representing the will through indirect means as depictions of its real-world manifestations like other art forms, such as poetry or painting, Schopenhauer believed music was a direct manifestation of the will itself, its immediate expression. Consequently, when we listen to music, we connect with a higher truth, the essence of things. According to Schopenhauer, this is why the effect of music is so much more powerful and penetrating than that of any of the other arts, for they only speak of shadows, but music speaks of the thing itself (2017a).

Unlike Schopenhauer, the Romanian-born, French philosopher Emil Cioran is the anti-systematic as well as the anti-metaphysical thinker *par excellence*. Rejecting any philosophical system-building, his work is mostly aphoristic and composed of fragments expressing his experiences and personal reflections. Inspired by the thinking of Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche and Fyodor Dostoevsky, among others, he wrote about central issues of modern existence like solitude, alienation, absurdity, futility, despair, suicide, and death. Dealing with these personal obsessions, Cioran creates an atmosphere of pessimism, nihilism, and radical skepticism in his books. His philosophy is characterized by a tragic vision of human beings: To him, being born is a misfortune, man is a heresy of nature without any sense. The painful condition of man is rooted in the fact that he is condemned to exist as a being with consciousness (Kanterian, 2017).

Thrown into this cruel and hopeless existence, according to Cioran, there is no salvation for man as an individual nor as a species. Thus, all attempts to find redemption, whether in religion, philosophy, politics or science, are in vain. Nevertheless, Cioran believes there are two possible ways to escape from a meaningless and torturing life – and from the human condition: the idea of suicide (Trujillo, 2021) and music (Diaconu, 2016). The possibility of killing oneself is a main concern in Cioran's works (Cioran, 1979). To him, knowing that one can determine the moment of one's death is a lifesaving recognition, as it offers the possibility of agency – herein lies man's essential choice between being and nonbeing, the idea of which gives life a certain kind of meaning.

Besides the thought of suicide, music has a tremendous impact on Cioran (2019). To him, music is the one element that contradicts his nihilism – without Bach, according to Cioran's confession, he would be an absolute nihilist (Cioran, 2008, p. 2008). The reason why he considers music to be the limit of his nihilism is his conviction that music is the “language of transcendence”, making man experience the absolute, eternity and immortality. In music, Cioran retrieves the beatitude of the paradise lost. Eden is where man is not yet man – without consciousness of himself or the world around him. Eden symbolizes lost innocence, freedom from all of the burdens of existence man suffers during his lifetime. Bursting the individuation that isolates man, musical exaltation makes the tortured human being divine in a world of God's beauty – thus, to Cioran, music is not of human but divine essence (Cioran, 2019, p. 7).

“To learn how to die” - music as a medium between life and death

As we can see, both Schopenhauer and Cioran ascribe a redeeming effect to music. Redemption means being freed from the human condition: Music makes us experience our own nonbeing, tearing us away from our individuation. We want to further develop the idea of the transcendent power of music: The fact that music brings us closer to nonbeing can also be interpreted as an approach to death. Nonbeing – as the disappearance of the ego, the individuation – means dying. At first glance, the thought

that transcending the human condition represents a sort of dying may seem strange to us: Death is the human's *summum malum*, knowing about the finitude of his existence. So why should one strive for the experience of music, making one's being dissolve? Or, in other words, why should we aspire to the experience of death in music?

A look at ancient philosophy can help us to answer this question. In Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*, we read Socrates' sentence that "to philosophize is to learn how to die" (Plato, 2005a, *Phaedo* 61d) as meaning that those who philosophize would do nothing else than prepare themselves for the moment of dying. The occasion of this utterance is the final hours before the execution of Socrates, in which he engages in a debate with his friends about the philosopher's relationship to death. As surprising as it is disturbing to his friends, Socrates, facing his death, sees nothing frightening about dying. His fearlessness seems inhuman, even harsh, in the face of their grief and fear: Is not philosophy, especially the Socratic one, about learning how to live, not how to die?

Even if the initial point of the discussion is physical death, it quickly becomes clear that the actual subject of the debate is another form of dying than the physical one. In any case, one dies only once. How then should one exercise dying in the concrete sense? By speaking about learning how to die, Socrates addresses the intellectual preparation for the end of existence – for one's nonbeing. For this, the search for truth is essential: The aim of philosophical endeavor is to free oneself from all fixed ideas and categories through intellectual work. Leaving behind the changing everyday truths, the philosopher approaches the absolute and eternal truth by becoming a part of it. Spiritual detachment from illusionary truths should bring about existential detachment from all ties to the ego and its attachment to everyday life. In this sense, philosophy is a transforming and changing force: The seeker for truth overcomes – transcends – the human condition, bringing the absolute and the eternal into his existence and becoming a part of it.

Dedicating his life to the search for truth, the philosopher has lived for the greatest good. By approaching it during his lifetime, transforming into it, death can no longer be the greatest evil for him. He has nothing to lose; he is free to go. For the purpose of our analysis that means: The

one who knows how to live knows equally how to die. Living and dying, life and death: There is no one without the other, both are two sides of the same coin. This shows that, speaking of learning how to die, Socrates does not imply that death is the aim of philosophy. On the contrary, the philosopher's destiny is not death but life – life beyond the human condition. So, the longing for transcendence is not the longing for death – it is the longing for true life which is to be found during a lifetime. Thus, the afterlife, even if it is broadly discussed in *Phaedo*, is not actually necessary for Socrates. He has reached the absolute and eternal. The French philosopher Michel de Montaigne took up the Socratic sentence, but especially in the sense of a *memento mori* (De Montaigne, 2005, p. 60–70). The daily reflection on death would, according to De Montaigne, diminish his terror. For him, learning to die means the highest degree of freedom that man can attain.

What can we learn from this for our reflections on music? The paths of philosophy and music may be different – philosophy chooses the rational path, music relies on esthetic power – but the goal seems to remain the same: Transcendence. Thus, both – music and philosophy – testify to the fundamental longing of humans to overcome the human condition. In this sense, we can apply the Socratic sentence to the sphere of music – through music we can learn how to die or, as we have seen, to live. Yet music captures us beyond reason as well as beyond language, detaching us from our ego, not in a rational or logical way but rather in an emotional and sensual way. Enraptured and swept away by music, one can immediately experience the dissolution of the ego – breaking all ties to oneself and one's own life. The world disappears; only music remains. Nothing else matters.

Music's beginning marks the end of individuation. Yet the indicated death is not meant to be the end. In fact, the loss prepares a path to the ground of being and has to be understood as a transition to a superior life, requiring our nonbeing, our metaphysical death in music. We can illustrate this using the reasoning of Schopenhauer and Cioran.

For Schopenhauer, life is pain and death the inevitable destiny of human beings – the aim and purpose of life. We are born to die. One cannot escape the triumph of death (Schopenhauer, 2017b, p. 541–596). While humans – aware of the certainty of death – are frightened to die,

Schopenhauer, however, maintains that death, far from being an evil, is something desirable, a friend we should welcome. In death we experience the final release we strive for during our lifetime.

In order to reconcile ourselves with the idea of death, according to Schopenhauer, we have to realize that all individuality – all individuation – is alike unreal, an illusion of the phenomenal world, created by the thing-in-itself, the will. However, the end of our individuality is what threatens us most: Schopenhauer claims that everyone is given to himself directly and everything else indirectly as a representation for the subject, with the consequence that the individual is the only real being in the world. Thus, it appears as if when one dies, the world itself ends. The only cure for the fear of death consists, for Schopenhauer, in seeing through the illusion of our individuation – realizing the illusional character of the ego and our whole existence. Losing this illusion, one will recognize that even if individuality ceases with death, the essence of being is indestructible and remains part of the process of life. In fact, the individual death is meaningless, a delusion just like the individual life. Dying, one returns to the will, the origin and essence of life, as an unconscious eternity beyond time and space (Schopenhauer, 2017b, p. 573).

Being aware of Schopenhauer's reflections on music – as the direct manifestation of the will – we are able to conclude that the musical experience could be interpreted as a death experience. The illusional individuation fades away, entirely dissolves, absorbed by the melody, which means being absorbed by the entity we are embedded in. In music, we experience dying, we learn how to die, while facing pure life beyond the limits of the human condition.

Despite all the differences in their reasoning, Cioran has a quite similar argumentation to Schopenhauer regarding the relationship of music to death. He designates the musical ecstasy as a return to identity, to the original, to the absolute: “I *hear* life. All revelation begins here” (Cioran, 2019, p. 10). The approach to death reveals itself as an approach to true and pure life, a life beyond the human condition, promising eternity, liberating us from the burden of being human. In Cioran's philosophy of music we are confronted with the paradise lost, with his Edenic nostalgia; in this sense, he writes that listening to Mozart makes him regret Adam's fall.

After all, living in expectation of death, all human beings are condemned to the fear of death. Rejecting all intellectual promises and solutions vehemently, Cioran is convinced that only music can alleviate this fear, heal it and finally turn it into joy, into “joy of dying” (Cioran, 2019, p. 10). No thought has ever redeemed man from the fear of death, according to him (Cioran, 2019, p. 19). To music, he attests the absolute superiority: No other condition than musical ecstasy would give man the instant and incomparable willingness to die. The exaltation in musical experience is the deepest and highest experience possible – in this moment of bliss man is free to let go of life, to give himself up. The fear of death disappears, the fear of losing that moment of bliss, of pure life, arises (Cioran, 2019, p. 10). Yet Cioran draws an unusual conclusion: The ecstatic moments of musical experience, those moments which make one want to die, can give the meaningless life meaning, showing us that there is something to love in life and how much we have to lose as a result. The futility of transcendent moments in music leaves us with the regret that we did not die on those heights of existence. Music is the expression of human longing for life: If you want to live, to truly be alive, you have to die. In the moment of the deepest vitality you are ready to go.

Closing words

According to Plato, music has a tremendous power, finding its way into the innermost soul and taking a strong hold upon it. (Plato, 2005b, *Republic*, 47c) Thus, in his *Republic*, he points out the ambivalent character of music: Able to evade reason and to penetrate into the very core of the self, music can cause good and harm. The ambiguous character of music is particularly evident in Cioran’s reflections. Musical ecstasy can uplift us, but it can also destroy us, making it impossible to return to reality – to everyday life, to ourselves, to individuation. After the heights of the musical experience, one faces the threat of falling into profound abysses. In this sense, Rüdiger Safranski writes that Friedrich Nietzsche’s fundamental problem was how to go on living when the music ends (Safranski, 2008, p. 9), which means: How to live at all, how to be human? Religious experiences, like the transcending power of music, can have the

effect of a drug intoxication (Wyss, 1991, p. 82). Having a similar intense experience with music, one can find oneself addicted, instead of being liberated, despising life and escaping from it – longing for the drug which makes life bearable.

These brief deliberations on the anthropological and existential dimension of music show how superficial today's debates about so-called Artistic Artificial Intelligence are (see, for example, Rautenberg, 2021). The conviction that AI can be an artist – or even a better artist than any human can be – is rooted in the modern capitalist mind, which sees music as an element of production and consumption, with no sense or meaning beyond that. From a technical point of view, an AI that manages to generate 5,000 Bach chorales in one day may be astounding but we doubt if there is a deeper worth beyond. At this point, it might be inspiring to refer to Byung-Chul Han, a contemporary German philosopher: His reasoning centers on the lost ability to transcend oneself in Western neoliberal societies. In this context, he speaks of the “agony of the Eros” – Eros is understood as the power that makes us strive to overcome ourselves (Han, 2012). Due to hyper-individualism and the rejection of self-negation – necessary for every form of transcendence, according to Han – the Other is eradicated, which means that no actual and true experience of something Other is possible. The absolutization of the ego generates depressive and narcissistic individuals, incapable of escaping from their selves (Han, 2012).

If one wants to be truly alive, one has to die, metaphorically speaking; there is no affirmation of life without the affirmation of death. The inability to die in today's Western societies makes the people, to Han, “undead” (Han, 2019). The undead individual described by Han may fit in in the utopia of algorithmic arts. Yet this individual may never experience the abysses of music, never learn to die nor to live through them.

References

- Bernhard, T. (2020). *Der Untergeher*. Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag.
 Cioran, E. M. (2008). *Das Gesamtwerk*. Suhrkamp Verlag.
 Cioran, E. M. (1979). *Die verfehlte Schöpfung*. Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag.

- Cioran, E. M. (2019). *Das Buch der Täuschungen*. Bibliothek Suhrkamp.
- De Montaigne, M. (2005). *Die Essais*. Anaconda.
- Diaconu, M. (2016). Ciorans romantische Metaphysik der Musik. In T. Kahl (Ed.), *Von Hora, Doina und Lautaren: Einblicke in die rumänische Musik und Musikwissenschaft* (pp. 543–563). Frank & Timme.
- Han, B.-C. (2012). *Agonie des Eros*. Matthes & Seitz.
- Han, B.-C., (2019). *Kapitalismus und Todestrieb. Essays und Gespräche*. Matthes & Seitz.
- Kanterian, E. (2017). Cioran als Nihilist, Skeptiker und politischer Essayist. In *Philosophische Rundschau*, 64(4), 349–374.
- Loichinger, A. (2001). Musik und religiöse Erfahrung. In *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, 123(1), 69–82.
- Marx, K. (2005). *Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripte*, (B. Zehnppennig, Ed.). Meiner Verlag.
- Plato. (2005a). *Phaedo*. In Platon, *Werke in acht Bänden*. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Plato. (2005b). *Republic*. In Platon, *Werke in acht Bänden*. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Rautenberg, H. (2021). *Die Kunst der Zukunft. Über den Traum von der kreativen Maschine*. Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag.
- Safranski, R. (2008). *Nietzsche. Biographie seines Denkens*. Fischer Verlag.
- Schopenhauer, A. (2017a). Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung I. Erster Teilband. In A. Schopenhauer, *Werke in zehn Bänden*. Diogenes Verlag.
- Schopenhauer, A. (2017b). Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung II. Zweiter Teilband. In A. Schopenhauer, *Werke in zehn Bänden*. Diogenes Verlag.
- Smith J. E. The structure of religious experience. In <https://www.britannica.com/topic/religious-experience/The-structure-of-religious-experience#ref421295>
- Talmon, J. (1963). *Politischer Messianismus*. Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Trujillo, Jr., G. M. (2021). The benefits of being a suicidal curmudgeon: Emil Cioran on killing yourself. *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 37(1), 219–228.
- Voegelin, E. (2007). *Die politischen Religionen*. Periangoge.
- Wyss, D. (1991). *Psychologie und Religion. Untersuchungen zur Ursprünglichkeit religiösen Erlebens*. Königshausen & Neumann.