



Cross-Disciplinary Interplay
between the Humanities,
Technology and Musical Practice

**Thursday,
November 17, 2011.
2:15-4 p.m. in U73.**

Guest lecture in the seminar series
**Topics in the Aesthetics of
Music and Sound,**
<http://soundmusicresearch.org/seminarsfall2011.html>.

Two Dogmas and the Arts

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Abstract: In 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism', Quine discredits the analytic/synthetic distinction and kindred dualisms – scheme/content, necessary/contingent, a priori/a posteriori. He thereby undermines the conceptual underpinnings of traditional philosophy. In the final section of the paper, 'Empiricism without the Dogmas' he asks, in effect, what is left for philosophy to do once the traditional supports have been abandoned. His answer echoes that of the logical positivists – mathematics and natural science remain. Remarkably, he never argues for – indeed never seriously investigates – the assumption that only mathematics and science remain. He takes it for granted that ethics and the arts are irremediably committed to the untenable dualisms.

I think this is a mistake. I believe that the arts, like the sciences, advance understanding. I will argue that music exemplifies properties, patterns, feelings and forms. By making them manifest, it enables us to identify them, recognize them when we encounter them in other contexts, and appreciate their

significance. Music thus affords epistemic access to aspects of reality that were previously inaccessible to us. Some are purely or predominantly musical – melodies, harmonies, rhythms, motifs. Others are broadly aesthetic – stylistic properties that cut across genres. Yet others extend beyond the arts. The polite, restrained struggle to be heard, the trade-offs and negotiations that we first recognize in a string quartet can make us aware that the same features are present in ordinary conversational practice. Some of the features music exemplifies are even more abstract. Bach's fugues afford auditory access to mathematical symmetries. Many works exemplify complex and/or subtle emotions, enabling us to discern fine distinctions, recognize surprising equivalences, and appreciate combinations of emotions that we were previously oblivious to. By increasing our sensitivity to what there is and our appreciation of why newly discerned factors are significant, we advance our understanding of ourselves and the world.

The rebuttal to Quine is this: A musical work, like a mathematical proof, can exemplify structure. A musical work, like a scientific experiment, can reveal previously undetected aspects of reality. Like any hypothesis, a hypothesis suggested by an encounter with music, or any other art, must be tested against further experience. Some findings are misleading; some are ambiguous; some are enigmatic. Others are powerful, sustainable, resonant sources of insight. This too is a feature that the arts and the sciences share.

ALL ARE WELCOME!