PROFESSOR LUNDY'S GUIDE TO ROCK MUSIC CONNOISSEURSHIP

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Developing Defendable Aesthetic Judgment and Discovering the Most Worthwhile Music Experiences

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Preface

I have often said that one of my main goals in life is to hear every good song ever written. This book represents an earnest and passionate quest to find such music and contrast it with lesser music. It is a union of several of my major interests: music, psychology, the scientific method, statistics, and aesthetics in general. My wife and I constantly attempt to rate countless things for aesthetic quality, as we are always looking for the best of everything, whether it be films, TV shows, paintings, literature, restaurants, cities, architecture, team logos, and so on. While this list could go on and on, music is by far my most passionate interest area. I have been systematically and continuously thinking about music rating since the early 1990s when I was an undergraduate at the University of Toronto. Eventually, I went from studying physical facial beauty and other interpersonal attraction variables to designing studies on *empirical aesthetics* (the scientific study of beauty and the arts). After completing Master's and doctorate degrees in Experimental Psychology, I have since conducted many studies on aesthetics and published my findings in several papers in various social science journals.

The appreciation of great and beautiful things such as music is partly a social endeavour; one reason I wrote this book was to share with other audiophiles great music that they might not otherwise be aware of. Overall, I had the following three main goals (organized into three sections):

(A) **Show interested people the keys to doing a "disciplined knowing" search for degrees of music quality, while considering key aesthetic criteria and minimizing nonaesthetic biases** (Chapters 1 to 3). This goal involves discussing defendable elements used to decipher levels of aesthetic quality, including subdimensions of such quality to consider. This requires a great deal of homework in order to earn one's place in the group we could call "connoisseurs". For one thing we need to minimize as many aesthetically irrelevant (but common) biased human tendencies as possible. I ultimately attempted to maximize proportionality to recognize how thousands of albums and tens of thousands of songs match up against each other.

(B) **Show a precise but usable aesthetic rating method applied to music that maximizes *proportionality* (from Lundy, 2012)** (Chapter 4). This goal describes a rating method (*Definitive Levels of Aesthetic Impact Rating Method* or *DLAIRM*) that any interested person can use to effectively rate music (or any aesthetic works) in a more meaningful and proportional way. This method allows each person to refine his or her own precision about aesthetic sensitivity and aesthetic impact. The philosophical and the empirical are applied to the practical, rating modern music. If we are to ever have anything close to what I term *aesthetic justice* (recognition of truly greater works of art and greater artists over lesser ones), then we need to have a reliably precise system to allow contrasting comparisons among a large body of works. The end result is a more clear indication of truly great songs and albums once the common tendency toward inflated ratings and other biases are effectively removed.

(C) **Provide a shortcut to great aesthetic experiences in music, including my determinations of the best of all time for musicians, albums and songs** (Chapters 5 to 8). Based on my thousands of hours of homework for goals A & B just noted, the third goal is to present to the reader my resulting perceptions of aesthetic impact for songs and albums for roughly the last half of the 20th century (arguably the most diverse and exceptional period in popular music). These ratings and lists represent my refined perceptions based on my rating method (*DLAIRM*) that I started in the early 1990s.

Next it will be your turn to determine your perceptions, but to be taken seriously by others they need to be as precise, proportional, and as unbiased as possible. However, critical thinking is not something that people are necessarily used to employing in the arts, seemingly "taking a break" from scientific thinking in this realm. Thus, bias is commonplace, and people make assumptions like "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" without examining the evidence. Although aesthetics will never be 100% objective, I hope that the goal of greater reflection through the use of some scientifically based tools may help others see musical aesthetics more clearly and precisely. This book is based on a combination of my reading of the philosophical and empirical aesthetics literature, as well as professional critics' narratives, my own published studies, and over 30 years of experience actively listening to more than 100,000 songs between 1960 and 1999.

I roughly follow the definition of *Aesthetics* from the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy (Blackburn, 1996): "…feelings, concepts, and judgements arising from our appreciation of the arts or of the wider class of objects

considered moving, or beautiful, or sublime" (p. 8). More than anything else, this book represents a description of a proportional rating system for music aesthetics that any interested aesthetes can use. Can aesthetic perceptions be improved through training and become more objective? My research certainly suggests that the answer to this age-old question is a resounding "yes". Aesthetes unite! In an age when music has become more and more individualized via technology and choice (Frith, 2004), it is my hope that many passionately informed music listeners can step outside their bubbles of nonaesthetic biases and come to share some "high aesthetic quality" spaces.

A social scientist generally assumes that something is not true unless empirical evidence suggests otherwise; a scientist of aesthetic quality only has the "data" in the form of the refined aesthetic perception of experts, at least until one becomes one of the experts themselves. Humans have been attempting to compare various works of art for centuries, in such domains as music, dance, visual art, theatre, films, literature, and architecture. This has been done mainly qualitatively, but sometimes quantitatively. In terms of music, this has been done haphazardly and almost randomly at worst, and with occasional, approximate accuracy at best. Professional critics tend to agree more often than they disagree in their appraisal of music quality (Lundy, 2010), but there is still much room for improvement.

Another focus of this guide is to provide many actual examples of various levels of aesthetic experiences as a crash-course training mechanism for those interested in experiencing great music of diverse subgenres of rock and related genres. I also provide a list of key variables found to affect aesthetic impact as well as a list of key nonaesthetically biased variables found to contaminate aesthetic judgments. The expert critic is eventually able to perceive degrees of aesthetic quality fairly quickly and accurately (Rader, 1960, as cited by Broudy, Smith, & Burnett, 1966), which is important in an ever growing and potentially overwhelming volume of potentially aesthetic stimuli. As Shelley (1998) has suggested, one can improve one's *perceptual acuity*. Similarly, Child and Schwartz (1967) concluded from much research on this topic that "…the most valuable approach might stress independent exploration, with the teacher assuming the role of guide and companion, rather than authoritative schoolmaster" (p. 35). This is similar to a quote from Jeanette Bicknell's (2009) final chapter in her book, *Why Music Moves Us*: "…life is short. If one wants to experience the very best music and art that is available, then critical guidance can help us find those great works more easily than we could on our own" (p. 141).

My goal is to be a guide and companion to a world of rewarding (and often lesser known) music, but in a proportionally precise way. And by following the process of connoisseurship I describe, almost anyone's critical acuity can probably be improved. I hope you will allow me to be your "music maven". According to Malcolm Gladwell (2002), mavens are information specialists who accumulate knowledge through both their natural inclinations and wealth of experiences. They also possess a desire to help others, which makes them worth paying attention to. But they are always interested in constantly learning more themselves, being both a teacher and a student. In a nutshell, passing on my developmental process of music connoisseurship is one of the main aims of this book.

Although I value practically all types of music, and there are great albums in practically all genres, some had to be left out. If I wanted to finish and publish this book in this lifetime, completeness in terms of inclusion of all genres was not possible. Thus, this book contains no pure classical, jazz, blues, reggae, rap, folk, country, or world music; it focuses on english language rock that overlaps with other areas. Any motivated aesthete could potentially use the ideas covered here to do justice to any years and genres that I do not cover. If we were to conservatively estimate that 10 rock songs were released per day (roughly one album) that would yield 3650 songs per year, or 146,000 songs (or 14,600 albums) in 40 years. That is a lot of music to listen to, let alone rate. This is only in the time period and music genres covered in this book, i.e., almost the second half of the 20th century, 1960–1999, an amazingly creative period in music history. (The 1950s are not included here because albums were not numerous enough, with the focus more on singles.) By listening to new albums almost every day for many years, at last count I had heard well over 10,000 full albums from this period (and have briefly checked thousands more for potential greatness). The average music listener has probably not heard 5% of these songs or albums. It would also be tough for Canadian-American-English-language-speaking me to judge the best Chinese or Indian music, so I don't have anything to offer in these areas. I agree with Gracyk (2007) that any genre requires acquired listening skills, but I do not believe that this means one cannot compare across familiar genres in terms of overall aesthetic quality. My choice has been to focus on the areas with which I am most familiar: rock and some genres that cross-over with and contribute to this domain (e.g., eclectic artists such as Robert Cray, UB40 and Eddy Grant are included). In terms of rock's central features, I defer to Gracyk (1996), who refers to "rock music" as a mostly collaborative musical tradition with fuzzy boundaries that is an intersection of various performance styles with a focus first and foremost on (usually amplified) recorded music, wherein the same reproduced versions can be heard by everyone. Other than this, you know it when you hear it, clearly distinct compared to musical forms like pure classical, pure jazz or pure country.

This book also does not include long biographical narratives on each musician, as these have been done very well in books elsewhere (see various *Rolling Stone* book publications or the *MusicHound* or *All Music Guide* (*AMG*) series, for example). You simply cannot just listen to a small percentage of works and hold any weight as a critical connoisseur. In the end, my main focus has been on looking for the *best*

music, a much smaller body of work. The top albums are then analyzed in much greater detail than other books, song by song, and also rated on many different dimensions, such as originality, lyrics, melody, dynamics, production, and so on. (To qualify as an "album", I only include works here that were at least 25 minutes long.)

Unlike some critics, I am not trying to personally insult particular musicians, hence my focus on bests not worsts, and ultimately a celebration of great music. I'm simply rating the studio albums that they (and their record companies) have released compared to all other albums. If they release only a few weak albums, that doesn't necessarily mean that they couldn't have made a good one, that they weren't great live, or that they didn't have great unreleased songs.

You will find this book especially enjoyable and useful IF:

1) You agree that some music is objectively better than other music (e.g., the best songs by The Beatles are better than the best songs by The Monkees');
2) You are constantly searching for potentially exciting new music, including music from lesser known artists (sadly, most people have not yet discovered The Go-Betweens, Paul K, The Church, or Prefab Sprout, for instance);
3) You are not satisfied listening to the same group of hit songs year after year, either on the radio or via other limiting or overwhelming sources (e.g., radio stations almost never play hundreds of fantastic songs, such as "*End of the Line*" by Roxy Music or "*Golden Hours*" by Brian Eno);
4) You often like to adopt an *aesthetic attitude* toward music. You like to think about what makes one song or album higher or lower in *aesthetic value* than another song or album, rather than just listening to music to achieve personal or social goals (e.g., Radiohead's *The Bends* is a lot better album than Radiohead's *Pablo Honey* because of greater consistency, melody, vocals, dynamics, etc.);
5) You want to become more of a connoisseur of music and you believe this requires self-training and other homework;
6) You would like to sometimes be able to convince other people *why* some piece of music is great and essential listening for anyone who loves music;
7) You want to expand other peoples' musical horizons by recommending amazing but lesser known musicians (and share mind-expanding and unique "mix tapes"), and you want to curate your own music collection to its essential core.

The book unfolds in the following way.

Chapter 1 (An Introduction to Connoisseurship) lays out the defining characteristics of what having a connoisseur's "aesthetic focus" means, how experts of aesthetic judgment tend to differ from nonexperts, and how to begin the process of becoming more of an expert and less of a nonexpert. In short, there are subjective elements to aesthetic appraisals, and for most people these elements may often predominate. Everyone is an amateur critic; however, if one is interested in taking an aesthetic stance, aesthetic appreciation does not *have* to be mostly subjective; in fact, a key assumption of this book is that appraisals of aesthetic quality *can become largely objective* (not unlike good teachers being able to grade student papers objectively). There will always be some individual disagreement in any aesthetic domain, but an important skill for any judge is to figure out how to be consistent within one's own aesthetic perceptions, making one's ratings as proportional and meaningful as possible.

An important goal of this book is to provide many actual examples of various levels of aesthetic experiences as a crash-course training mechanism for those interested in experiencing great music of diverse subgenres of rock and related genres. I also provide a list of key variables found to affect aesthetic impact as well as a list of key non-aesthetically biased variables found to contaminate judgments. The expert sees aesthetic quality more efficiently, which is important in an ever growing and overwhelming volume of potentially aesthetic stimuli. My goal is to be that guide and companion to a world of rewarding but often lesser known music, but in a proportionally precise way, and show others how to be more precise as well.

Chapter 2 (Music Rating Aesthetic Criteria), based partly on ideas and research data from scholars of aesthetics across centuries and nationalities, this chapter lays out the basic idea of what tends to create aesthetic quality in general (such as "unity in diversity"), and then presents twelve specific aesthetic criteria that help to distinguish albums from each other in overall aesthetic quality. The twelve aesthetic criteria are: *Accessibility (AC), Consistency (CO), Diversity (DI), Durability (DU), Dynamics (DY), Instrumentation (IN), Lyrics (LY), Melody (ML), Originality (OR), Production (PR), Sophistication (SO)*, and *Vocals (VO)*. This chapter ends with a consideration of potential factors that can contribute to making music "bad".

Chapter 3 (Minimizing Nonaesthetic Biases) lays out the main biases that humans beings tend to have when they try to appraise aesthetic products. Eleven such biases are described, including research that supports the existence and problematic nature of each one, as well as ways to minimize them in future music judgments. These biases are: *Familiarity, Historical, Conformity, Genre, Subject Matter, Personal Prejudices, Personal Idiosyncrasies, Impaired State, Lacking in Good Sense, Numerical Rating*, and *Unbalanced Judgment*.

Chapter 4 (The Definitive Levels of Aesthetic Impact Rating Method (DLAIRM)) lays out the precise method that I started to formulate in the early 1990s, developed and refined over several years, and published in 2012. It maximizes rating precision and proportionality. I describe exactly how any audiophile who is up to the task can become the most reliable and valid version of him or herself, aesthetically speaking. This includes a step

by step description of how to apply DLAIRM to one's own ratings. This process explains how all the song and album ratings in this book were determined, with the goal of maximizing precision and proportionality, one rater at a time. This published rating method (*DLAIRM*; Lundy, 2012) is a way of achieving maximum proportionality of ratings and repeatable internal reliability (that is, consistency within yourself) through organized and systematic ratings, thereby allowing a greater chance of accuracy. Ultimately, if this method is used by all judges it is suggested that this will result in the most accurate and meaningful measure of consensus. DLAIRM is not focused on prescribing what music someone should like or not like, but how to quantify and organize music you are trying to appraise. This chapter also includes a copy of my *Desire for Aesthetics Scale* (*DFAS*), and how to score oneself on it. This 36-item published scale measures individual differences in the extent to which various forms of beauty matters to people in everyday life (Lundy, Schenkel, Akrie, & Walker, 2010). The chapter ends with a comparison of how this book differs from, and overlaps with, other music rating guides.

Chapter 5 (Best Albums Lists) represents the fruits of my intense labors over 30 years of doing "my homework" (including listening intently to thousands of albums). Any method of music connoisseurship that is worthwhile should be able to be effectively applied to specific music. This is the section where, based on a careful use of a precise and contrasting method of exemplars (*DLAIRM*), I provide developing connoisseurs my suggestions for the most essential listening experiences. These are the works that would get my vote for the essential canon of the highest aesthetic impact for this period of modern rock music. This includes my choices for the best albums for each and every year between 1960 and 1999. At the end of this chapter, I also include a list of albums that succeed the most on each of the twelve aesthetic criteria described in Chapter 2. Thus, readers who might weight certain criteria higher

than others (such as *originality* versus *accessibility*) can use this information to seek out exemplar albums that are particularly high in their preferred subdimensions. As one should expect, many of these albums are highly regarded by many professional critics, although there are some important surprises.

Chapter 6 (Best Songs Lists) lays out my perceptions of the best 3000 rock songs between 1960 and 1999, what I consider to be roughly the top 5% of all songs released within this 40-year period. Many of these songs have rarely if ever been played on "the radio", so may be unfamiliar to most readers.

Chapter 7 (Rated Songographies of Prolific Musicians) asks key questions like, "What could possibly be the very best Beatles, Rolling Stones, or Bruce Springsteen songs?", or "How many great songs they made compared to other musicians?". This chapter precisely summarizes my perceptions of the good, great and greatest songs released by the most prolific musicians between 1960 and 1999. In order from 100 down to 60, all of the "good" or better songs released by each musician are listed.

Chapter 8 (Aesthetic Conclusions) considers patterns in great albums and songs and comes up with 17 intriguing conclusions. Such realizations include: "Most albums are closer in aesthetic quality than is implied by conventional critics' ratings with their less precise rating scales", "Truly exceptional albums (80%+) and even great albums (70–80%) are much less common than is implied by most critics' ratings (where inflated ratings are the norm)", and "Fame is often misleading - some relatively unknown musicians have many more strong songs than many well-known musicians".

In short, this book is dedicated to everyone who loves to seek out great music, and to all those talented musicians who had to unnecessarily suffer years of under-appreciation because of the focus of (most) radio stations, (many) uninformed and biased listeners, and (a few) inept critics.

Acknowledgments

Part I

Aesthetic Criteria and Nonaesthetic Biases

Chapter 1
An Introduction to Connoisseurship

This book is not quite like any other critical review of music in print. It makes the seemingly audacious assumption that many people, if they are motivated enough, can refine their listening habits to more objectively determine greater and lesser works of music (which is not for the "faint of art"). The method I describe to rate the albums here is organized, systematic, and explained in great detail. It attempts to be far more precise than any other book, four to ten times more precise to be exact. It uses fairly basic psychological and statistical concepts to create a detailed method that people can apply in order to decipher the best of the best and the worst of the worst in music, and everything in between. It could be used (and hopefully enjoyed) by any person who loves music and is interested in an ongoing search for great music. It is not expected that you will agree with all of the ratings here, but that, if you wish, you can use the developed system to do your own ratings, make them precise and proportional, and compare them to others' judgments. You are also being given a shortcut to find great songs and albums that you may not be aware of. However, this is more the demonstration of a precise rating *method*, and a quest to improve perceptions of aesthetic quality, rather than a claim to have a monopoly on knowing all the highest quality music.

This chapter lays out the defining characteristics of what a connoisseur's "aesthetic focus" means, how experts of aesthetic judgment tend to differ from nonexperts, and how to begin becoming more of an expert and less of a nonexpert.

1.1 ADOPTING AN AESTHETIC FOCUS

There are many reasons why people listen to music and why different individuals might have different reactions to the same music (see Hodges, 2013, for an exquisitely brief summary of the myriad possibilities). One's preferences and reactions will depend in large part on one's goals. People often use music in everyday life for various instrumental purposes (Gracyk, 2007; Rubin, 2002; Wilson, 2007), such as mood management (Zillman, 1988). I am not denying the potential for individual personal meaningfulness in any of these possibilities. I am simply focused on the *aesthetic judgment* piece, where one is focused on trying to make some determination of the overall *aesthetic quality*

of pieces of music that could possibly have some meaning beyond idiosyncratic preferences, so that aesthetically minded individuals could reasonably be expected to hear similar levels of quality. The existence of other motives for listening to music does not negate the possibility that one can also focus on aesthetic quality and do so with defendable consistency. Not all music that is good in instrumental/personal ways is necessarily high in aesthetic quality; however, it is true that music that is high in aesthetic quality will also be good for at least some instrumental/personal function(s). For example, a great Brian Eno song will not just be great for aesthetic appreciation; its aesthetic qualities will make it potentially great for other purposes as well, such as background for driving through the Smoky Mountains or doing your Sociology 101 homework. Such are the kinds of added bonuses of finding music high in aesthetic quality. In contrast, for me, if a song was not at least above neutral in aesthetic quality then I would probably never use it willingly for any instrumental purposes.

My focus then is to elucidate the key factors that should aid in this aesthetic quality goal of evaluation, and I will discuss the key philosophers and social scientists who I believe can bring us closer to this nonidiosyncratic place. I do not expect everyone to have the same reactions to all music. There will never be absolutely perfect consensus, partly because we are all genetically and environmentally unique. Consequently, there are individual differences in senses, perception, and specific environments, all contributing to personality and other differences that affect ratings (Payne, 1967; Juslin, 2019). However, there is plenty of evidence that sophisticated observers can be highly in sync (especially about the very best and very worst music). For example, my own research shows that my ratings tend to be moderately positively correlated with a large number of professional critics. I would also guess that the critics I tend to agree with are already "naturally" using many of the keys that I recommend in this book, but they do not discuss any strategies explicitly.

When we find that we disagree, if we have stated our aesthetic criteria explicitly, at least we know why we disagree. Furthermore, when we use a standard logical, and statistically sound method at least we know *by how much* we disagree about aesthetic quality. However, without following the same system and criteria, "3-star" or "60% album"

does not mean the same thing among different critics. Even if it turns out that there is only moderate agreement between critics, at least we put it to the proper test as we began to think about the specifics required to compare fairly across raters. This leads us to a more confident conclusion with regards to the old question about whether taste can be somewhat objective, or if it is 100% subjective, and we will have a measure of the *degree of subjectivity*. Objective versus subjective dimensions exist in all areas of life, with most things being somewhere in between: "All measurement in science and technology is necessarily filled with subjective elements…" (Muckler, 1992, p. 441). The goal here is to be as objective as possible while stating the factors used to appraise music (what I call *aesthetic transparency*). Because people may weigh various aesthetic factors like originality versus lyrics versus vocals differently, we need to specify these weightings clearly, otherwise, "Two people who disagree about a work of art may actually not be talking about the same thing" (Pratt, 1956, p. 3).

In short, there are surely some subjective elements to aesthetic appraisals, but for most people these nonaesthetic biases may dominate their perceptions. However, if one is interested in taking an aesthetic stance, aesthetic appreciation does not *have* to be mostly subjective; again, a key assumption of this book is that appraisals of aesthetic quality *can become largely objective*. Of course, such objectivity, evidenced partly by agreement about relative aesthetic quality, may be easier in some aesthetic domains (music, film) than others (visual art). There are certainly subjective aspects, but according to Manns (1998), in his discussion of Kant's view of aesthetics, these aspects do not necessarily have to be private and idiosyncratic. We should expect a reasonable proportion of aesthetic consensus, implying a degree of human objectivity. It will be interesting to see to what extent (trained) peoples' personal universes of music preferences are overlapping. Even if consensus turns out to be somewhat lower than expected, at the very least I have been consistent and proportional within my own ratings and you can learn to do the same. If nothing else, subgroups of people with similar aesthetic criteria can help each other find new albums that they will enjoy.

I define *"aesthetic impact"* as a combination of factors that culminate in a greater or lesser listening experience for an "educated" or "sophisticated" listener. This would be similar to Child's (1962) term *aesthetic value*, or what Eysenck (1957) called *aesthetic merit*. I prefer the term *impact* because it also puts some focus on the *perceiver*, taking into account individual differences in perception that affect a particular person's experience with a particular song; terms like merit, value or quality alone sound a little too final, implying there is an absolute and singularly correct answer. However, the *aesthetic* part of this term means that the perception should be as unbiased and finely tuned as possible. The term *aesthetic impact* could then apply to any area of individuals' reactions to any sensory and perceptual objects (i.e., any area of art, food, beer, wine, etc.). The assumption here is that if we are looking for a valid

measure of aesthetic quality then the best we can do is to use expert listeners' perceptions of aesthetic impact, especially if we observe independent corroboration of such impact from several experts. But what makes someone an expert?

1.2 EXPERTS VERSUS NONEXPERTS

An overriding assumption here is that expertise requires specific acquired characteristics that take a lot of time to master (Ericsson & Smith, 1991). Our first clue that aesthetic appraisal takes work, training and reflection is this research finding: professional judges of music overall tend to be less idiosyncratic and biased in their ratings compared to nonprofessional everyday people (Lundy, 2010; Lundy & Smith, 2017; Lundy, Stephens, Whitton & Hinners, 2018). Put simply, experts are more likely than regular people to agree about what music is better or worse. Furthermore, there is not much consensus between between experts and nonexperts' judgments of specific artistic works (Child, 1964; Gordon, 1955; Hickey, 2001; Holbrook, 1999; North & Hargreaves, 1998). In contrast, many studies have found consensus among experts' ratings of artworks in many aesthetic domains (Baer, Kaufman, & Gentile, 2004; Boor, 1990, 1992; Burt, 1933; Child, 1962; Dewar, 1938; Farnsworth, 1949; Lundy, 2010; Lundy, Crowe, & Turner, 2017; Simonton, 2004). Some studies have found apparent consensus about aesthetic quality or eminence between experts and nonexperts (Boor, 1992; Dewar, 1938; Farnsworth, 1949; North & Hargreaves, 1995; 1996; Wanderer, 1970), but such supposed agreement is often likely due to conforming to well-known artists' popularity and name recognition (Lundy, 2010; Lundy, Allred, & Peebles, 2019).

This book is not at all focused on what specific pieces of music mean to biased people; if we cannot agree about what is better or worse music than there is no true aesthetic judgment to be had. Many have argued that aesthetic appraisal is mostly or completely culturally relative (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984), but there are many great works that have stood the test of time across cultures (Hume, 1757; Manns, 1998), and legitimacy in any art form is earned by lasting power (Brown, 1992). (And music cannot have lasting power if it is never heard my most people.) The key is to minimize one's cultural blinders and focus on what Walter Pater referred to as "art for art's sake" (Janaro, 1975). The fact that popular music is always a social practice does not mean it is *only* a social practice (Gracyk, 2007). Great artworks in any domain should be perceivable to anyone who is not focused on some personal or specific cultural agenda.

Some raters are going to be better gauges of aesthetic quality. Such individuals are what Levinson (2002; 2010) calls aesthetic "geiger counters", who will serve as the best guides to artistic satisfaction (i.e., aesthetic experiences worth having). Young (2010) suggested that many people could probably become part of an educated, relatively unprejudiced audience, and it sounds like Gracyk (2007) at least partially agrees in stating that human beings tend to

possess naturally occurring musicality and aesthetic interest capacities. As Feldman (1966) has also noted, "…almost everyone practices criticism in one form or another" (p. 83). However, I know from more than 30 years of experience that being good at deciphering aesthetic quality is not easy; it takes a lot of effort. This is comparable to research showing that the top experts in any field spend much more time practicing their craft than other people in order to stand out from the majority (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Ericsson & Smith, 1991; Gladwell, 2008: Levitin, 2007; Sloboda, 1991). In short, there is likely a continuum of relative degrees of expertise in any domain, possibly following a normal distribution (Salthouse, 1991), starting with laypersons and going up several levels all the way to experts (Patel & Groen, 1991).

Many people are probably not going to possess the necessary level of motivation and conscientiousness to spend the amount of time that the task of effective music criticism requires (Lundy & Smith, 2017). But one focus of this book is to help motivated music listeners to become more like connoisseurs. Any persons interested at all in music are already amateur critics; they have preferences for some works over others that they can attempt to defend. But everyone needs to become personally involved in their own improvement, experiencing each piece of music for themselves for a large body of works across wide ranges of quality. To become an expert in any area, there is now considerable evidence that it takes thousands of hours of practice (Gladwell, 2008; Levitin, 2007), and precision in music ratings is no different. But for those of us who are music lovers, it does not feel like work at all. (For a list of basic prerequisites for acquiring musical expertise, none of which absolutely require formal training, see Sloboda, 1991, p. 168.)

Expert judges tend to be higher in *aesthetic sensitivity* (i.e., knowledge of the variables that determine aesthetic quality; Child, 1962; 1964; Eysenck, 1972), and higher in *aesthetic fluency* (i.e., development in knowledge base in an artistic domain that facilitates aesthetic experience; Smith & Smith, 2006). *Aesthetic judgment*, my main area of interest, has been defined as ratings positively correlated with independent measures of aesthetic quality, usually experts' ratings (Child, 1962). Higher aesthetic judgment has been found to be related to a tolerance of complexity and "independence of judgment" (not modifying one's judgments to conform to what one has heard others express; Child, 1965; Child & Schwartz, 1967).

The notion of any person's "superior perceptual self" (or higher *perceptual acuity*; Shelley, 1998) is achievable through purifying one's own numerical ratings by utilizing a standard method (described in Chapter 4). Everyone who is truly interested can improve and create his or her own individual ratings through the application of a precise rating method. Then we can ask the question: How much consensus exists among expert in rating music? That is, do many sophisticated music lovers agree on the best and the worst music? There would probably be more consensus than you might

think. As Thomas Reid (as cited in Manns, 1998) put it, if an object is found to have a reliable effect on humans, it should be considered to be a true quality of the object. Moreover, if the responses are reasonably consistent among sophisticates, this is even more likely to be true. For example, most critics already roughly agree on the high quality of Bob Dylan's lyrics, or The Beatles' consistently prolific songcraft. At the very least, we can have enlightened arguments about the relative quality of various songs and albums, like more precise versions of the characters in Nick Hornsby's novel *High Fidelity* (eventually made into a movie).

I will not lie to you though: Connoisseurship is time consuming because there is a lot of lesser material to filter through to discover the aesthetic nuggets. But if you love music, you should find that this is time well spent. I have found it to be a positive existentialist journey into the heart of aesthetic profoundness.

1.3 CONNOISSEURSHIP AS A REFINEMENT PROCESS

Think about all the songs and albums in your music collection. They obviously differ in aesthetic quality, but by exactly how much? If you were trying to curate your collection down to the songs worth keeping, where would you make the cut between songs that should stay and those that should go? (I have actually done this, and now have everything in my collection that I have deemed "good or better" on several USBs, which translates to somewhere around 40,000 songs, providing conveniently strong soundtracks for all road trips.) The rating system used here (*DLAIRM*) allows you to know exactly what it means to say a song or album is 45% or 65% or 80% or 85% and so on, at least within your own aesthetically motivated perceptions. This method was first published in my paper called, "Degrees of Quality: A Method for Quantifying Aesthetic Impact" (Lundy, 2012). The basic premise of this system is *contrast*. The ratings of a song or album only make sense when contrasted with other songs or albums; that is, the true worth of a great album only becomes completely apparent when compared with inferior ones, but this needs to be done in a systematic and precise way. The end result is more precise *proportionality*. This term was inspired by a famous paper by David Hume in 1757, who found it a huge mistake to judge beauty "…without being frequently obliged to form *comparisons* between the several species and degrees of excellence, and estimating their proportion to each other" (p. 14).

Only through such a process can quality be quantified precisely. What does a rating of 80% or 85% really mean? Everything is relative, whether it is music, films, literature, etc. This method simplifies the rating process across judges in one important sense: people can engage in the practically impossible task of trying to figure out hundreds of variables that contribute to quality and how they interact, or instead one can simply compare the overall *aesthetic impact* of each song with other songs. This implies that to be able to rate any given song or album accurately in a particular

music area you need to have heard a reasonable proportion of all the songs of albums ever produced in that area (especially ones from all existing styles and extremes of high and low quality). Only when one is familiar with the full landscape of what is available, will one be able to spot the true musical gems. There are a lot of brilliant songs that most people have probably never heard (which is so sad for both the people missing out on valuable aesthetic experiences and those musicians who skillfully were communicating something worth hearing).

Great music can make us feel everyday how real life makes us feel only occasionally. The greatest music can make existence seem profound and infuse whatever we're doing at the time with an aura of extreme importance. However, it has been shown that music has to make it through various filters in society before it even gets heard by most people (radio, marketing, name recognition, etc.). I wanted the only filter here to be concerned with the perception of aesthetic quality. You cannot, of course, rely solely on radio. It is a huge mistake to confuse popularity with excellence; sometimes the two can be related, but just as often they are not. I'm continually amazed and disturbed by the mediocre albums that sometimes become amazingly popular, and win "awards". And even worse, an incredible number of excellent artists go almost completely ignored. For research on this disconnect in the arts in general see Martindale (1995) and Rosen (1981).

Consider, for example, how long it took the Rolling Stones to win a Grammy. Despite years of critically acclaimed albums from the mid-1960's onward, they did not get nominated until 1978 and did not win until receiving a lifetime achievement award in 1986 (see www.grammy.com). We need greater *aesthetic justice*. We have accurately recognized truly great artists at some points in history, such as Beethoven and Monet, but this often does not happen until the artist is long gone. Couldn't we give merit to the greats while they are still breathing? The pauper Vincent Van Gogh died presumably thinking that he may have been talentless, especially if he went by his almost non-existent painting sales. Thankfully, most readers of this book will be on board with this idea of aesthetic justice, given that it has been found that people who value artistic beauty also tend to value fairness (and this appears to be mediated by the personality trait of openness to experience (Diessner, 2019)).

Related to this issue is the importance of the historical development of innovative music. When one has heard almost everything, one gains an appreciation for the pioneering musicians, the ones who were first to play a certain way, or to first write a brilliant lyric. A current song might sound pretty good, but if one knows that it has been done better before, or a very similar song had previously been done, this can change the appraisal of the song. I am constantly surprised by just how many great songs turn out to be covers, partly because almost no one ever tells you they are covers (e.g., *Superman* covered by R.E.M., *Always Something There to Remind Me* covered by Naked Eyes, *Pictures of Matchstick Men* covered by Camper Van Beethoven, *I Scare*

Myself covered by Thomas Dolby). Originators of a particular sound, melody, lyric, or riff have to be given special credit. For example, in the present system, an artist who covers a song is not given any credit for *lyrical* quality. However, the best covers often transform other musical elements in the original versions into *something else*. But we should also keep in mind that no music is really completely original; everything creative has earlier influences. And it is also true that the best music will partially transcend its influences.

While is always a good idea to be skeptical, before you are too critical of the evaluations here, go listen to as much as possible, use the rating method here to make your ratings as precise and proportional as possible, and see what truly stands out (and by how much). We also want our perception to be as wide and open as possible, so that we will not be limited by personal idiosyncrasies and societal biases. An important question for each audiophile, once one's own rating precision is achieved, is this: "As an educated listener, if this song really speaks to me, am I the only one?". It is highly likely that album ratings that seem to be very different from most other (educated) critics' ratings indicate albums with tremendous *personal* appeal. However, my assumption is that if you develop as a connoisseur (and I think Kant would agree), then the majority of your preferences should not fall into such an idiosyncratic realm.

1.4 HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

You can use this book in one or both of the following ways: (a) to enhance the objectivity, precision, and proportionality of your own ratings of music (so you can at least be consistent within yourself), and/or (b) to get some idea about which music might be most worth searching. You only live once as far as we know, and many of you will not have the time to listen to everything. It is my hope that this book can help lead people to discover some of the most enriching music of their lives. There are some unbelievably grand works in existence that you may never know about otherwise. We all need aesthetic guides within the confusion of overly narrow radio, misplaced awards, imprecise critics, and trial and error searching.

As stated earlier, it is not expected that aesthetic judgment can ever be perfectly objective, but this book attempts to move critical evaluation in that direction at least. We need scholars to be *critics of the critics*; not all would-be critics are created equally. This book strives to be an example of what has been called "disciplined knowing" ("Wissenschaft"), pursuing an area of inquiry under rigorous, accepted methods of investigation (cf. Kroger, 1991). In the case of currently existing, standard evaluation methods, there is relatively little to go by. There is no explicit information about how ratings are done, and there are inconsistencies between raters and glaring logical errors, etc., which I discuss in detail later. Again, we need to be as accurate as possible at least within ourselves and then compare notes with other connoisseurs.

The rating method described here could easily be applied to the critical evaluation of *any* form of art. We would, however, have to agree about our assumptions first, or at the very least, we need to explicitly communicate our assumptions. *Suitable prompting* was discussed for painting appreciation by Wollheim (1990), but it applies to any form of art. This idea basically means one can point out something relevant about a work that someone else may have missed, but then might agree with, once he or she becomes aware of it. A useful final step to enhance *aesthetic justice* would be for informed connoisseurs to compare notes and provide a chance for any last resort "suitable prompting" from each other to surface (in case someone missed something). Amabile (1982) created the important *Consensual Assessment Technique* as a way of comparing experts' ratings of any artwork, but this would be most accurate if one by one, each expert is as precise and proportional as possible within his or her own ratings. Unless each listener reaches connoisseur status, we cannot use general voting of musical listeners as a gauge of any "best of" lists. This is partly because such lists would always be disproportionately weighted towards more commonly known works. Great works that are not known by as many people have little chance of making such lists. This is why you do not normally see obscure but great musicians/albums/songs on such lists; they cannot possibly receive enough votes when most voters are not even aware they exist.

On the other side of the world, some professional *critics* actually seem to understand aesthetic quality better than many academic *scholars* of aesthetics because they are on the front lines of a large body of aesthetic works rather than focusing too much on one or two musicians. Such critics continually experience the highs, the lows, and the predominant near-neutrality of these works (see Lundy, 2013 to see what critics' rating distributions look like, which is not too far from the infamous "bell curve"). Therefore, professional critics gain perspective about what variables help create varying degrees of quality across hundreds of works and multiple genres. In short, they begin to realize the similar factors that create quality. In contrast, many scholars appear to only know very narrow avenues of works and then base their (usually overly narrow) theories on this limited perspective of actual works, or even worse, do not base their theories on the experience of actual works at all. In the next several chapters, I attempt to bridge these two important worlds.

Chapter 2
Music Rating Aesthetic Criteria

Based partly on ideas and research data from scholars of aesthetics across centuries and nationalities, this chapter lays out basic ideas of what factors tend to create aesthetic quality in general, and then presents twelve specific aesthetic criteria that help to distinguish albums from each other in overall aesthetic quality. This chapter ends with a consideration of several potential factors that tend to make music lower in aesthetic quality, even to the point of being "bad".

2.1 CRITERIA AND ASSUMPTIONS

Although hundreds of years of philosophy have made it pretty clear that it is very difficult to make any specific rule-based statements or general principles about what always makes any form of art good or bad (Mothersill, 1984; Gracyk, 2007), this chapter attempts to give a rough overall idea of what can be considered to be important and relatively uncontroversial aesthetic criteria or dimensions that vary between songs and albums. However, if you are someone who does not think that each of the criteria I discuss are valid considerations in the aesthetic quality of a song or album, then you would be less likely to agree with the ratings in this book.

To start in a very general sense, Birkhoff's (1933) work was modified by Eysenck (1957) to yield the key rule for the two basic elements of all great art (not just music) that are tough to deny: M (*aesthetic measure*) = O X C (*order times complexity*). This implies that the best art has just the right interactive, balanced combination of artistic *complexity that exists harmoniously*. In other words, all the interacting elements fit together into a Gestalt or organized whole. Similarly, Gracyk (2007) argues that "Aesthetic evaluation is a matter of holistic perception, not inferential necessity" (p. 90). The overall complexity/harmony combination has also been called "unity in diversity" or "unity in variety" (see Hutcheson as discussed by Dickie, 1997). This notion of unity in diversity has been discussed as a foundation of beauty by numerous scholars (see Diessner, 2019, for a brief review of at least 18 scholars across centuries and nationalities who focused on this same basic definition). However, individuals do tend to vary in how much they weigh these two factors, with some preferring complexity more than harmony and others doing the reverse (Eysenck, 1957), but

Levitin (2006) notes that tolerance for complexity tends to increase with age and musical experience. The term harmony here is used in a general sense of various elements fitting together, not just in the strict sense of pitches combining to make chords or clusters of sound.

Before we go any further, I must make an assumption about you. If you have read this far it is probably safe to say that you tend to be interested in the aesthetic value of music, not just what music does to further your personal and social goals. This tendency, however, may make you part of a minority of people. I agree with Patrik Juslin (2019) that aesthetic experience involves a "…special mode of music listening", and that "…some listeners rarely experience events or objects with an aesthetic attitude" (pp. 423–424). I will consider this again a little later in relation to Kant's notion of disinterestedness, and also discuss some relevant dimensions or criteria that affect aesthetic value. However, as Gracyk (2007) notes, it is often overlooked that Kant argued that aesthetic experience also involves "…a free play of imagination and understanding" (p. 31). Along the same lines, according to Seashore (1941), music allows us to escape from the humdrum of everyday life and exist in play with the ideal.

For aesthetes, music often feels like a form of intrinsically motivated play causing a *flow* experience (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) where the outside world is temporarily held at a distance as all of one's faculties are narrowly focused on interacting musical elements. Once it becomes familiar enough, great music makes such a flow experience effortlessly engaging.

In terms of this book's central criterion, beauty makes up an essential portion of aesthetic value. To be sure, meaningful intellectual depth, emotional involvement, originality and other factors also contribute to aesthetic value, but for me beauty is at least a partial foundation of such value. I consider postmodern art without beauty to be mediocre art at best, such as a painting of a few colored lines or bars (which almost anyone could do in a few minutes) or a mangled mass of rusty wires symbolizing something. To me, art without at least some aesthetic component may be art *but it is not art at the highest level*. We need a different term for that domain, such as "uniquely annoying stimulus" or "weak artism" (see Dutton, 2009, for a useful definition of art, whether the art is good or bad). However, if the die-hards

out there still want to maintain that in great art there is room for ugliness or the absence of beauty, then I would say I am focused more on *aesthetic value* than *artistic value* (see Shimamura & Palmer, 2011, and Gracyk, 2007, for discussions of such issues). To be sure, Danto (2003) notes that there are certainly theories of art that do not include beauty, and that beauty is a value rather than a necessary condition. In short, I value beauty in art as an important aspect, which is a driving force in my aesthetic quality ratings. Furthermore, I assert that music is the domain of art for which this line of thought is most applicable (i.e., beautiful sound is part of what true music is meant to be). This probably explains why I rate Radiohead and R.E.M. much higher than, say, Sonic Youth or Captain Beefheart. In the end, at the highest levels of aesthetic quality we can have it all: beauty plus other elements in just the right combination.

There are also no points for "anti-music" here; different or novel or "alternative" is not necessarily or automatically good, as seems to be the case for some music reviewers. When searching for new avenues of "expression" (or sales), nonmusic is unfortunately always a possibility, just as anti-art (or at least unaesthetic art) exists in modern painting and sculpture. If you do not think aesthetic qualities are a foundational ingredient of the best music then you likely will not agree with many of the ratings here.

In addition, for me, bad music is never better than dull music, and this is parallel to other sensory and perceptual areas of life. Similarly, eating a tasteless wafer must surely be better than eating a piece of cow dung. However, I am still against what I call the anaesthetic and unaesthetic in music; I believe that true art should exalt, not anaesthetize; no points beyond neutrality are given here for general anaesthetic or mind-numbing qualities. *Aesthetic* should be quite a different experience than a *general anaesthetic*. Much ambient music, for instance, can be quite dull and thus near aesthetic neutrality. Although I cannot recall where I read it, one author put it perfectly as "…music that starts nowhere and goes nowhere".

Levinson (2010) has argued that if a work has aesthetic merit it basically implies that such a work is an aesthetic experience worth having. What then makes something "an aesthetic experience worth having"? Universality surely would be one central element, wherein (with enough experience of various musical styles) we judge aesthetic quality partly on the ability to tap into universal aspects of our species' existence regardless of our specific cultural background. The impact that art can have was emphazied by Levinson (2006) in that art "…can connect us to one another, and to larger truths about what it means to be alive and what it means to be human" (p. 244).

If an artist is too self-indulgent then he or she can be tough to appreciate by anyone but him or herself (and maybe a handful of close friends). The best artists wax poetic about curiosities of human existence with depth, intelligence, insight, style, sincere passion, poignance, novelty, and humor. This often creates a level of vulnerability and intimacy for the listener that rarely occurs even in

close friendships (Levitin, 2006). For the listener it adds to self-exploration as well as exploration of the universe that we inhabit; we are all on an existential journey. Thus, the following finding should not surprise us: people who tend to habitually be engaged with artistic beauty tend to see themselves as part of one big human family (Diessner, 2019). This is in stark contrast to short-lived fads among neophytes.

According to Walter Pater (as cited by Janaro, 1975), aesthetic experience is the "joy of pure experience", a state of being, an aliveness in the moment caused by the aesthetic stimulus, and awareness of what it means to be here (i.e., earth, universe, life, death, etc.). The best songs usually combine emotional and cognitive involvement for the astute listener in a seemingly irresistible two to five-minute package of meaningful, almost philosophical ecstasy. I also agree with Gracyk (2007) that aesthetic experiences with music have value in that they can create empathy for other peoples' lived experiences and challenge our existing perspectives, even if this often happens *after* we are initially attracted to the music for music's sake. Whether we agree perfectly about ratings or not, our experience of music and the world around us will be enriched nonetheless. Ultimately, not unlike the importance of having a well-educated and well-informed group of voters in an ideal democracy, the less biased that perceivers are in terms of aesthetic works, the more that creators of true aesthetic quality will be recognized and rewarded (*aesthetic justice*).

There are at three potential functions of professional critics or connoisseurs in any society (Lundy, 2010):

(1) to help reward quality in a meritocracy by being a short-cut filtering device for aesthetic merit;
(2) to direct others in a worthwhile direction, saving would-be aesthetes time, effort and money in the huge sea of greater and lesser aesthetic works;
(3) to be instructors of aesthetic sensitivity, pointing out factors that one should focus on (based on their hard work, wisdom, familiarity, and knowledge).

No one person, of course, can hold a complete monopoly on knowledge of aesthetic value in any field; one needs to demonstrate some corroboration, i.e., consensus across independent judges. Aesthetic judgment will never be an extremely precise science like physics, understood only by those with Einstein or Hawking-like genius, but this is not to say that all opinions are equally valid (Lundy, 2010). Nor will there ever be one "ideal critic"; it is more a matter of basic prerequisites that we should expect in an informed listener. Each of us can only strive to be *better* listeners than we were before. For David Hume, some critics are more qualified or competent to give opinions about aesthetics. Such reflection is a difficult, complex task because beauty is relative (Pratt, 1956). As Thomas Reid (1764) has suggested, we must be able to notice and perceive the entire range of qualities of a beautiful object. To make such a potentially onerous

task easier, the rating method described here in Chapter 4 (DLAIRM) uses contrasting levels of aesthetic quality relating to a specific array of aesthetic criteria. However, it may not be natural for people who tend to be aesthetically minded to also be conscientious in that there tends to be no correlation between the two (Diessner, 2019), but as we will see, precise aesthetic reflection requires organized thinking and attention to detail.

2.2 GETTING SPECIFIC: TWELVE GENERAL ALBUM DIMENSIONS

My research team found clear evidence that professional critics tend to use each of the following aesthetic criteria often when writing about musicians, albums, and songs (Lundy, Stephens, Hinners, & Whitton, 2018). We had two members of our team independently categorize professional narratives from all available books that rated music into ten of the aesthetic dimensions below, as well as organized into the nonaesthetic bias categories discussed in the next chapter (and in both cases, critics performed much better than laypersons). This ended up including dozens of critics, hundreds of narratives, and thousands of categorized statements. Most of the comments fell into one of these listed aesthetic categories.

Therefore, in addition to an overall rating of each album in this book, I also give ratings for each of the aesthetic criteria listed on the next few pages. These 12 subdimensional ratings are only meant to be a rough guide because different components may be more or less important to different people. These aesthetic criteria should also help readers find specific albums that would be especially appealing to them. For example:

- If you personally are into innovative artists (*originality*), you can look for albums with especially high ratings on this dimension.
- If you want to increase your chances of liking an album right away, then look for a high *accessibility* rating.
- If you want to be able to listen to an album many times for many, many years, look for a high *durability* rating.

Here are twelve aesthetic criteria that can be rated for any album according to the following definitions (listed in alphabetical order along with examples of albums that are particularly high on each dimension):

- **Accessibility (AC)**—easily, quickly likeable, "non-difficult", music that may appeal to a wider audience, where training or a wealth of experience is not required. These albums would appeal most to those who want to quickly find new music to instantly like. (Examples: *The Cars,* 1978, or *Kick* by INXS, 1987)
- **Consistency (CO)**—unchangeably good (or unchangeably bad) from song to song on the album, thus fewer obvious peaks and valleys (i.e., low range) (Example: *Rubber Soul* by The Beatles, 1965)

- **Diversity (DI)**—wide variation in musical styles, genres, and influences, like taking a historical world tour of musical styles. (Example: "The White album" by The Beatles, 1968)
- **Durability (DU)**—holds up to repeated listenings over long periods of time, yielding years of pleasurable longevity, while continuing to sound fresh. These albums would appeal most to people who like to find a select few albums to listen to over and over and over. Psychologists would call these albums low in habituation—they do not become boring very easily. (Example: *London Calling* by The Clash, 1979)
- **Dynamics (DY)**—notable variations within songs and between songs in ideas, tempos, rhythms, keys, chords, loudness, styles, emotional expression, consonance/dissonance, etc.; in short, tension and release. (Example: *The Wall* by Pink Floyd, 1979)
- **Instrumentation (IN)**—especially exceptional facility within the playing, sound, and orchestration of the instruments used. (Examples: *Are You Experienced?* by Jimi Hendrix, 1967, or *1984* by Van Halen, 1984, minus the last two songs)
- **Lyrics (LY)**—intellectually and philosophically deep and meaningful ideas, verbally communicated with creativity and cleverness (i.e., poetic) as opposed to dull and clichéd. (Examples: *Highway 61 Revisited* by Bob Dylan, 1965, or *My Aim is True* by Elvis Costello, 1977, or *Late for the Sky* by Jackson Browne, 1974)
- **Melody (ML)**—beautifully constructed, memorable melodies, in all or most songs (Examples: *Avalon* by Roxy Music, 1982, or *Jordan: The Comeback* by Prefab Sprout, 1990)
- **Originality (OR)**—groundbreaking, innovative, and important music that is more unique to an artist that has not really been done quite the same by anyone else. It sounds "special", i.e., nonstale, nonclichéd, novel. It is music that has found its own niche or "authentic voice". These albums would appeal to people who are always looking for new and unique musical experiences to expand their consciousness. These albums often go on to influence many future works. (Example: *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* by The Beatles, 1967)
- **Production (PR)**—great sounding: rich, unmuddled, full, lifelike sounds expertly crafted in the studio. (Examples: *Rumours* by Fleetwood Mac, 1977, or *Hotel California* by Eagles, 1976)
- **Sophistication (SO)**—more complex music with impressively multi-layered subtleties that sink in over time and enhance meaningfulness. (Example: *OK Computer* by Radiohead, 1997)
- **Vocals (VO)**—distinctive singing that conveys meaningful expression, passion, technique, engaging phrasing, and overall intelligent communication (Examples: *Plastic Ono Band* by John Lennon, 1970, or *The Lion and the Cobra* by Sinead O'Connor, 1987)

You can refer to Chapter 5 for my lists of the best albums along each of these dimensions, and most of these will apply to song ratings as well. These dimensions help us to describe WHY we might rate some albums higher than others, but they are not meant to be hard and fast principles. For instance, when I say that good dynamics often make songs better, one cannot necessarily define exactly what always makes something "great in dynamics", but we can certainly recognize it when it works well. These aesthetic dimensions are seen as consistent with Gracyk's (2007) view on aesthetic evaluation, which "…requires an articulation of some general criteria that contribute to repeatable elements of the experience" (p. 110). Everyday music listeners, however, are often not very good at reflection about liked or disliked music, and when they try, my research suggests that it is not uncommon to give *nonaesthetic* "reasons" rather than aesthetic reasons for preferences (Lundy et al., 2018). Such *nonaesthetic biases* will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Keep in mind that these dimensions could not possibly take into account everything that makes up an album, and adding them together and averaging them would not necessarily give an accurate overall rating of an album's complete qualities. This is partly because aesthetic properties never occur in isolation, so that evaluations are holistic rather than atomistic (Gracyk, 2007). This is also partly because the relative importance of each of these dimensions will be different for different albums. It should also be mentioned that being too extreme within a dimension could become an aesthetic liability (e.g., too many dynamics could destroy the overall harmoniousness of a song; compare, for instance, "all-over-the-place" Prefab Sprout songs on their first album to their later focused and majestic songs). Nor would an album necessarily need to capitalize on every single dimension to achieve greatness (e.g., great instrumental songs or albums obviously do not require great vocals or lyrics). Furthermore, almost any decent album would also need to be both authentic and expressive, two factors that are sometimes mentioned as important aesthetic criteria (cf. Juslin, 2019), so these are not included as specific subdimensions here. Different albums may require more or less emphasis on each of these criteria, but there is probably some balance required. I try to emphasize them fairly equally, but if I tend to favor any of these it is probably melody and dynamics. My sense is that strong dynamics of many different elements (within limits) is a key that often takes good songs and albums and makes them great. This view is consistent with theories of music that the process of tension and release forms the biological/evolutionary core of all music appreciation (Levitin, 2008).

Overall, Gracyk (2007) argues for an aesthetic *particularism*, where each piece of music must be appraised on its own unique aesthetic merits and deficits within a specific context. I do not disagree; my subdimensions are simply meant to provide some key areas to discuss defendable aesthetic appraisals. But are any important criteria of aesthetic impact missing here? This is certainly something worth

considering. Juslin (2019) has stated that "Listeners may differ in terms of *how many* criteria they use, *which* criteria they use, and how the criteria are *weighted* in the judgment process" (p. 459). However, in our study on critics vs. laypersons' justifications for liked and disliked musicians, we did not find evidence of critics' aesthetic statements that could not be coded into one of the subdimensions listed here (Lundy et al., 2018).

Aesthetic terms are sometimes used with slightly different wording that could probably be incorporated into one of my 12 criteria. For instance, Gracyk (2007) speaks of the relevance of "dramatic tension" in great songs, and I see this idea as part of *dynamics*. One could, of course, break each of these dimensions down into smaller subdimensions. For example, instrumentation could be broken into drumming, guitars, strings, etc. These could be broken even further into lead guitars, rhythm guitars, bass guitars, and so on. These would simply need to be added together to define the overall dimension of interest. I have not, however, been interested in such fine grained distinctions, but someone could certainly do so if they wanted such a micro-level focus.

2.3 WHAT MAKES SOME MUSIC WEAKER?

We have talked a lot about greatness in music, but in order to better understand the positive side of things, it is a useful exercise to consider some of the common factors that tend to make music weaker or even "bad". Some scholars think the notion of bad music is practically always a subjective matter hopelessly clouded by personal biases where experts and nonexperts alike need to create cultural identities for themselves. Washburne and Derno (2004), for instance, consider trying to identify music as bad as impossibly subjective, and at best, undesirable. To be sure, there are many times when apparent badness determinations are clearly nonaesthetically biased (more on this in Chapter 3). However, one can certainly make distinctions between better and worse music, even if it just equates to mediocrity rather than actual badness, and you might recall that my research suggests that music and film critics are much less biased on average than nonexperts (Lundy et al., 2018). Furthermore, if you do not believe there is sometimes such a thing as legitimately or objectively bad music, as some scholars definitely suggest (e.g., Meier, 2017), just listen to the beginning of the *Boogie Nights* film soundtrack in which two of the main characters are making a song demo (wherein one can easily tell the actors are trying to make bad-sounding music, such as off-key singing, unoriginal chord progressions, etc.). The main issue becomes how fine-grained distinctions of goodness and badness can be made and be agreed upon.

One could obviously just think of the low end of the 12 aesthetic criteria I have described earlier in this chapter, but is there anything else we should think about when attempting to define musical badness? Scholars have considered several key players in terms of what helps to create

badness in aesthetics in general. Gracyk (2007), for instance, mentions insipid, trite, predictable, and destroying dramatic tension as "aesthetic defects". Lorand (1994) published an intriguing paper about forces in art that tend to oppose beauty, titled "Beauty and Its Opposites". In short, she says "There is more than one way to negate beauty" (p. 400). It is very telling that this list can be applied so easily to music because she was writing about aesthetics in general, including visual art, and barely mentions music in particular. Specifically, I summarize five candidates that she discusses.

1) *Ugly* = a lack of order, disorganized, clashing nonunified components, incompleteness, Hume's 'deformity' or Arnheim's 'clash of uncoordinated orders' (e.g., a face with all the parts in the wrong places if one is judging physical attractiveness, or a song where all the parts do not fit together as happens with some songs by Emerson, Lake and Palmer).

2) *Meaningless* = senselessness, randomness, components arbitrarily placed, vagueness creating confusion, incomprehensibleness creating indifference [even to an experienced audience] (e.g., near random pointless noodling on a guitar or keyboard, such as the worst songs by the (sometimes great) band, Yes).

3) *Kitsch* = contains some beautiful elements but its a misuse of beauty, where effects are used to flatter the audience based on well-tested formulaic components, which can be tough to resist; thus, it lacks originality and true sincerity, so it can be sickly sweet like cheesy candy (e.g., some of Billy Joel's, Queen's or Elton John's more mediocre material). I think that being overly sentimental would fit here as well (if implied emotions are unearned within the crafting of the music or lyrics).

4) *Boring* = no novel, unpredictable order is created (following a well-known pattern), so it cannot astonish or amaze or stand out from similar others, i.e., dull, nothing of interest, not singular in any way (e.g., the same power-chord progression you have heard at least a dozen times before). These overly predictable elements are good in science or engineering but not in aesthetics.

5) *Insignificant* = no illumination of deeper human concerns universally relevant beyond one's time (e.g., a song can be pretty without being deep, but a pretty song becomes even better if it offers some insight into a longstanding human issue). This also may be the place for some music that is bad partly because it is unintentionally funny or silly because it is trying to be original or profound but it is not at all successful (at least in the eyes, ears, and brain of the connoisseur). Even Kant talked about the opposite of the sublime being the *silly* (as cited in Danto, 2003). Simon Frith (2004) calls such music "ridiculous" or "foolish" due to a gap between what musicians think they are doing and what they are achieving. For example, I would include here any highly popular songs that try to be deep but just make you laugh.

It should become obvious that these considerations are in line with many of the aspects of beauty that I have discussed so far. My disagreements with these suggestions are only small ones. Firstly, I would argue that boring is closer to neutral rather than bad, to be found in the middle of the rating scale (remember that smelling or eating paper is closer to neutral; smelling or eating dung is much worse). Secondly, these supposedly bad factors do not guarantee below neutral ratings, but they do always take away from true greatness. For example, a song could be rated as 65% (above neutral overall), but it failed to be rated higher because of some elements that were kitchy. A well-crafted song could be solid in many respects and rated 75%, but it fails to reach a higher level because of formulaic qualities or a lack of depth. Any combination of good and bad elements are possible, and it is up to each connoisseur to weigh these competing forces and come up with a quantifiable Gestalt rating that is proportional to his or her ratings of other works. No wonder the task is so challenging.

Is this an exhaustive list of potentially bad elements? Although this is not the main focus of my book, let us consider one seemingly comprehensive source. Washburne and Derno (2004) edited an entire book on the subject of the potentially bad in music, which I recommend to readers interested in going down that rabbit hole. Even though the editors appear to believe that badness is always subjective and biased, according to my count, the various authors in the book end up using well over 100 words to attempt to describe various bad music, including the ones mentioned by Lorand (1994; way too many to discuss here). Someone needs to do a factor analysis to investigate how many truly different forms of badness there could be in music ratings (and find out if there are more than Lorand described). For example, the following are mentioned more than once: inauthentic/false sentiment, being in bad taste, musically incompetent, stupid, and genre confusion/keeping up with the latest style, sound gimmicks for novelty that end up sounding dated. Again, the editors think all of this is subjective and biased, but for me, the best critics have musical interests that are truly eclectic and do not build their identities on the back of genre biases and personal prejudices. In his chapter, Frith (2004) suggests that there are types of badness we can recognize, but he does not believe people will ever agree on particular cases of bad music (i.e., albums, songs). However, there is research that shows that many experts do agree often about badness and goodness in music (e.g., Lundy, 2010; North & Hargreaves, 1998; Wapnick & Ekholm, 1997). In short, all genres have better and worse songs and albums, and while they sometimes disagree, experts more often agree on what these songs and albums are. Likewise, as authors of fiction, (wildly popular) Danielle Steel is clearly aesthetically weaker in many valid ways compared to, say, D.H. Lawrence or Jane Austen, even though in some respect they all write about "romance".

Overall, in looking for greatness we are in some sense searching for the opposites of these badness factors, and the best musicians of all-time seem to have an uncanny ability