



Structural Universals, Types and Musical Works

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Received: 19 December 2024 / Accepted: 4 March 2026
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Abstract

The view of musical works as structural universals has been recently presented as a plausible candidate to explain the nature of works of Western classical music. According to A. R. J. Fisher (Erkenntnis 88:1245–1267, 2023), this view explains five basic intuitions about musical works' nature: manifestation, repeatability, creatability, destructibility and persistence after the composer's death. Fisher argues that the structural universalist view is superior to type/token theories insofar as the latter fail to explain destructibility and offer complicated explanations of creatability. And, in case they explain the same phenomena alike, the structural universalist view should be preferred to type/token theories because it is more parsimonious. This paper questions the appeal of the structural universalist view over type/token theories. First, we shall see that the structural universalist view cannot explain musical works' destructibility without denying other basic intuitions about the persistence of musical works. Second, the structural universalist view will be revealed as unable to explain the creatability intuition properly, even in a complicated way as type/token theories do. And third, the simple way in which type/token theories explain how a musical work is the intentional object of performances, interpretations and appreciation will be contrasted with the difficulties faced by the structural universalist view. These three points will support the idea that the structural universalist view has less explanatory power than type/token theories in musical ontology, which in turn undermines the argument from parsimony against type/token theories.

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1 Musical Works as Structural Universals

The identification of works of Western classical music with structural universals has been recently introduced by A. R. J. Fisher (2023) as a plausible answer to the categorial question in the ontology of music. This is the question about what kind of thing a musical work is. According to Fisher, the ontological category of structural universals provides us with a more satisfactory answer than type/token theories, i.e., those views that identify musical works with the ontological category of types.

What is a *structural universal*? Fisher understands universals as multiply instantiable properties that exist and are wholly present in their instances. A structural universal is a complex universal, i.e., a universal that has simpler properties as its constituents. An instance of a structural universal is a mereological sum whose proper parts instantiate certain properties and stand in specific external relations to each other, being those properties and relations the constituents of the structural universal. Considering Fisher's example borrowed from Armstrong (1997, 34 and ff.), *being a methane molecule* is a structural universal instantiated by mereologically complex particulars (i.e., molecules) that have five proper parts, four of them instantiating the property of *being hydrogen* and one of them instantiating *being carbon*, such that each of its four proper parts that instantiate *being hydrogen* stand in the bonded relation to the proper part that instantiates *being carbon*. This way, as Fisher (2023, 1256) observes, 'structural universals are conjunctions of states of affairs types', like the ones described above in the case of *being a methane molecule*.

However, Fisher does not simply identify musical works with structural universals, but with structural universals of a certain *kind*. The structural universals involved here require, not only that the *proper parts* of their instances stand in specific relations to each other, but also that the *simpler properties* that constitute those structural universals stand in specific relations to each other. This is so because the sonic properties instantiated by the proper parts of a musical performance must be related in specific musical ways (rhythmical, harmonic, timbral, etc.) to constitute a sound structure: *being a sound structure* is a structural universal that is 'spread through time' and that, by contrast with *being a methane molecule*, requires its constituents (sonic properties) to be instantiated in a specific temporal order (Fisher, 2023, 1257). Accordingly, the view that emerges here is that a musical work, like Beethoven's *Second Symphony*, is a structural universal, *being Beethoven's Second Symphony*: a complex sonic property (a sound structure) that has other simpler sonic properties as its constituents and that is instantiated by musical performances such that 'every performance of Beethoven's *Second Symphony* is a mereological sum of particulars (say, instruments or people playing instruments) that stand in some kind of spatial order and instantiate sound-properties across time in the right way according to principles governing the relevant musical relations between sound- properties' (Fisher, 2023, 1258). I will call it the *structural universalist view* (or *structural universalism*) about musical works hereafter.

The identification of musical works with structural universals of this kind is seen by Fisher as a sound answer to the categorial question in the ontology of music insofar as it explains five *basic intuitions* about them. It explains, first, that musical works fully manifest in their properly formed performances; second, that musical works

are repeatable in the sense that they can be multiply performed; third, that they are created; four, that they can cease to exist; and five, that they can persist after their composers' death. According to Fisher, structural universalism offers a better answer than type/token theories because they fail to explain two of these five basic intuitions, namely, the creatability and destructibility of musical works. And, even if we assume that type/token theories were able to explain these intuitions, Fisher argues that these theories present the disadvantage of being less parsimonious than structural universalism, positing an additional entity (types) to explain the same phenomena.

This paper questions this alleged theoretical superiority of structural universalism over type/token theories. As we shall see in § 2, the structural universalist cannot explain musical work's destructibility without a high theoretical cost. Moreover, § 3 will offer good reasons to think that the structural universalist view is unable to explain, even in a complicated way, the creatability of musical works, standing in a worse position than type/token theories in this regard. This will undermine Fisher's argument from parsimony against type/token theories because structural universalism will be revealed as having less explanatory power. This disadvantage will be confirmed in § 4 considering, in this case, the explanation of the relation between a work and its performances given by the structural universalist.

2 Destructibility

One of the advantages of the structural universalist view over type/token theories is, according to Fisher, that it explains the intuition that musical works can be destroyed. If musical works are identified with structural universals, this explanation is simple and goes as follows:

Since immanent universals are contingent existents, it is possible for a universal not to be instantiated at any future times. So the Aristotelian explains how a musical work can be destroyed. This just means that a musical work has no further instances in the future (Fisher, 2023, 1250).

Since structural universalism is the best Aristotelian theory in the ontology of music according to Fisher, and in the absence of any additional remarks in this regard, we are supposed to assume that this is the way in which structural universalism explains the destructibility of musical works. As it stands, the key point of the explanation lies on the idea that structural universals are immanent, which means that they 'exist 'in' their instances, are wholly present in their instances, and do not subsist eternally in some other realm' (Fisher, 2023, 1245). However, this idea is not fully precise because we can understand the immanence of structural universals in a stronger or in a weaker sense.

Understood in the *stronger* sense, to say that structural universals are immanent is to say that they *only* exist in their instances. However, this strategy faces structural universalism with an immediate problem in the ontology of music. If a musical work is a structural universal and it only exists in its instances, it only exists wherever and whenever its performances are; consequently, if there are no performances (i.e.,

instances) of the work, the work does not exist. This consequence fits well with Fisher's explanation of musical works' destructibility presented above and with the idea that immanent universals do not subsist in any other realm out of its instances. The problem is that, for the very same reason, if no one is performing Beethoven's *Second Symphony* just now, Beethoven's *Second Symphony* does not exist just now, and if tomorrow some orchestra is performing Beethoven's *Second Symphony*, Beethoven's *Second Symphony* comes into existence again. Therefore, if Beethoven's *Second Symphony* is a structural universal, it goes in and out of existence depending on being or not being performed, but this goes against the basic intuition that Beethoven's *Second Symphony* exists now even if no one is performing it. Consequently, if structural universals are immanent in the stronger sense, the identification of musical works with structural universals explains their destructibility with the theoretical cost of neglecting a basic intuition about their persistence conditions.

Alternatively, the immanence of structural universals can be understood in a *weaker* sense. Under this interpretation, the claim that structural universals exist in their instances only concerns their existence conditions, but not their persistence conditions: intuitively, the idea is that, whereas there are no uninstantiated universals, a universal can exist if it has no instances just now. This strategy solves the problem of musical works having an intermittent persistence, i.e., going in and out of existence depending on being performed, and it requires endorsing a *principle of instantiation of properties* that does not make the persistence conditions of properties to be dependent on having instances. One plausible candidate is Armstrong's (2010, 15; 1978, 75–76) principle of instantiation, according to which a property exists at t if, and only if, it is instantiated at t^* , being t^* a time before, identical to, or after t . If so, since Beethoven's *Second Symphony* had its first instance in 1803, this fact makes that work to exist uninterruptedly, and consequently, to exist now even if no one is performing it. But the structural universalist would surely refuse Armstrong's principle because, whereas it solves the problem of musical works having an intermittent persistence, it implies that a musical work exists before its first performance, which prevents the structural universalist from explaining musical works' creatability. A solution for the structural universalist would be to endorse a principle of instantiation along Puy's (2020, 190) lines, according to which, 'once a property has been instantiated at t , it exists at any time after t '. Consequently, Beethoven's *Second Symphony* comes into existence with its premiere in 1803 and exists uninterruptedly since that time even if no one is performing it just now.

In any case, if immanence is understood in the weaker sense, the problem for the structural universalist is that neither Armstrong's nor Puy's principles of instantiation allow Beethoven's *Second Symphony* to be destroyed. According to both principles, Beethoven's *Second Symphony* exists at least since its premiere in 1803 if no one performs it again. Therefore, not having further instances in the future is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for a musical work to be destroyed. This way, if the structural universalist endorses a principle of instantiation that avoids the problem of musical works having an intermittent persistence, the structural universalist has no way to explain how musical works can be destroyed.

One might still think that a musical work can persist if at least one of its scores exists, or if a recording a work's properly formed performance is stored in a CD or

other device, or even if someone remembers accurately such a performance. If all these things ceased to exist, one would probably suspect that the work no longer exists. This is indeed a plausible and intuitive view of what for a musical work to persist through time is. However, this is not an available solution for the structural universalist. In first place, neither a score, nor a CD nor a memory are instances of a musical work qua structural universal: the proper parts of a sheet of paper, a piece of plastic and a mental state token do not instantiate sonic properties, the kind of properties that constitute a sound structure qua structural universal; and they do not instantiate the properties they have in the temporal order required by the kind of structural universals considered by Fisher (see §1). For example, a score is a sheet of paper whose proper parts instantiate the properties of *being cellulose and being ink* standing in certain spatial but not temporal relations. Accordingly, the structural universalist cannot say that the work persists because it is instantiated in a score, a CD or a mental state token. An alternative solution might be to see those things, not as instances of the musical work qua structural universal, but as items that allow the possibility of the work to be instantiated: the score, the CD or the mental state token would play the role of enabling this possibility, and the destruction of all of them would amount to the destruction of the work. Here, the idea is that the existence conditions of musical works would be given by their possibility of being instantiated: a work exists when and only when it is possible for it to be instantiated. However, this is problematic for the structural universalist. Unperformed works would exist insofar as there was a score enabling it to be performed, but then musical works qua structural universals would not be immanent, even in the weaker sense. This undermines the distinctive point of Aristotelianism against Platonism, something that the structural universalist cannot embrace.

In sum, the structural universalist is faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, she can explain musical works' destructibility if universals' immanence is understood in the stronger sense, but this prevents the view from explaining a basic intuition about the persistence conditions of musical works, which is a high theoretical cost. On the other hand, if the structural universalist endorses a principle of instantiation that enables the view to explain our intuitions about musical works' persistence conditions, musical works' destructibility remains unexplained. As a result, the structural universalist seems not to be in a better position than type/token theories to explain the intuition that musical works can be destroyed.

3 Creatability

A second advantage that the structural universalist view has over type/token theories is, according to Fisher, that it can explain without further ontological complications the basic intuition that musical works are created. If musical works are structural universals, the explanation comes in a simple way as follows:

Immanent universals are brought into existence at the time of their first instance; the first instance occurs in virtue of causal relations holding between particulars having that universal(s) and other particulars, such as a composer, musicians,

instruments, etc., having the appropriate universals. Whatever and whenever the first instance is, its time marks the creation of the work. Since a work is a sound structure, where a sound structure is a complex of sound-universals, the Aristotelian counts the first instance as the work's first actual performance (Fisher, 2023, 1250).

Again, the key point of the explanation lies on the idea that structural universals are immanent. If musical works qua structural universals are immanent, they are created when their first performance (i.e., instance) occurs. This approach requires either understanding universals' immanence in the stronger sense or endorsing Puy's principle of instantiation, alternatives that have been revealed as problematic in § 2. However, for the sake of argument, let us put aside these concerns and concentrate on the explanation of musical works' creatability offered by the structural universalist.

A *prima facie* unsympathetic consequence of this explanation is that, if musical works come to exist with their first performance, unperformed works do not exist. Fisher assumes this consequence and tries to make sense of our intuitions on this point explaining them away. According to Fisher, these are cases in which a composer 'has written a score and never have it performed', a score that grounds 'the mere possibility of the instantiation of the work' and enables musicians to 'conceive of the structural universal in abstraction', for which 'the universal need not to exist' (Fisher, 2023, 1259). However, this explanation is far from being satisfactory. Let us imagine a case in which a J. S. Bach's work was not premiered at his time, the score remained lost until last year and the work is premiered today. Many scholars would argue that the work is individuated by its time of composition and is to be performed according to the interpretive conventions of that time (cf. Davies, 2001; Levinson, 2011; Kania, 2022). But it is hard to see how something that comes to exist today and was not created at Bach's time can be individuated by Bach's context. Notably, what grounds the idea that Bach's work is individuated by Bach's context is the intuition that Bach created that work when writing its score according to his context's conventions. Yet, if Bach's work is a structural universal that only comes to exist today with its premiere, it is not true that Bach created that work.

This concern puts us in the direction of identifying the real problem for structural universalism concerning musical works' creatability. Whereas structural universalism can explain that musical works are things that are created, it *cannot* explain the intuition of musical works' creatability. The reason is that the creatability intuition is not that musical works are *merely* created, but that they are created *by their composers*. Typically, Western musical practice makes a neat distinction between the roles of the composer and the performer, involving two separate moments: a first in which the composer creates a musical work by means of writing some instructions for performance in a musical score; and a second in which performers follow those instructions to perform the work. It is composers but not performers who create musical works, and the work, as an outcome of the composer's labour, typically pre-exists its first performance. This cannot be explained by the structural universalist. Since musical works qua structural universals come to exist only with their first performance (this is what minimally means to be immanent and it is the hallmark of Aristotelianism against Platonism, as we have seen in § 2), structural universalism implies that it is

performers but not composers who create the musical work. In other words, structural universals are not the kind of thing that composers qua composers can create, and thus structural universalism fails to explain the creatability intuition.

This problem puts structural universalism in disadvantage with respect to type/token theories. These theories can explain the creatability intuition in different ways. It has been argued that musical works qua types come into existence by means of a composer's act of indication (Levinson, 2011), by means of producing the first of the work's embodiments, like its score (Walters, 2013), or by means of being ontologically dependent on other facts, like the composer's completion of the score (Irmak, 2021). Alternatively, the creatability intuition can be reinterpreted in the sense that composers do not create but creatively discover musical works (Dodd, 2007). All these explanations can be regarded by Fisher (2023, 1250) as involving 'complications' or 'ad hoc entities'. But, at least, they are explanations. The problem for structural universalism is that it has no explanation for the creatability intuition. If a musical work is a structural universal and comes into existence with its first performance, it is created by the performers that participate in that performance. The composer does not create the work, but something (a score) that helps other people to create the work when producing its first performance. Or, at most, the composer is a co-creator of the work by means of participating in a causal chain that leads to the first performance, being the performers involved the other co-creators of the work. But this is at odds with the creatability intuition.

A consequence of the problems faced by structural universalism in explaining the destructibility and creatability intuitions is that Fisher's (2023, 1251) argument from parsimony against type/token theories fails. The argument goes as follows: since types are individuated by properties, type/token theories are less parsimonious than structural universalism because they posit two kind of entities (i.e., types and properties) where structural universalism only posits one (i.e., properties) to explain the same phenomena; 'all else being equal, we should prefer the more parsimonious theory'; therefore, we should prefer structural universalism over type/token theories. The problem is that not else is equal. Both the structural universalist and type/token theories fail to explain the destructibility intuition. However, whereas type/token theories can explain, although with complications, the creatability intuition, structural universalism cannot explain it. Consequently, we can admit a theory to be less parsimonious if it has more explanatory power than a more parsimonious theory. This way, Fisher's argument from parsimony against type/token theories seems to be neutralized.

4 The 'of-ness' Constraint

Although not considered by Fisher among the five basic intuitions, there is a further one that he takes to be an explananda for an adequate ontological theory of musical works. He identifies it with what Wesley Cray and Carl Matheson (2017, 713) have called the 'of-ness' constraint. This is the intuition that a musical performance is something *of* a work, but not vice versa: the performance is a manifestation of the performed work, and the relation between them is not that of parthood or coinci-

dence, but of conformity or compliance. This is an important explananda for Fisher (2023, 1248) insofar as the failure of nominalist theories to explain it counts as a reason to see them in disadvantage with his proposed theory, structural universalism, which he takes to explain this intuition just as good as type/token theories.

The structural universalist view seems to offer a simple explanation of the ‘of-ness’ constraint. Since a musical work is a complex property, the ‘of-ness’ is explained as a matter of a performance being an *instance* of the work. Moreover, a performance with wrong notes is one that fails to instantiate some of the constituents of the structural universal that the work is, counting as a ‘partial instantiation of the work’ (Fisher, 2023, 1260). This seems to capture nicely the relation of conformity or compliance, instead of parthood or coincidence, that holds between the performance and the work.

However, one might suspect that the explanation of the ‘of-ness’ constraint offered by the structural universalist is not as satisfactory as the one given by type/token theories. And one might also suspect that this is not only a disadvantage for structural universalism, but for any ontological theory that identifies musical works with properties. Properties are features *of* objects, i.e., they are had by the particulars that instantiate those properties. They are respects in which objects differ and are reflected in our language in the form of predicates or names systematically related to those predicates, like ‘sadness’ is to ‘sad’ or ‘redness’ is to ‘red’. If a musical work is not an object but just a complex property, and the only objects in our musical ontology are particulars (like instruments and people performing those instruments) and mereological sums of those particulars (musical performances), musical works are properties had by performances and their mereological parts. Musical works are features of performances, and this way they are something *of* performances. The concern is that this is an inversion in the direction of the intentionality of the ‘of-ness’ constraint that does not seem to be adequate. Beethoven’s *Second Symphony* does not seem to be a feature with respect to which performances are similar or differ, but the intentional *object* of those performances. A performance points to the work that it is a performance of. But a musical work is not only the intentional object of performances. It is also an *object of interpretation*, where the work’s interpretations are numerically distinct from its performances (Davies, 2011, p. 110). The work is also the main *object of appreciation* in Western musical practice because the practice is work focused: the work is an object valued for its own sake, while the rest of musical objects, like performances, interpretations, versions or recordings, are valued for the sake of the way in which they present the work (Dodd, 2020; cf. Kania, 2020; Puy, 2022).

The explanation of this deeper sense of the ‘of-ness’ constraint is much simpler for type/token theories. As Julian Dodd (2007, 42) observes, ‘types, by contrast with properties, are things in their own right rather than features of things: a fact revealed by type-names, such as ‘The Union Jack’ (...), being neither predicates nor names systematically related to such predicates’. The same applies to the name ‘Beethoven’s *Second Symphony*’, and the fact that types are things in their own right easily explains how Beethoven’s *Second Symphony* can be the intentional object of performances, interpretations, versions, appreciation and aesthetic predications.

Yet, Fisher (2023, 1264) might still say that, insofar as ‘*being exhilarating* is had by redness and its instances; Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* is also exhilarating and so are its instances’. But it is not easy to see how redness, and not just the things that

are red, is exhilarating. In other words, it is not evident how a property, even a complex property, may bear other properties without becoming itself an object, and how this is consistent with immanentism and other claims about the existence and persistence conditions of universals under the Aristotelian approach. Salient Aristotelian accounts (Martin, 2008; Heil, 2012) are two-category ontologies that introduce a neat difference between substrata or substances as property bearers, on the one hand, and the properties had by those bearers, on the other. In this regard, it is not obvious how a property may become a property bearer without changing its identity, existence and persistence conditions. The Aristotelian might vindicate at this point a one-category ontology but, first, this framework seems to be more suitable for tropes rather than for structural universals (Fisher, 2018), and second, a further explanation of the distinction between musical works and performances would be required. Alternatively, the structural universalist might argue that *being exhilarating* is just a constituent of the structural universal that Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* is. However, one might wonder if an *aesthetic* property like *being exhilarating* could be a constituent of a sound structure (the structural universal), since it is not a *sonic* property as it is, for example, *being in D Minor*. Although the required explanations could be available for the structural universalist, the type/token theorist avoids these difficulties by identifying the work with a thing 'in its own right' that occurs in musical performances, providing this way a simpler explanation of the 'of-ness' constraint.

5 Conclusions

Despite Fisher's attempt to present structural universalism as a plausible candidate in the ontology of music, we should harbour significant doubts in this regard. As we have seen, it is far from clear that structural universalism is superior to type/token theories to explain musical works destructibility: when the structural universalist tries to explain this intuition, she faces serious problems concerning the persistence conditions of musical works. Moreover, the structural universalist is not able to explain, even in a complicated way as type/token theories do, the intuition that musical works are created by their composers. Finally, since structural universals are properties had by performances, the account of the 'of-ness' constraint given by the structural universalist is in disadvantage with respect to type/token theories, which easily explain how a work can be the intentional object of performance, interpretation and appreciation in Western classical music. All this suggests that, if Aristotelianism wants to be a serious competitor to type/token theories in the ontology of music, other alternatives to structural universalism should be explored.

Acknowledgments This publication is part of the grant RYC2021-032014-I, funded by MCIN/AEI/ <https://doi.org/10.13039/501100011033> and the European Union «NextGenerationEU»/PRTR, and the project PID2023-147445NA-I00, funded by MCIN/AEI/ <https://doi.org/10.13039/501100011033/FEDER>, UE. An earlier version of this paper was given at the Workshop on the Philosophy of Music: Authorship, Ontology and Interpretation, held at the Complutense University in February 2025. I sincerely thank the participants in that event, especially the members of the GARLA Project Paloma Atencia, Ramón Carnota, Sergio Añón and Carlos Ibáñez, as well as two anonymous referees for this journal, for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Funding Open Access funding provided thanks to the CRUE-CSIC agreement with Springer Nature. RYC2021-032014-I and PID2023-147445NA-I00, Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación – NextGenerationEU

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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