
Introduction

THE TITLE of this book is adapted from the familiar opening lines of William Congreve's 1697 tragedy, *The Mourning Bride*: "Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast, to soften rocks, or bend the knotted oak."¹ This quotation-book staple is the definitive idealized expression of music's benevolent powers, and of course it relates to more than just music. Straightforward declarations like this, and the straightforward use we often make of them, speak to our deep desire for simplicity and comprehensibility. They evince an ancient and persistent faith that there can be a parallel relation between a statement and its object, between a set of conditions and the sentiments, ideas, and applications that arise therefrom.

From another perspective it might be observed that these reassuring, apparently universal parallels have been much questioned for a very long time now, and not altogether without reason. We may have had such a direct experience with music, and with other things besides. Ideas and the experiences that give rise to them, or that emerge out of them, can surely be congruent. But congruency does not exhaust every possibility, and ambiguity lies always in wait. When we investigate Congreve's statement further we find ourselves confronted with a pair of common quotation-book complications. The first of these is that for almost every position we urge there is sure to be an equally urgeable counterposition. The other is that this counterposition is often to be found at the source of the original statement, and that the roots of received wisdom are generally more tangled than we'd like them to be.

Almeria, Congreve's mourning bride, illustrates this idea as she opens the play with her well-known statement, which she then immediately contradicts.