

Music and Representation

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The title is a neat one, but it is yet another key that opens a semantic Pandora's Box. As must be so in all theorizing about music, an instrumentality appropriate to one modality of human discourse— language—is invoked for the analysis of an altogether different modality. That language can be a snare and a delusion, whether it attempts to explicate some territory within its own domain or makes excursions (bold or tentative) into remoter realms, was generally recognized and acknowledged long before the Derridean revolution, which further compounded the uncertainty that is endemic in aesthetic theory.

"It is the business of philosophy to make sense of experience," said Susanne Langer. What an old-fashioned ring this has! Ironically, despite her aim of clarification, her hypotheses have engendered a great deal of controversy: and, even among her supporters, have been widely misunderstood. Yet she has contributed more seminal insights to musical theory than any other savant of our century. Her arguments identifying music as a unique (and "non-discursive") symbolism have "made sense," especially to many practicing artists, whom philosophical writers seldom bother to address directly. As for seeking out those persons most intimately engaged in music-making—and this would seem to be the most promising course for philosophers of music: a course which Langer, virtually alone, has followed—this has obviously never occurred to most of them.

But musicians, even more than painters and sculptors, are conscious of the limitations of written and spoken language and indeed know the impossibility of "representation" of music in words. (Poets, too, are more

likely than philosophers to understand, from direct experience, where words "leave off." Though they exercise a rightful hegemony over words, it is within the power of poets, at best, to communicate something other than, and more than, information.) "Reading (or speaking) between the lines," then, comes naturally to artists, who, through their production of hand and eye and ear are accustomed to moving through terrain where the word is a stranger. When they talk of their work, as they do, characteristically, with zest and penetration, they use words as pointers, nothing more: to be understood in the context of whatever is taking shape. Very little of this spontaneous talk is ever recorded. (Philosophers, therefore_____unless they are among the fortunate ones who enjoy unmediated experience of an art_____remain ignorant.) Langer has aptly described such vivid, informal use of language as "studio metaphor."

The making of music_____like the hearing of it_____is an empirical business, and its manifestations are ephemeral. The musician, like the poet, is keenly aware of "perpetual perishing." If the convoluted theorizing of Jacques Derrida could somehow be translated into a more accessible, less esoteric, idiom, the perceptive musician would be likely to get the drift. But in contrast to the philosopher, who must hold to the word even in the face of deconstruction, the musician can get along without words altogether.

In writing an essay, however, one must have recourse to them. And the writing, certainly in traditional terms, is logocentric: which music, essentially, is not.

This has been a necessary prologue.

Every proposition is open to question. In the past, any challenge has presumably been made in the interest of some "truth-value," in the expectation_____to employ a terrible philosophic jargon which is nevertheless widely understood_____of determining to what extent something "is the case." And undoubtedly, in many instances, this is still . . . the case. But the multiplying and wide dissemination of theories is likely to induce a certain passivity, and at times even a sense of hopelessness, in the truth-seeker. It is impossible, of course, for any individual to keep abreast of the prolific outpourings: and the heartening spectacle of an Aesthetic Renaissance is accompanied by profound psychological fatigue.

At a cultural juncture such as ours, Edgar Allan Poe might *well* ask, once again, "Is there balm in Gilead?"

What I want to suggest is that the speculative literature in its quantity and range may undermine any residual impulse to seek answers _____ or partial solutions to problems. Are we doomed merely to play with ideas which enjoy roughly equal status in the intellectual community, all tenacious of life, brutally attacked and defended, but none _____ more than any other _____ representing "the case?"

Finality, to be sure, is no desideratum. Defensible hypotheses, however, are another matter. In science, theories come and go, are tested: and those adopted are later superseded, *pace* flat-earth precepts and Creationism. But in the arts, doctrines which are patently false are perpetuated far beyond their natural lifespans, and fervently defended: not only by those who might be dismissed as superstitious or simply deluded, but by persons with impressive professional credentials.

In illustration, let us take the most obvious example of alleged "representation" in music: *program music*, so-called, in its various manifestations. Any music to which some verbal agenda is attached will qualify as a member of the genre. Now the alliance of music and extra-musical association may be eminently successful, artistically. This is undeniable, and does not relate to the argument, although it is relevant to point out that no "program," however excellent in itself, will redeem inferior music.

But widespread disagreement continues between proponents of *referentialism* and *non-referentialism*, respectively: the former holding that music can express outside, or "extrinsic" meanings, as well as embodied, or intrinsic ones; while the latter, not denigrating the extra-musical associations *per se*, maintain that music communicates its essential meaning independently through its peculiar tonal modality; whatever is superimposed, then, may be an enhancement; but different constituents have nevertheless been brought into juxtaposition and there is a distinction to be made between them. This is obviously the stronger argument.

Yet Leonard Meyer, in his *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, equates the genres when he refers to "designative" and "nondesignative" meanings. Yes, he says: music can and does communicate both kinds of meanings. But the crucial question, which he does not address, is *how* each kind of meaning is apprehended by the listener. In the same way? Obviously

not : nor is this flat denial an instance of question-begging, incontrovertible evidence being always at hand. For essential musical meaning is accessible only through hearing, is a private experience, and cannot be communicated through any outside agency. (In contrast, knowledge *about* music____its formal structure, for example____can be transmitted verbally.)

"Designative," or extra-musical meanings, are arbitrary. But when they appear to make a close "fit," as they invariably do in the best examples, one easily *believes*; and so great is the power of association, the connection seems to be inherent. Yet the likelihood of envisaging Don Quixote or Don Juan on a first hearing of those tone poems by Richard Strauss, bearing their names, is as remote as the probability of one's travelling to another galaxy in this century. The crucial point is that *one has to be told*. Then, and only then, may one member of the artistic dyad be said to represent the other.

The foregoing distinction is demonstrable, and may be tested and confirmed by anyone who wishes, at any time. But that clarification, which continues to elude not only the general public, but many otherwise philosophically astute observers, deals with representation in the most elementary way only. The problem is not so easily disposed of.

Clearly, there is "representation" in music : and representation of a kind, to borrow Wordsworth's phrase, "far more deeply interfused," accessible to the sensitive listener, and available on its own terms. Anyone who speaks of "getting something out of" music is acknowledging the presence of meaning, or "import." Such testimony as evidenced by that cliché, is ordinarily concomitant to recognition and the desire for repetition. We are now outside the logocentric confines, but not beyond concept : because there is something "there," however fluctuating its lineaments; and *meaning*____unless indeed we surrender our view of language as an instrumentality of human discourse and elect, instead, to regard ourselves as victims of a sovereign Linguistic____signities, in any humane vernacular, a keenly intuited, if not readily identifiable, *substratum* of apprehension. The indispensable human context invalidates Hanslick's dictum that "music means itself."

The connection between music and human emotion, as yet but little understood, is constantly remarked upon, and it has ever been so : composers, performing musicians, and myriad listeners have given

impressive testimony to *some kind* of relationship there. But any inference based on this consensus, to the effect that music *represents* emotion, requires a very close scrutiny. If music does have such a function, what is its *modus operandi* ?

Nothing so simple as a direct correspondence between fleeting "feelings" and a work of musical art is observable. Inevitably, then, the rapport between music and human emotion—affirmed, albeit vaguely, so universally—must be of a general kind: a complex symbolism for which the term *representation* is inadequate.

Symbolism, in any of its guises, is representation. But representation of the most obvious kind, though it undoubtedly qualifies as a symbolism, is neither interesting nor apposite to our purpose. The complex way in which music may be construed to depict "the life of feeling" is, in contrast to the simplicity of one thing's "standing for another," a challenge to both hemispheres of the brain :—and to human intuition as well, wherever *that* may reside.

In order to get off the ground, as it were, let us consider Langer's nice distinction between "sign" and "symbol," wherein she ascribes the fundamental utilitarian uses of symbolism to the former, and the more recondite aspects to the latter. The existence of such hierarchical structure in symbolic representation is apparent even to those who do not subscribe to her terminology. The distinction is useful, moreover, not only in reading Langer, but in setting aside the numerous examples of symbolism which do not, in this context, merit our attention. Among these are such well-known devices as text-painting; the intricacies of musical numerology (whether exhibited in the isorhythmic motet, instances of "dynamic symmetry" in Bach chorales, the Schillinger system, or—indeed—the various manifestations of serial technique), or mechanically induced "imitations of nature." All these, whether arcane or easily accessible, are in the domain of sign language and must be understood discursively or not at all.

Adamant philosophical opponents of the "non-discursive" symbol remain ignorant, inexplicably, of the long tradition which that concept represents. But perhaps it isn't inexplicable, after all, in view of the *literary* nature of that tradition in the nineteenth century. (But why

should philosophers, incorrigible truthseekers, be so befuddled by obstacles that are nothing more than terminological?) For Goethe, the symbol was a "concrete universal." Carlyle compared the *symbol* to an iceberg; partly revealed, largely hidden. More broadly, nineteenth century literati conceived of the symbol as "any formal unity." And the French symbolist poets, for whom Mallarme was the leading theorist, sought a veritable *synaesthesia* of modalities, in which life and art were inextricably intertwined.

The transmutation of human dynamism into music effects a *containment*_____ "stylized," to be sure_____ in the work of art. There is, therefore, "representation"; but more, there is, as it were, a "capture" of emotion; and the music, consequently, *is*, in whatever measure, what it "stands for." ("A poem should not mean but *be*," said Archibald Macleish.) Recognizing, in some widely touted "masterpiece" of any era, its capacity to be brought to life again and again, and to speak (in the phraseology of the old Anglican prayerbook) to "all sorts and conditions of men," the inference commonly drawn that an experience of profound significance can take place in human perception, through the agency of such music, appears altogether justified. (Inferences as to possible cathartic and therapeutic values may also be drawn; a consideration of these, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.)

But ascribing to music the power to encapsulate and evoke emotion as an exclusive function must still be, despite the magnitude of such a claim, an oversimplification. The dynamism of both thought and feeling, perceived as a unity, would correspond more accurately, I suspect, to the sources of music in human experience. We need not go so far, perhaps, as Nietzsche, poetphilosopher, who declaimed, in exaltation, that "language can never adequately render the cosmic symbolism of music, because music stands in symbolic relation to the primordial contradiction and primordial pain in the heart of the PerimalUnity, and therefore symbolizes a sphere which is beyond and before all phenomena."¹

More sober voices have reiterated the same message. Edmund Gurney, Nietzsche's contemporary, put it this way: "The ground which preclude verbal interpretations and set verbal descriptions lie at the root of the art's wide comprehensibility and diffusion."² Susanne Langer, more than half a century later, observed that "the limitations inherent in verbal

conception and discursive forms of thought are the very *raison d'être* of artistic expression."³

Despite a long acquaintance with her thought, I have found it strange that Langer subsumes, implicitly, mind within emotion; and yet, paradoxically, her *magnum opus* bears the title *Mind*. When she speaks of art as an analogue of emotive life—and music, hence, as a tonal analogue of that life—she is acknowledging art as representative in *that* sense. But "thought-feeling," or some acceptable equivalent, would seem to fit the case better.

Gurney published *The Power of Sound* in 1880. William James, who reviewed it, hailed the work as the most important book on aesthetics in the English language: an estimate which, a century later, I am tempted to second. (Being "up-to-date" in aesthetic theory is, in any case, a laughable idea.) Its neglect from the first—a neglect which has continued to the present day—was explained by several preceptive readers among Gurney's own circle, who observed that the book was too philosophical for musicians, too musical for philosophers. Whatever the reason, its neglect has meant a loss for everybody concerned with the philosophy of music.

Gurney's description of music as "ideal motion" fulfills all the requirements of Langer's *symbolic analogue*: "In the imaginative work the ideas and emotions are embodied *as such*, to be again and again reawakened as such."⁴ Gurney, like Langer, was an organicist. (I can find no evidence that Langer ever read Gurney; her thought, nevertheless, has many affinities with his.) Where Langer speaks of "the forms of sentient being" which art gives expression to, Gurney maintains that music "condenses a very large amount of inner life."

Corroborating both, John Dewey—still another much neglected theorist in this sphere—sees music as depicting the "stir, agitation, movement, the particulars and contingencies of existence." In a most remarkable passage, he says that "music complicates and intensifies the process of genial reciprocating antagonism, suspense and reinforcement, where the various 'voices' at once oppose and answer one another."⁵

Dewey is noted, in general, for the felicity of his prose style, nor are we especially concerned with that quality just now; but in those lines, surely, he comes close, if he does not altogether succeed, in bursting

logocentric bounds: in pointing, that is to say, toward what language is incapable of communicating.

Alfred North Whitehead was responsible for the long life of *presentational immediacy* as a concept in artistic experience. Its difference from *representational* can be most easily understood in the notion of the non-discursive symbol as objective: an entity which does not merely "stand for"____or in place of____something else. The symbol may, indeed, and characteristically does, signify an "other," or "more," as well; its boundaries are not fixed. Gurney expressed the identical insight, using the term *presentative*. Gurney's "organic" postulates, affirming the inseparability of matter and form, were subscribed to both by Whitehead and Langer. Gurney emphasized the pertinence of his organic and presentative canons to music in particular: "The successions of intensity and relaxation, the expectation perpetually bred and perpetually satisfied, the constant direction of the motion to new points, and constant evolution of part from part, comprise an immense amount of alternations of posture and of active adjustment of the will."⁶

Philosophic neglect of the musical practitioner, which I spoke of earlier, is nowhere more evident than in the example which the late Roger Sessions affords us. Should we not listen with special interest to what a composer has to say about his art? Yet one may look in vain, in most of the theoretical literature, for references to Sessions, one of the most verbally articulate and eloquent of twentieth century composers. His two large contributions to aesthetics, *The Musical Experience* (1949) and *Questions About Music* (1970), were delivered originally as public lectures: the earlier ones at the Juilliard School in New York City, and the later ones, many years later, at Harvard University where he held the Norton Chair of Poetry in 1968-69. The books are not footnoted: Sessions had no need to consult "authorities."

But he, like our "bona fide" theorists just quoted, regards his art as organic, an expression of the dynamism of life. Musical experience is human, and has to do with the listener's relationship to the sound he hears. Sessions speaks of those elements of tension and relaxation present in music as in life, which contribute to the emotional analogue shaped by art: "What we may call the raw, formal materials of music are also the

expressive elements, and these, again, have their basis in certain of the most elementary, intimate, and vital experience through which we live as human beings."⁷ He says further that "a melodic motif or phrase is in essence and origin a vocal gesture; it is a vocal movement with a clearly defined and therefore clearly expressed profile." Emphasizing the organic analogy Sessions maintains that rhythm is fundamental: breathing is our first and most lasting experience of rhythm, reflected musically in upbeat and downbeat, arsis and thesis; and what we call a musical phrase is a musical breath. Finally—for there is no need to multiply examples—he tells us that

In embodying movement, in the most subtle and most delicate manner possible, music communicates the attitudes inherent in, and implied by, that movement; its speed, its energy, its elan or impulse, its tenseness or relaxation, its agitation or its tranquillity, its decisiveness or its hesitation. It communicates in a marvelously vivid and exact way the dynamics and the abstract qualities of emotion, *but any specific emotional content the composer wishes to give to it must be furnished, as it were, from without, by means of an associative program.*⁸

Music does not contain propositions. The claim that experience must be verbally expressible in order to have "meaning," as many professional philosophers contend, is, after all, a futile exercise in semantic nit-picking; for the denial of meaning to all human enterprises not susceptible to verbal approximation is in obvious contradiction to the richness and variety of life; and it trivializes the philosophic quest. But it is this kind of unnecessary, professionally imposed linguistic impasse that prompted Langer—a symbolic logician concerned that her tenets enjoy a wide applicability and intelligibility—to coin "import" as a possible way out of that terminological dilemma.

The empirical evidence for what may be called a symbiosis between music and human thought-feeling is overwhelming. The hypothesis of a *symbolic analogue* is testable in the only acceptable laboratory; the psyche of the individual listener. The invitation, moreover, is to a sumptuous banquet: and this test is also a testing. Plato said that all learning is a remembering. Because music does have recourse to those dynamisms "at the core of life," one who is open and receptive to its intrinsic mean-

ings may experience a strong sense of recognition : may even feel impelled to say, "Yes, that's the way it is !"

Sri Aurobindo gives compelling testimony in support of the "symbolic analogue :"

For the universal soul all things and all contacts of things carry in them an essence of delight best described by the Sanskrit aesthetic term, *rasa*, which means at once sap or essence of a thing and its taste . . .

We attain to something of this capacity for variable but universal delight in the aesthetic reception of things as represented by Art and Poetry, so that we enjoy there the *Rasa* or taste of the sorrowful, the terrible, even the horrible or repellent; and the reason is because we are detached, disinterested, not thinking of ourselves or of self-defence (*jugupsa*), but only of the thing and its essence.⁹

There is, to be sure—in the vernacular of the drug culture—the possibility of one, or many, "bad trips," in the vicarious modality of art. (Yet we are, as Schopenhauer also expressed it, "far from their pain." Thus we can *enjoy*.) For the entire compass of human vitality and experience may be accommodated, symbolically, within a musical purview; the quicksands of ambiguity, the ambivalences, "negative" and "positive" states—all are mirrored there.

The experience of music is not an exercise, surely, in reductionism. It should be possible, very nearly, for a listener of strong appetite, curiosity, and capacity for adventure to "have it all." Dynamism is at the core and there are no static goals; but there are revelations along the way—self-validating and verbally incommunicable epiphanies. The continuing *experiencing* of music is a broken journey without a fixed destination. But in perceiving and participating in the nature of such symbolic representation it is an enhancement for the listener if he can be *aware*, and yield to the strong magic in full consciousness. The illusion which great art provides is an elixir that does its work with or without our consent. But how much better, following Bergson's injunction "to enter in," to comprehend, as it were, *Rasa*: its function as well as its flavor. It is not necessary, nor desirable, to flounder forever in the dark.

Notes and References

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music," in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, trans. by Clifton P. Fadiman (New York: Modern Library, 1954), p. 979.
2. Edmund Gurney, *The Power of Sound* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1880), p. 529.
3. Susanne Langer, "Abstraction in Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XXII, No. 4 (Summer 1964), p. 380.
4. Gurney, *op. cit.*, pp.45-46.
5. John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: [Capricorn] G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), p. 236.
6. Gurney, *op. cit.*, p. 348.
7. Roger Sessions, *The Musical Experience of Composer, Performer, Listener* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1962), p. 19.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 22. (Italics mine.)
9. Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1949), p. 101.

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