

MUSICAL MEANING: REFERENCE AND SYMBOL

I wish to present an argument which will establish not merely the intelligibility of the concept ‘meaning’ as it applies to music, but to argue that we can talk, without idiosyncrasy, of musical meaning and say in what that meaning consists. It will be conceded that meaning is something which is characteristically although, I will suggest, by no means uniquely, attributable to language, more specifically, sentences in a language. Moreover, according to Michael Dummett¹ “general agreement” seems to have been reached that the meaning of sentences consists in their truth conditions. And although music has often been held to be a language, and even to have a logic of its own, we would be reluctant to argue that music is a semantic system whose meaning consists in its truth conditions.

Perhaps that might count as a very good reason for arguing that music is not, therefore, a language, and I shall return to this point presently. But we can talk without embarrassment of understanding, or of not understanding, some musical works and because I believe that to understand anything in this sense is to understand its meaning, we can legitimately talk of musical meaning and in what it consists. I would like to say that there is a conceptual and therefore significative aspect to musical apprehension but not of the kind that has been traditionally presented.

This does not entail any semantic relation with truth conditions for, assuming that truth conditions themselves entail some notion of correspondence with entities in the world or with facts or states of affairs, music, being non-referential in any essential sense, cannot have meaning and truth.

¹ “What is a Theory of Meaning?” in *Truth and Meaning: Essays in Semantics* ed. Evans and McDowell (Oxford UP 1976).

Meaning and truth, at least as far as music is concerned, are separable, and even though music is sometimes said to have or reveal or express truth, it can hardly be said to assert it. And if, as I shall argue, music has meaning and therefore value, it does not express any truth which may be semantically construed.

In this way I shall argue that although music is not a language, because no specifiable unit of a musical composition can be said to be declarative or even referential, it can still be said to have a meaning. And “meaning” is not being used in any attenuated sense, nor even less in any idiosyncratic sense, but is used with the same force in which we talk about the meaning of a given meaningful sentence which has an intention but no denotation.

I say this because meaning functions in a variety of ways the range of which is broadly reflected in St. Augustine’s distinction between natural and non-natural, or designative, meanings. Meaning functions linguistically in a designative way whereby someone intends an utterance or sentence to convey the meaning he wants it to convey. Meaning functions culturally in this designative sense whereby, for example, a given symbol comes to have the meaning that it has in virtue of the historical circumstances in which it has arisen (the cross, for example, the crescent, or the hammer and sickle). Examples of natural meaning, might be expressed in such locutions as “that red sky means good weather” or “He’s here tonight – that means trouble!” But the essential question concerning anything claimed to have a meaning is not whether it does or does not have meaning as such but in what way its meaning functions.

Meaning functions in varying ways: dreams, headaches, nothingness, a gibbous moon, a two-fingered gesture, all mean something, but in ways not necessarily assimilable to sense/reference distinctions common to discussions of linguistic meaning.

Perhaps the problem may be viewed in this light: Schumann (in some accounts it was Beethoven, suggesting that the story is apocryphal, but no matter) was reportedly asked after the performance of one of his compositions what the piece meant and he responded by sitting down and playing it again. The question is: what are the ways in which the music may have been said to mean something? The anecdote suggests two widely varying interpretations between which polarities the controversy has continued for centuries. Namely, that music has a meaning which is constituted in its having a significance beyond itself; or alternatively, the meaning of music is immanent to it. Schumann (or Beethoven) was implicitly expressing the latter view by demonstrating that the meaning of the piece lay in the piece itself and was not to be revealed in a discursive explanation of its supposed provenance in some realm of extra-musical reality.

My “use” in the following argument, of the accounts of Deryck Cooke and Susanne Langer is intended more as a discursive procedure than a critique of their theories. I am aware that there have been more recent contributions to the aesthetics of music, specifically Peter Kivy whom I shadow here when he describes musical descriptions as being “either nonsense, or subjective reverie” or Roger Scruton who, for example, describes the music of Philip Glass as “nothing but figures ... endless daisy chains.”² The central question is whether musical meaning is expressible and therefore describable in terms of *what it is not itself* and it is to that problem to which I address myself. If music can be said to express a truth does it lie outside of itself or is it an interminable succession of tonal daisy chains without any significance?³

² *The Corded Shell* Princeton University Press 1980

³ *The Aesthetics of Music*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

This “extra-musical reality” is usually identified by philosophers as the realm of feelings and emotions. The relationship between music and the life of feelings or emotions has been defined in a number of ways but among the most significant of these are Deryck Cooke’s contention that music is a language of the emotions, and Suzanne Langer’s theory that music is a symbol of the emotional life. I shall briefly examine a particular aspect of the claims of each, namely that there is an identifiable abstraction of the musical experience, whether of composer, listener or performer, which can be broadly said to be the correlate of this experience and is the source of its meaning.

Cooke’s *The Language of Music*⁴ seeks to establish a referential, and hence semantic, relation between melodic shapes and other features of musical expression, and the specific feelings they are said to represent, in over five centuries of Western music. From settings of a range of texts by many composers he derives a supposedly conventional meaning attaching to musical phrases in virtue of their more-or-less fixed correspondence with particular emotions. Each distinguishable unit of a musical work, he argues, has an emotional meaning corresponding with the composer’s, making music, therefore, a language consisting of separable expressions each with conventionally fixed verbal connotations. As he says, “Music is a language, not just in a vague, general sense, but in the detailed sense that we can identify idioms and draw up a list of meanings.” Or again: “Music is, properly speaking, a language of the emotion, akin to speech.”

On the basis of an examination of what he calls “the elements of musical expression” (the thirds, the sixths, the sevenths and so on), Cooke argues that there are sixteen basic melodic shapes which are inherently and consistently related to some

⁴ Cooke, Deryck, *The Language of Music* (Clarendon Paperbacks)

emotion: the descending 5-3-1 minor progression is said to refer to “a passive falling away from the joy of life”; the ascending 1-3-5 major corresponds to outgoing emotion, an active, assertive emotion of joy as is expressed, for example, in Strauss’s “Blue Danube Waltz”.

The sixteen musical elements are said to have the following characteristics: obsessive, outward-looking, assertive, despairing, anguished, reassuring, joyful, sorrowful, happy, consoling, gloomy, inward-looking, exuberant, innocent, painful and passive.

I won’t go now into the question of whether the emotions listed here are separable or even distinguishable, or whether a principle for distinguishing them can be established. And following from this I will leave open the question whether we can say that a musical expression can be said to specify a feeling of despair as opposed to anguish, or gloom, or pain, or whether joy or happiness or exuberance are being specified. But an empirical claim that such specifiable emotions correspond with and are therefore specifiable in virtue of particular musical expressions will find difficulty in being accepted mainly because emotions are not separably identifiable objects of musical expression at all, although they themselves may be said to have objects. Claiming fixed emotional referents for the musical expressions with which they are supposed to correspond is a position which, I shall argue, is untenable.

The claim that every musical expression has a fixed emotional referent suggests that an interpretation of a piece which fails to identify, correctly, the “intended” emotional referents fails for this reason. Disregarding the fact that any performance is *ipso facto* a unique interpretation of a musical work, Cooke points to the ideal

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