

Music as Universal Language

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Is music a "universal language" as Longfellow suggested? Or is this merely a platitude, easily debunked as a truism rather than an immutable "truth?"

Most of us would agree with Heinrich Heine, the noted German poet whose poems were set to music by Robert Schumann, Franz Schubert and Felix Mendelssohn, who averred, "Where words leave off, music begins."

Regardless of our cultural upbringing, we intuit that music possesses the unique ability to reach places in our soul and psyche in ways that words

simply cannot.

Our Founder once said music is analogous to the spiritual realm in that it is invisible, vibratory and touches the heart. We all sense that music "speaks" to us and possesses the ability to convey and express emotions in powerful ways.

Though we may consider music to be a language, the way it speaks to us remains inscrutable and enigmatic. Mendelssohn, a composer whose music exhibits great lyricism and warmth, suggested music is more specific in what it expresses than words written about it could ever be.



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That may be true. However, the same piece of music will often "say" different things to different people. Why this happens remains a mystery, but Albert Einstein (who played the violin and loved the music of Mozart) believed there was beauty in the mysterious, and perhaps that's why we find the transcendent aspects of music to be so enchanting and enticing.

Music's connection to spirituality and religious ritual can be traced to the earliest civilizations precisely due to its transcendent characteristics. The Sumerians, Chinese and Greeks held to the idea that communication with their gods and ancestors could be more easily facilitated when music worked its conscious-changing magic.

Taking their cue from the Greeks, early Christian philosophers -- most notably Boethius, Augustine and Aquinas -- considered music to be a potent moral and ethical force that could either benefit or harm an individual or society due to effects on consciousness -- individually and collectively. What music "said" and how it could potentially benefit society became important considerations.

Regarding moral and ethical concerns *vis-à-vis* art and beauty, Unification Thought posits:

We understand the relationship between ethics and art from the perspective of the relationship between love and beauty. Love is an emotional force that the subject gives to the object, and beauty is an emotional stimulation that the subject receives from the object. Thus, love and beauty are so closely related. . .we can understand that ethics, which deals with love, and art, which deals with beauty, are inseparably related. When we look at art and ethics in this way, we come to the conclusion that true beauty can only be established on the basis of true love.

A Metaphorical Language

In his Harvard Lectures in 1973, Leonard Bernstein stated that the development of musical syntax is etymologically akin to the development of "natural language." Citing Noam Chomsky's theories of linguistics, specifically his theory of "universal grammar," Bernstein makes a convincing case there exists certain universal and innate aspects in tonal music in much the same way there are universal aspects in language. Phonetically, all languages utilize consonant and vowel sounds. Similarly, the "phonetics" of music can be found in the overtone series in which there are consonant and dissonant intervals. How we harmonize these polar opposite sounds lies at the heart of how we communicate effectively -- in both natural language and music.

Chomsky speculated that the underlying principles of language are genetically transmitted and all humans share the same linguistic heritage, thus language is a process of "free creation, unconstrained by linguistic rule except insofar as such rules govern the forms of words and patterns of sounds." Though languages are predicated on fixed laws and principles, the manner in which the principles of generation are used is free and infinitely varied.

Alluding to Chomsky's theory, Bernstein applies it to the process of creating music according to tonal theory in which the basic components of music (pitch sets, chords, rhythm, and structure) are used in a variety of ways but within a codified set of laws and principles.



An excerpt from Leonard Bernstein's 1973 lecture series at Harvard University

Analyzing the elemental properties of music -- sound, structure, meaning (properties which correspond to phonology, syntax, and semantics in natural language), Bernstein deduced that music, though highly metaphoric, nonetheless possesses communicative capabilities in much the same way as does natural language. The tonal syntax that evolved in Europe over hundreds of years, like any natural language, has "fixed laws." Yet the "free creation" within the laws and theories of tonality yield infinite possibilities. Bernstein also purported there was an underlying similarity in music and natural language with regard to the subconscious need to communicate -- and communication is necessary for survival. It is, in fact, a primal impulse.

Columbia University composer Fred Lerdahl points out that music and language share certain attributes in that both domains consist of organized sound and time, are culturally universal, are uniquely human, employ rhythm and contour, are hierarchical, are used in poetry and song, and generate infinite output from finite principles. However, Lerdahl cautions these similarities go only so far and that both domains have significant differences as well. Music, for instance, doesn't have parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.), nor does it have semantics in the linguistic sense. Moreover, language doesn't have anything analogous to pitch sets, scales, harmony, or counterpoint, nor does it have the tonal tension and attraction that is endemic to tonal music.

Jesuit philosopher Walter J. Ong's comparison of artificial computer language and natural language is also very instructive and supports Bernstein's claim regarding the subconscious. Computer languages, Ong writes, "do not grow out of the unconscious but directly out of the consciousness," whereas "the rules of grammar in natural languages are used first and can be abstracted from usage and stated explicitly in words only with difficulty and never completely."

Tonal music in Western culture developed in much the same way as natural language. The rules governing the theories of music composition were abstracted after usage, not before. To a significant extent the desire to communicate with greater efficiency lies at the heart of musical evolution. Music theory, temperament, instrumental development, tuning, and structural innovation can be said to be the progenies of the increased desire for communication and spiritual nourishment. The human need to communicate is causal whereas the aforementioned developments in musical theory and practice were resultant phenomena. In this respect, music's attributes as they pertain to spirituality and creativity take on deeply meaningful connotations.

The Spiritual Dimension

In his book, *The Poetics of Music*, composer Igor Stravinsky alludes to the impulses that foster brotherhood, community and a communion with God in relation to music:

How are we to keep from succumbing to the irresistible need of sharing with our fellow men this joy we feel when we see come to light something that has taken form through our own actions? Thus the consummated work [composition] spreads abroad to be communicated and finally flows back toward its source. The cycle, then, is closed. And this is how music comes to reveal itself as a form of communion with our fellow man -- and with the Supreme Being.

Stravinsky articulated what many composers from the Renaissance to the early 20th century held to be an important motivation for their creative endeavors. The spiritual dimension of music and its nourishing properties are linked to its ability to communicate and in so doing takes us to a higher understanding, albeit in a non-verbal fashion.

The onslaught of highly dissonant atonal music during the Cold War era, with its predilection for total organization and serial techniques (music by the numbers), had the very real effect of dehumanizing art music. Music of the so-called Second Viennese School was decidedly "left-brain" music with little in the way of an ingratiating aesthetic. This resulted in a serious cultural gap between the artist and the public. For these mid-century modernists, communication was considered *passé*; the residue of Romantic excess.



A performance of Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 5, "Reformation" (Finale) by the Korean Symphony Orchestra in 2014

However, the late 20th century witnessed a renaissance of sorts, as the integration of mind and heart, for so long a measure of successful musical achievement, was finding favor once again. In his book, *Music, the Arts and Ideas*, Leonard B. Meyer presciently observed in 1967 that our "cosmopolitan world culture" in which globalization and technology would become dominant factors, would give rise to a wave of diversity and pluralism in art music. Part of that pluralism has led to the reintroduction of tonal/diatonic syntax into contemporary art music -- the music of Arvo Pärt, Jennifer Higdon, Tan Dun, and Eric Whitacre, for instance.

This development reinforced the idea that the desire for aesthetic beauty and communication is primal and humane. Commenting on the future of contemporary art music, American composer George Rochberg asserts:

The hope of contemporary music lies in learning how to reconcile all manner of opposites, contradictions, paradoxes; the past with the present, tonality with atonality. That is why, in my most recent music, I have tried to utilize these in combinations which reassert the primal values of music... There can be no justification for music ultimately, if it does not convey eloquently and elegantly the passions of the human heart.

David Hume, in the fourth of his *Four Dissertations* (1757), asserted history demonstrates that "the general principles of taste are uniform in human nature," and certain works of art might have attributes that could be considered "eternal" because they've been admired across generations and cultures. Post-modernists addicted to the opiate of anti-essentialism would disagree, but Rochberg's assertion that music which effectively conveys the passions of the human heart will find its "justification" seems inherently correct -- provable, in fact. That justification is linked to music's ability to "speak" to us in profound ways.

Music that "speaks" to the entirety of our personhood tells me that Bernstein, Rochberg, Hume, and Heine were essentially correct in their perspectives regarding the innate desire for beauty and how music satiates

that desire and addresses deep human instincts, especially the primal instinct to communicate and relate to others in ways that can foster harmony, cooperation and unity.

Moreover, Mendelssohn had it right when referring to music's communicative attributes when he suggested that music "fills the soul with a thousand things better than words." Though we might differ as to what certain music says to us, we can easily agree that the communicative aspect of music, no matter how ephemeral or incorporeal it may be, is nonetheless perceptible and real -- universal, in fact.

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