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## *How Music Combines with Words?*

Since language provides the most typical paradigm of meaning, when we ask what meanings music may communicate, it will certainly be illuminative to compare these meanings with those conveyed by language. In particular we would want to ask an even more specific question: how, in general, the respective meanings of music and words are related in a vocal composition.

Let us first consider a verbal text – a poem, a passage from a play or religious text, or even a fragment of prose – to which music may be composed. Written on paper, it is endowed with all the meanings properly belonging to the words, and together with them it is constant and unique, always the same. But there can be many ways of saying it, especially of what we call artistic interpretation or recitation. These differ in respect to some specific sound qualities of the speech act, in the tone of voice, shaped and formed in a particular way. Something can be said softly or loudly, gently or forcefully, quickly or slowly, nervously or calmly, with energy or resignation – all this, of course, with a much finer differentiation and gradation than can be described in words. This adds to a text additional meanings – a second layer of slightly equivocal, ambiguous, very often emotionally-involved senses, attitudes and valuations. Thus there would be two layers of meaning in words: one constant and unique, actually present in the written text, and the second only potentially there, which may appear only when the words are spoken. This second layer has to be formed and added to the basic text in every act of its oral performance and thus is obviously not constant and unique. It certainly has some meaning – various interpretations may add to a text different precise and specific undertones, may uncover or stress certain of its aspects, present it in different lights and provide it with slightly different global meanings – but this is definitely not any kind of meaning that is possessed by written words alone. There is usually nothing in this second layer of meaning that can be said to refer to or denote something – a function which words almost always discharge. And since a text can al-

ways be written down when listening to any of its utterances, nothing is changed in the first layer by the addition of meanings from the second layer. The two layers seem essentially not to interfere with each other.

Now, it is true that music has much wider possibilities than recitation, both from a technical point of view – i.e. it has much richer and superior means for arranging sounds in various, diversified configurations – and from the point of view of its expressive capacities, which seem to be particularly well suited to, and capable of rendering, what we tentatively described as the content of the second layer of words (saying that it contains slightly equivocal, ambiguous, very often emotionally-involved senses, attitudes and valuations). Would it therefore be unreasonable to assume that music composed to a verbal text is something like its recitative interpretation elevated to a new dimension,<sup>1</sup> adding to it the second layer of meaning, yet contrary to recitation in that it is not produced just for one single occasion (or a series of occasions, like an interpretation conceived and memorized by an actor for a series of performances), but is executed and fixed in notated sounds for lasting preservation?

Now it is, of course, possible that in music itself certain explicit references – to objects usually also hinted at in words – are attempted. Instances from all ages – from the early Renaissance through nineteenth-century programme music up to the present day – are obvious and numerous. Suffice it to quote just a few by way of example. ‘Descendit’ and ‘ascendit’ in the musical setting of a mass illustrated by a descending and ascending melodic line, ‘Trinity’ symbolized by a momentarily three-voice texture in a four-voice composition, light or flood depicted in Joseph Haydn’s *The Creation*, or some even more literal meanings based on the imitation of actual sounds, such as the standard cuckoo, storm or battle. But it is by no means rare or unusual that music itself does not contain any explicit references of this kind. If we assume for some time in our analysis that there are no explicit references of this kind in music (we shall return to this later), then the second layer of meanings added by music to the first, basic layer of a text’s meanings would be the only meaning of music. Music and words (taken now in the more specific sense of ‘what is given in a written text’) would thus operate on two different levels, each providing meanings peculiar to itself, from two different domains.

In a text in its written, unequivocal form we have only the first, basic layer of meanings, the second layer being undefined. In a vocal composi-

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<sup>1</sup> It is not suggested here that music is just an amplified and strengthened recitation. Only that the general area of operation, namely sound, and the task to be performed are somehow similar. But this task may be achieved in a quite different way, thanks to different mechanisms.

tion we have both. Consequently, much more of its content is fully given and determined and there is less room for different interpretations in actual performances. We can see this if we compare the literary genre intended, as a rule, for performance, namely the play, with performative musical genres: opera and music drama. There can be many different stagings of *Hamlet*: political, existential, psychoanalytical and so forth – even Marxian. But an opera does not leave so much room for interpretative freedom – the music itself gives one, quite specific, interpretation of the drama. Consequently, various productions of an opera are more uniform than those of a play, and a stage director in opera is a less important figure than in drama. His interpretative contribution has to compete with that of the conductor and, above all, that of the composer, who was the first to interpret the drama with his/her music.

Such a picture of the relationship between the meanings of words (taken in the narrow sense of ‘what is given in a written text’) and of music might suggest that there is no substantial connection between them, i.e. they have really nothing in common and are independent of each other. There would be only a relationship of juxtaposition between them. They would operate in two different, separate, areas, each performing its specific task, to which it is particularly well suited. So let us consider the consequences of such a picture and the question as to whether it can be deemed correct.

If music cannot reach down to anything that words are about (assuming that it does not resort to any sort of explicit reference) and words cannot reach up to that which music expresses, then this would mean that any words can be combined with any music, at least from the point of view of their respective meanings, i.e. assuming that the technical difficulties of fitting music to the syllabic structure of words could somehow be overcome. This is not, as one might assume, entirely in contradiction to reality. First of all, it goes without saying that there may be many different musical settings of a particular text. In fact there are texts which have been set to music thousands of times, namely certain religious texts, especially those of the constant parts of the Mass (Kyrie – Gloria – Credo – Sanctus – Agnus Dei).

Secondly, one musical composition may serve as a musical setting for many texts. This seems less obvious than the first possibility, but it is not at all rare or exceptional. As Susanne K. Langer says:

There is a musical form anciently known as the ‘air’ [...] a simple, self-contained melody, which may be played without words or sung to any verses that follow its meter. [...] The same tune may be a drinking song, a national anthem, a ballad or a ditty.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York, 1953), 155.

Sometimes words can be written to music which was originally composed as a purely instrumental composition. The well-known Polish singer Wojciech Młynarski wrote a humorous song about a family dinner using the music of the famous minuet from Luigi Boccherini's E major String Quintet, Op. 13 No. 5. In the seventies and eighties there was a satirical programme on Polish Radio (entitled '60 minut na godzinę' [60 minutes per hour]) whose authors wrote an elaborate, amusing song using the music of the even more famous march 'Alla Turca' from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's A major Piano Sonata, KV 331. And the programme's theme tune was based on the overture of Gioacchino Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. People who were not fond of classical music always associated this tune with the programme and would never have thought that it had not been originally composed for it, let alone that the music did not fit. But even taking into account all the examples of this kind, we can hardly accept the claim that any music suits any given text, even assuming the absence of any explicit reference in the music.

Then on the other hand, we face the following problem: if we assume that what is conveyed by music actually has something in common with what the words convey, then with respect to this part of its meaning music does not make any real contribution to the meaning of a vocal composition, since this part of meaning is already contained in the text and the music merely repeats it. Consequently, music actually contributes to a composition only as far as it is independent of and unrelated to the text. And when it is related, it adds nothing. This would mean that a musical setting which is said to be unusually well-suited to the words is tautological and redundant, and a setting which is most obviously unrelated to the words, most genuinely creative and innovative.

A picture of the relationship between music and words implying such consequences obviously cannot be correct. But since this picture – as suggested by the examples mentioned – seems to contain a grain of truth, let us try to remodel it instead of casting it aside. Let us look once again at what music contributes to a text. At the beginning of our deliberations, we tentatively described the second, only potential and variable, layer of a text, manifesting itself through different kinds of recitation, as the layer in which a specific undertone is added to a text, in which some emotionally-involved senses, attitudes and valuations become manifest. It was claimed that music enters this territory of recitation and takes over its function, thanks to its expressive capabilities. What music itself expresses is again most often described as feelings, moods and emotions. And if we do not want to evoke a stereotyped image of 'romantic', sentimental music and to enclose ourselves in such a domain, we should say – again following Langer – that it expresses feelings understood in a very broad sense:

meaning 'everything that can be felt', from physical sensation, pain and comfort, excitement and repose, to the most complex emotions, intellectual tensions, or steady feeling-tones of a conscious human life.<sup>3</sup>

This may also be called the forms of human sentience or mental states, attitudes and processes. Obviously, music is much more powerful in this domain than different tones of voice in recitation. It is rather difficult to say that a tone of voice in recitation expresses something, and what it is, all by itself. Tone of voice is only able to add something to a text, and it is easier to define this layer and its role in purely formal terms, i.e. saying that it is just something which is added and is not inherent to a written text. But music definitely *is* able to express something by itself. Thus instead of describing merely formally the territory that music took over from recitation, which it expanded using new means and methods and over which it strengthened its grip, we can describe more explicitly the substance of this territory, identifying the subject of musical expression. We can describe it briefly as inner human life and then contrast it with the external world as the opposite, complementary, domain, which in turn is usually considered the primary field of reference of words. But if we look at what is now ascribed to music ('inner life'), we see that words do not have to be, and usually are not, completely unrelated to this domain. There are general linguistic terms, such as 'sadness', 'happiness', 'ire' or 'melancholy', which each denote a quite broad class of different feelings. Besides this, words themselves may have something like their own expression. I do not only mean the kind of expression which is usually associated with poetry and which itself constitutes a difficult, complex problem. But even a quite simple and straightforward, unpoetic description of some situation or an account of some story may contain certain obvious content of mood or emotion. In both cases, however, feelings are referred to in either a very general or an indirect manner.

In the first case, when emotional terms are used, although the reference to our inner life seems to be more direct (it is referred to in explicit terms) it may in fact be even less precise and more vague than in the second case. The meaning of the word 'sad' consists mainly in its opposition to the word 'happy' (or 'merry'). These two words divide the whole domain of inner experiences into two parts, with some intermediate zone in the middle. To say about an experience that it was sad is just to say that it belongs to one of the two parts, rather than to the other. More specific terms may divide the domain of inner experiences into more parts or subdivide the two general parts. But the procedure is always

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<sup>3</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art* (London, 1957), 15.

more or less similar, and each category described in words may still contain countless specific experiences not at all equatable with one another.

In the second case, what is actually described is a certain situation or a course of actions. Feelings are conveyed only indirectly: we can only imagine or know from past experience how it feels in such a situation. The range of possible images or remembered experiences is quite broad, although not unlimited (in the sense that some feelings are obviously excluded). And the more specific our description of feelings becomes, the more bound up it is with some external things, such as the objects of feelings or a kind of situation that they may be – but are not necessarily – associated with. When becoming more specific, we cease to speak solely about feelings and begin to speak about something else as well, whereas music seems to somehow embody directly one specific feeling without committing itself to a description of anything external. Moreover, its ability to render minute nuances, shades and aspects of different feelings seems incomparably greater than that of words.

In view of the above, the relationship between words and music (or, strictly speaking, between their respective meanings) can now be presented as follows: words, besides describing objects, actions and situations, i.e. certain elements of the external world, may also say something about our inner experiences, but only in an approximate manner, merely delimiting certain regions within the domain of feelings, without reaching any one specific feeling. Music, possessing greater capacities for differentiation and being much subtler in this inner domain, articulates feelings more precisely and definitely. In this picture, music may be, in some sense, unsuited to certain words: if it is far from the area approximated by words. But even remaining within this area, and in this sense being suited to words, it still has a vast scope: various musical settings of a text may all be acceptable, even when very different. There does exist a certain real, substantial connection between music and words, but this interpretation does not imply that music only repeats what the words articulate anyway. Being more specific, it almost always makes a genuine contribution.

The considerations of the foregoing paragraphs were conditioned by the assumption that music does not refer explicitly to anything in the way words usually do. But music may attempt such references. In such a situation, what is the relationship between the substance of words and that of music? If the words speak about a parrot and the music imitates a cuckoo, one might say that a composer was not very successful. However, such a situation is purely theoretical. Music, essentially without any established denotations, is unable, in principle, to refer to anything by its own unaided powers and usually has to rely on the help of words in this

respect.<sup>4</sup> Thus if music refers to something with the help of words, it cannot at the same time contradict them. Consequently, on this level we can have either no correlation at all between music and words or else conformity, i.e. positive correlation. Discrepancy is rather impossible. In the latter case (of positive correlation) music usually refers to something which is already hinted at in words.

Such a discrepancy might, however, be possible in the case of expressive meanings, namely if the music were far-removed from the area delimited by the words. In a simple example, a combination of exultant, jubilant music with words speaking of mourning, depression or melancholy would obviously be a case of the music being unsuited to the words. The possibility of such discrepancy shows clearly once again that what music expresses may have its source solely in the music itself (not in the words) and constitutes a real, genuine contribution of music to a vocal composition.

The present observation might suggest that the distinction between the referential and expressive meanings of music is coextensive with the distinction between those musical meanings which only echo what is conveyed in the words and those which really contribute some new meaning to a composition. Perhaps it would even be tempting – and perhaps what I have said thus far might suggest such a move – to equate on one side:

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<sup>4</sup> A justification of this relatively natural and intuitively convincing claim might look as follows: if music does not have any established denotations then – following Pierce's classical typology – its meanings must be either indexical or iconic. But since indexes always point to something that really exists and music – just as any other art form – has the character of 'fiction', of verisimilitude, and not of literal truth, then this first possibility is for music – and for any other art form – out of the question. (Cf. Krzysztof Gućzalski, 'Indeks i ikona, metafora i metonimia w muzyce' [Index and icon, metaphor and metonymy in music], *Muzyka* 50/1 (2005), 40). Consequently, the meanings in music have to be iconic, i.e. based on some similarity, understood in a very general sense. This may be either similarity to some actual sounds or some more indirect analogy to other objects, processes or events. But even with respect to actual sounds, music has rather limited capacities for imitating them, since they usually have a totally different character to musical sounds: the latter have only a finite number of harmonic components and a discrete spectrum, the former usually have a continuous spectrum and infinitely many harmonic components. Consequently, the similarity between music and its intended referent is usually rather faint and constitutes unsteady ground for producing the desired reference. Therefore iconic meanings of this kind can work only in combination with words that at least delimit quite closely the area in which we are supposed to be looking for a referent, if not simply naming it. Even where the imitation seems to be quite close and distinctive, as in the case of the eternal 'cuckoo', it is usually backed by the appropriate title (François Couperin's 'Cuckoo', Georg Friedrich Händel's 'The Cuckoo and the Nightingale' or at least 'Summer' by Antonio Vivaldi).

1. expressiveness and lack of reference,
  2. the realm of inner experiences (or sentience),
  3. the autonomous meanings of music (independent of accompanying words) actually contributing to a composition
- and on the other side:
1. meanings with obvious, explicit reference,
  2. the realm of the external, physical world,
  3. meanings of music merely echoing the meanings of words, with their help.

But such a claim would require careful examination. Only the second opposition (i.e. inner experience versus external world) seems to be clearly defined. As for the first (expressive meanings lacking explicit references versus obvious referential meanings), it has yet to be shown that in the case of expressive meaning there is no reference or denotation. It has only been observed that in the case of other meanings there are some obvious, explicit references. And if there is actually no reference in expressive meaning, if we cannot say or point out what music means in every particular case, then the question arises as to whether there is any meaning at all, and if so how it comes into existence. Finally, a further question related to this problem: how does music contribute any meaning to words if it does not have any denotation and does not refer to anything?

There is also a certain problem with the third opposition (see above): it can only be defined with respect to music with words. If there are no words, all meaning is contributed by the music, so all purely instrumental music is located just on one side of this opposition. Now, the first and second oppositions make sense for any music, even of a purely instrumental kind. So if all three oppositions should coincide, we would have to examine whether it is true that also for the first and second oppositions only one side of them pertains to purely instrumental music. Furthermore, the third opposition causes some trouble even with respect to music with words. If music contrives some referential meanings with the obvious and necessary help of words, paralleling their references and thus 'contributing nothing', does this mean that it makes no difference whether such referential meanings appear in music or not? It seems that music always 'contributes something'. Consequently, if the third opposition is to have any significance and usefulness, it has to be defined much more carefully so that it allows for the explanation of the role of music when it 'contributes nothing'.

The answer to all these questions about each opposition in turn and the careful examination of their interdependence would have to be a subject for another paper. But some preliminary research already completed

entitles us to proffer the following cursory conclusion: the examination of the relationships between three pairs of oppositions brings out examples located on one side according to one opposition and on the other side according to another, i.e. contradicting their full equivalence. At the same time, however, the character of these counterexamples shows to what extent and under what conditions different pairs of oppositions can be claimed to coincide. In addition, the marginal nature of these counterexamples reveals the reason for our intuitive temptation to equate the three oppositions and confirms such an intuition in the sense that its claim is shown to be in principle (i.e. in a majority of cases and in the most essential types of situations), even though not categorically (i.e. in all cases), correct.

*Translated by Krzysztof Guczalski*

