Is Music a Language?
A Contemporary Exploration of a Romantic Notion

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Abstract

The question—*Is music a language?*—is an enduring one, not only philosophically, but in the everyday discourse of practicing musicians. This essay revisits the question through a German Romanticist lens. It focuses primarily on the writings of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, plus the work of contemporary scholars such as Langer, Li, Han and Bowie. On one hand, the Romantic Era describes a period in which philosophers and composers were grappling with this very question in regard to its capacity to produce meaning without language. On the other, the Era offered a critique of the primacy of reason and an elevation of our nonlinguistic relationships to organic nature. Rather than remaining strictly within the Romantic framework, however, the essay expands into more modern, structuralist analyses of music to ascertain its constructive elements—that is, whether it has syntax and grammar, and whether "meaning" comes from these components. Recognizing that music has its structure and signifiers, much like language, the thesis offered is that music is not a language. It is rather a form of *expression* that defies and transcends the identification and meaning that language requires. Language is a way of *thinking*, one that has a different process than the thinking elicited by an engagement with music. To this end, Asian traditions are brought into the fold as is a discussion of the ineffable qualities of the sublime. The essay closes by considering the relationships between harmony and poetry and the improvisational nature of jazz performance.

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In Europe's Age of Enlightenment, music presented a philosophical problem. In this very Kantian period of history, people were applying reason to advance human knowledge and intellectualism. Reason happens with discourse and the application of language. The exercise in reasoned discourse involves finding the right representative and conceptual language for the task at hand. Music didn't fit comfortably with the rationalism of its time. It *did* something else.
Yet post-Enlightenment discourses, all the way up to everyday conversation today, aim to put the two together. "Music is a language," people say, as if it is age-old wisdom.

This essay will explore this collision by joining two topics of inquiry: (1) investigating whether music is a language, and (2) examining and exploring the relationship between music and reason. The question "Is Music a Language" is approached in a contemporary manner by tracing philosophical tributaries over the past two centuries—namely, the Enlightenment, through the Romantic Era, and into modern structuralism. Drawing out the literature on what music *does* presents an opening to also explore what *language* is doing. This essay will not attempt to define *what language is*, which is a subject far too deep to address here. The method instead is to work through what language and music *are doing* in ways that relate to each other. From this, the thesis offered is a Romantic one: Music is psychologically and aesthetically unique and special because it defies language. In music, there is nothing to refer to—no *thing* to think *about*. It taps into the human need to let go of rational, symbolic and representational thought. It instead invites us to feel and to dwell in the intensity of the sublime and the ineffable.

Responses to Plato

To the degree that all of European philosophical history is drawn from Plato, we can begin with his approach to music. First is his concept of the *demiurge* (*dēmioergós*, δημῐοεργός), "who composed the universe as an imitation of Ideas or unchanging Forms" (Hofstadter & Kuhns. 1964, p. 4). The *demiurge* is not God, but a "creator god" who imitates (*mimesis*) God's will. God is the ultimate holder of ideas; the demiurge imitates such ideas into things for the people. An artist then imitates the work of the demiurge by making art (poetry, paintings, music). Just as the demiurge created the cosmos, an artist is creating a "world" through some work of art. The gods aim for beauty and harmony; so does a person who makes a great work. Therefore, art is a reflection of—or imitation of—the work of the gods. In other words, when one makes art, one is imitating or copying in some way the divine ordering of the cosmos.

The next element of Platonism to consider is how music affects the human spirit. Key to this is Plato's twin towers of human greatness: reason and virtue. Music must aid in their development and not to their detriment. It brings the capacity to either draw its listener into virtuous social harmony or open one to the dangers of the passions. In music one must "discover what rhythms are the expressions of a courageous and harmonious life…" (Hofstadter & Kuhns, 1964, p. 26). Music should be simple, beautiful and harmonious, without the discord that threatens the pursuit of virtue. Plato asks, rhetorically, "for what should be the end of music if not the love of beauty?" (p. 29). He recognizes that music has a powerful effect on the soul, mind and body. But the only music that should be made and listened to in Plato's utopia is the kind that promotes virtue. He was strict in what was permissible in music and music education. Harmony of virtue, reason, beauty and knowledge was the aim, not expression for the sake of expression.

Aristotle shares Plato's ethical and educational focus on the value of music. For example, he is concerned about the *type* of music that is learned and performed and what kind of verse structure and instrumentation it uses. But Aristotle does not share Plato's worries about what music does to the soul. He is more open to its eudaemonic benefits. Music and dancing

are good in that they allow one to relieve one's cares and enjoy the pleasures of life. Music enlivens one's enthusiasm, which, for Aristotle, is important in nurturing the ethical part of one's soul.

In the 19th Century, Friedrich Nietzsche criticized the limitations Plato/Socrates placed on music and sensation overall. Writing in the late or post-Romantic period, Nietzsche points out how Socrates and the ancient Greek philosophers thought that "the senses might lure them away from their own world, from the cold realm of 'ideas,'" to "where they feared that their philosopher's virtues might melt away like snow in the sun" (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 332).[2] Socrates compares this to Homer's story of Odysseus' encounter with the mythical sirens on his way home after the Trojan War. The sirens were known to lure passing sailors to their deaths by singing with hypnotic and irresistible beauty. To protect his ship from their allure, Odysseus put wax in the ears of his oarsmen so they could not hear and thus not be tempted. But Odysseus had himself bound to the ship's mast, ears uncovered, to hear the madness of their singing. "Having 'Wax in one's ears,'" Nietzsche continues, "was then almost a condition of philosophizing; a real philosopher no longer listened to life, insofar as life is music; he *denied* the music of life—it is an ancient philosopher's superstition that all music is sirens' music" (p. 332).

Nietzsche's critique is that by chastising dangerous music, Socrates was denying its ability to tap into the experience of being alive. His metaphor is that philosophy too often does the same. He writes that this is Plato's "aesthetic Socratism… whose supreme law runs roughly like this: 'In order to be beautiful, everything must be reasonable'—a sentence formed in parallel to Socrates' dictum that 'Only he who knows is virtuous'" (1989, p. 63). In its adherence to reason, the discipline of philosophy, at least in the Platonic tradition, too often closes itself off from the passions.

Schopenhauer and the Will

Nietzsche is often aligned with German Romanticism even though he wrote after the period had mostly run its course. In part, this attribution is the result of his early adoption of the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, who wrote during the period. Both thinkers drew elements of Romanticism into their writings. Like the Romantics, they elevated the value of individual, passionate, emotional, and artistic life. Yet both lie at the periphery of the Romanticism in that they were antagonistic to some of the trends in literature and science at the time of their writings. What Schopenhauer and Nietzsche shared in Romanticism was a spirit for the ineffable power of music. Writing about both philosophers, Andrew Bowie emphasizes a *non-conceptual experience* in their writing about music as different from other forms of art:

> "Art, in the form of music, is a more apt response to the nature of existence because it does not require concepts. Concepts necessarily take one into the regress of causal explanations which lead to the 'abyss'. At the same time music expresses the creative principle of existence in a manner which makes existence's destructive aspect tolerable. Although, by unfolding in time, music relies on the divided nature of all phenomenal existence, it also conveys an affective overcoming of that existence, albeit at the price of the loss of reflective self-awareness." (p. 284)

Writing of Nietzsche's thoughts on music, Bowie touches on an element of it that resonates a more Asian aesthetics of *expression* rather than *mimesis*. This brings Nietzsche

[2] All references here are from his aphorism No. 372.

closer to the traditions of Daoism and Chan Buddhism. Both traditions sought to release the mind of its dependence on conceptual/linguistic thinking. As Bowie writes of Nietzsche:

> "Language has fallen ill because it has become too closely linked to conceptual thinking, and has lost its connection to feeling, and thus to 'nature.' It therefore works solely by convention, like a machine, and only music, now seen as a 'return to nature', as well as a 'purification of nature' (the two hardly seem compatible), is the 'language of true feelings'." (p. 285)

Such a perspective owes much to Nietzsche's readings of Schopenhauer, one of the foremost philosophers on the aesthetics of music. He was also one of the first Western philosophers to study Asian spiritual traditions such as Buddhism and Vedic-Hinduism. In 1818, Schopenhauer published *The World as Will and Representation*, in which he divides reality into (1) "will" (the unseen, unknowable force of nature) and (2) "representation" (appearances and things). His concept of representation is amended from a Kantian appropriation of Platonic metaphysics: Everything we see is an appearance/representation of some unseen realm or force; the art we make is a representation of all these representations. His dualism is a response to Kant's division of phenomena (appearances) and noumena (an unknowable realm that conditions and makes appearances possible). Schopenhauer's originality comes in his concept of *will*. Will is a *force* rather than an ideal realm. It is nature devoid of appearances and language, much like the Chinese *dao* or the ancient Greek concept of *logos*.[3] In the question of why humans strive to survive or why a plant reaches out to the sun, the answer he gives is the same: *will*.

Schopenhauer's question is, how do we bypass the world of representation and appearance to understand the deeper world of the will? Put another way, how can we gain direct access to the will? His answer was *music*. Music is mimetic, but only mimetic to the world as *will*, not representation (ergo, not Platonic or Kantian). All other art, he writes, is a copy of appearances (representation). But music is a "copy of an original that cannot itself ever be directly presented" (2010, p. 284). It is unmediated, "*a copy of the will itself*" (p. 285).

For Schopenhauer, music is inexpressible in language and defies conceptualization. "In every age, people have played music without being able to give an account of it: content with an immediate understanding of music, people did without an abstract conceptualization of this immediate understanding" (p. 284). Such terms as "unmediated" and "immediate" point to a *lack of mediation*; that is, a lack of anything that comes between the thing and our experience. A Platonic or Kantian representation or appearance comes between essence and thought; thought is a mediation of appearances. Schopenhauer is saying that music avoids such mediation. As immediate and unmediated, music does what other arts cannot. It needs no representation—no image, object, idea or word—to give it existence. Because of this, music offers a direct experience of the will. He goes so far as to say that music would exist "even if there were no world at all, something that cannot be said of the other arts" (p. 285). Music stands alone among all the arts. It is free from the world of representation/appearances and this is its power: "the other arts speak only of shadows while music speaks of the essence" (p. 285).

This conclusion leads to another question: How can a composer write music that directly accesses the will? Schopenhauer answers that it requires a *genius*, one who "reveals the innermost essence of the world and expresses the deepest wisdom in a language that his reason does not understand" (p. 288). Indeed, music is totally untouched by one's thinking

[3] "*Logos*" translated as "Word" is a Christian rendering; its pre-Christian denotation is much broader than a linguistic signification.

about knowledge or causes. It makes itself felt only through its *effect* on the listener. There is no reference to any cause. Here we find a way of thinking that would inspire the Romantic spirit. It also reveals Schopenhauer's interest in Asian philosophical and aesthetic traditions. Rather than leading us along a path of *reason*, as in the Platonic/Aristotelian and Enlightenment traditions, music is a direct *expression* of life itself, free of language and concepts.

Nietzsche might have had this concept of genius in mind when he met composer Richard Wagner. The two became friends over a shared appreciation for Schopenhauer's philosophy.[4] The Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy* wrote that Wagner's music breaks the Dionysian "spell of individuation," laying open "the innermost core of things" to reveal Kant's thing-in-itself (s16, p. 76). Later, Nietzsche would break his friendship with and respect for Wagner. In *The Case of Wagner*, he is critical of the composer's shift into a "semiotics of sound" and a predilection for dividing music into small units (p. 18). Wagner at this stage is a clever "tyrant" in producing a "theatrical rhetoric" (p. 20). As Nietzsche writes, Wagner "*has increased the linguistic capacity of music immeasurably* — : he is the Victor Hugo of music as language." In addition to his music, Wagner was also a writer. Wagner fell under the spell of his public image and an expectation to offer some higher conceptual meaning. By Nietzsche's account, Wagner's music served as a means for language, rhetoric and signification rather than the wholeness that he initially admired: "as a musician he was still a rhetorician, therefore he absolutely *had* to emphasize the 'it signifies.' … Wagner needed literature to convince the world to take his music seriously," so that it might, in Wagner's own words, signify infinity.

Suzanne Langer notes that for Wagner, music is *another* language. She reads his comment as proposing a "*formalization and representation*" of emotions and moods (1954, p. 180). For Langer, these notions of a "*language of music*" give a "misleading" account of what music is and how our minds respond to it (pp. 182-183). Instead, we have a *symbolic* relationship with music that requires no representation at all. The formal elements of music fit a formal element of the psyche, and here we find its emotional significance and resonance. Music doesn't represent words, objects or things; it expresses what language cannot. What makes music special is that it avoids the necessity language has of representation and semantics.

It's important to remember here that in the Kantian framework, following the European tradition, vision is knowledge. It is the primary means of gaining understanding from sensual experience. For Kant, music evades conceptual thought while not evading representation altogether. That is, it doesn't fit his *a priori* concepts that organize our thinking, but it does represent something. That something is *human emotions*. Music was, in his thinking, a "language of emotions" that represents feelings in much the way language represents ideas or objects (Bowie, 2003, p. 35). Langer writes about Kant: "the great worshiper of reason naturally ranked [music] lowest of all art forms" (1954, p. 170).

Schopenhauer is borrowing from the tradition of Kant even as he turns against him. For support, he pulls from ancient Indian philosophy and the concept of "Maya" or illusion. The world of representation is illusory, a "veil of maya" over the eyes. Our representations are just a dream; all of the different things we pull apart and identify are unimportant in regard to the will. Music surpasses this, giving us direct access to nature's essence. In this, Schopenhauer offers an original (non-Hegelian, it should be noted) concept of the Absolute that transcends reason. This constitutes his fusion of Asian traditions and Romantic aesthetics. It's why so many artists today continue to read his works. Art, particularly music, doesn't thrive in a world of rational thoughts; it must be free to transcend reason and express the ineffable.

[4] See Nietzsche, 1974, s99.

The Sublime

Music surely expresses and communicates feelings; whether or how it *represents* is open to debate, as the history of European aesthetics has shown. This distinction lies at the core of whether music can be regarded as a language.

A key concept in this question is that of the sublime. It is a difficult word to define because there is neither a grammatical subject nor phenomenal object for what is a raw experience. "The sublime" is not a thing but a sense of awe, power, and even terror arising from one's experience of art and nature. Kant's notion of the sublime marks a point of distinction from "the beautiful." The beautiful is formal; the sublime *transcends* form. It's a concept that allows us to think the limits of finitude. As Bowie writes about Kant's description of the concept:

> "The sublime relates mainly to nature, though Kant does refer to some art works in connection with it. Whereas beauty relates to the form of the object, the sublime is concerned with what is unlimited or even formless, to the extent to which it makes us able to feel in ourselves 'a purposiveness which is completely independent of nature'." (Bowie, p. 43)

Gilles Deleuze, in his monograph on Kant, puts it in a similar way:

> "The feeling of the sublime is experienced when faced with the formless or the deformed (immensity or power). It is as if the imagination were confronted with its own limit, forced to strain to its utmost, experiencing a violence which stretches it to the extremity of its power." (Deleuze, 1984, p. 50)

The sublime is a *feeling* marked by a failure of the *imagination* to come to terms with the enormity of some experience—the power of nature, violent storms, overwhelming landscapes, a musical performance, etc. As Deleuze writes, Kant's sublime forces one's reason "to admit that all its power is nothing in comparison to an Idea" (p. 51).

Kant's sublime is categorized into the mathematical (largeness) and the dynamical (boundlessness). In either case, it marks the limits not of reason but imagination. In the process of *reasoning*, the imagination functions to make an idea that corresponds to an understanding of an object. *Beauty* marks a "free play" of the imagination—free in the sense that it doesn't have to correspond the object to the *a priori* concepts toward any understanding. The *sublime* is a total breakdown of the imagination as it struggles in a state that is neither free nor cognitive. The imagination runs wild against the limits of thought. Reason then enters to try and deal with this overwhelming failure of the imagination. This is because reason, as Byung-chul Han points out, doesn't depend on sensation (2023). Instead, as Li Zehou explains in the following passage, this breakdown of imagination and appeal toward reason produces an *aesthetic judgment* that allows one to resolve the suspended moment:

> "Kant holds that the mathematical sublime is due to the massive expanse or extent of a natural object that surpasses the capacity of imagination, thereby arousing in the subject a demand for a rational idea in order to wholly comprehend the object. However, the rational idea does not have determinate content, being simply an indeterminate form of subjective purposiveness. Therefore, its application is properly an aesthetic judgment. In the case of the dynamical sublime, the conflict among aesthetic feelings is all the more salient. On the one hand, imagination is too weak to adapt to a natural object, so great is its dynamic power; consequently, the subject feels fear. Yet the imagination demands a rational idea to comprehend and dominate the object, and the initial feeling of fear transforms into pleasure at the realization of one's own dignity and courage." (Li, 2018, p. 304)

The sublime is therefore a contradiction while beauty is harmony. Beauty is a harmonious *play* between the understanding and the imagination, which offers a sense of calmness in our aesthetic response. The sublime, as Deleuze writes, instead marks a point of "contradiction… between the demands of reason and the power of the imagination" (1984, p. 51). Any harmonizing, as Deleuze writes in another work, can only be one of tension, "a discordant concord, a harmony in pain." (2004, p. 61). It is imagination pushed to the limits of its power. Similarly, Li describes Kant's sublime as a point of "confrontation between imagination and reason" that marks a site of violence (2018, p. 304). Whereas beauty is about quality, he adds, the sublime is about quantity. It is *too much* for the mind to bear. Han marks the point of tension as one between immanence and transcendence. The tension between reason and imagination that arises with the enormity of the sublime produces "a vertical feeling, always a feeling of transcendence" (2023, p. 62).

The Romanticism that followed Kant emphasized a different idea of truth than the Enlightenment philosophers of politics, ethics and science. The Romantic spirit is, at heart, the lived experience of striving along what is *ineffable* to reach out to the Absolute. Over the course of the Romantic period leading into late 19th Century Modernism, discourses on music became occupied by a tension between the representational and the sublime. In the former, whatever consciousness gathers points to something in the world that can be identified. The sublime, by contrast, points to nothing namable and everything ineffable in its awesome power. As Bowie writes:

> "The perceived inadequacy of language to aesthetic ideas makes other thinkers, particularly the early Romantics and Schopenhauer, look for a 'language' which is adequate to such ideas. The language in question is, however, the conceptless language of music, to which some thinkers will even grant a higher philosophical status than to conceptual language. Although music is manifested in sensuous material, it does not necessarily represent anything and may in consequence be understood metaphorically as articulating or evoking what cannot be represented in the subject, namely the supersensuous basis of subjectivity which concepts cannot describe, where necessity and freedom are reconciled." (Bowie, p. 34)

Bowie further states that music's ability to evade representation is why it becomes the dominant expression of Romanticism. It shares kinship with the sublime as a relationship to feeling rather than concepts (p. 51).

Yet the need to apply linguistic thinking to music persisted in the Enlightenment and subsequent Romantic and Modern periods. Nietzsche's critique of Wagner offers an interesting commentary on the shift between the latter two periods. The Romanticism of music's ineffable sublimity transforms into a fragmented, referential, semiotic Modernism.[5] Perhaps then, it is this emergence into modernism—the aesthetics of fragmentation and newness—that intensified this need to render music as language. It's a need that has never been satisfied, continuing today.

If one claims that music *is* a language, what does this mean today? How can, or indeed *should*, music be regarded as a "language," given how it seems to transcend the need for language and conceptual thinking. Such a philosophical puzzle asks one to address not only what music is doing but what *language* is doing. We can approach this by addressing the structural question: What is the formal structure of language and music?

[5] See Nietzsche's epilogue to *The Case of Wagner*, where he describes his aesthetics of modernism—a "lying…, *contradiction of values*" (2021, p. 39)

Structures In Time

As it is structural, music has its "code" that can be known. This knowability comes at both abstract and experiential levels. At the *abstract* level, it has a form that stands alone outside of its experience. Think of musical notation as its code; it can be reproduced without needing to hear it. At the *experiential* level, we know music because we've heard it and felt it and integrated its formal structure into our subconscious. Because of these experiences, we intuit what music *is*. Music is arranged in anticipation of a listener being aware of its formal structure and its experiential familiarity.

Language works in a similar way. It has its abstract form that can be written down and reproduced without having to say it or experience it in the moment. But we also know language because we've experienced it; we intuitively speak within the form, and reproduce expressive nuances, all of which are known. Langer writes that aesthetics philosophers of music suggested that the tones on a scale are words, harmony is its grammar, and thematic development is its syntax. Langer, however, describes this as "a useless allegory" because tones lack a symbolic "'dictionary meaning'" and they do not only construct harmony (1954, p. 185).

Let's reverse the metaphorical emphasis and see if we can think it in a different way. Rather than asking whether music conceptually comports to how we know language, let's instead ask: What are the actual, distinctly formal, elements of music that are language-like? To do this, we have to think of music *audibly*—that is, as listened to in the unfolding of time. Music is structured through three basic components:

(1) *Melody* is the construction/occurrence of notes that compose the main line of attention in listening; we might make a connection here between music's notes (tones) and the choice and order of words one speaks that are listened to.

(2) *Rhythm* is the arrangement of those notes in time intervals. We can make a correlation here to the rhythms and pace in which one speaks and a listener listens. Together, melody and rhythm compose the "time" of music.

(3) *Harmony* is a second series of notes, in time, that are complementary in structure to the main melody and rhythm. Harmony builds a sense of complexity and dynamism to the main melody. It is also a major concept in aesthetics and metaphysics in a metaphorical sense—the "harmony" of parts or of the cosmos, for example.

Music thereby has its conventional form. In the European tradition, this is called "notation." Notation is a formal standard that enables anyone reading it to know the melody, rhythm and harmony of a composition. This allows another musician to read it, even "*hear*" it in one's mind, and repeat it. This is one of the formal arguments for music as a language. Like language, each note is *differentiated from* every other possible note in time, just as each word is differentiated from every other. But only language signifies a concept, idea or thing outside of the word. This differentiation of one word from another is how "cat" is different from "car." The difference between the two is known because of the lexical construction of the words (ending in t rather than r) and also because each word signifies something different. In music, a middle-C note is different from a nearby E-flat note because their different locations on the piano produce different sounds. But, as we'll elaborate later, notes signify nothing except other notes.

If there's to be a correlation between music and language, it is because they share three traits: (1) each depends on a structure, (2) each component within that structure differentiates from other components (words and notes), and (3) both are significant only as they unfold in time. In listening to either music or language, the form (1) allows one to attend to the notes and

words that differentiate (2) in time (3). From this experience of time, one draws meaning, significance and any affective relationship with it.

Regarding the third aspect, speaking and music both exhibit what philosopher Henri Bergson called "duration." There is not simply a "point" in time, rather a width that includes the past and future within any such duration. As one experiences a note or a word, its duration of time retains an element of what has just passed and also contains an anticipation of what's to come. The past and future fold into the present duration. The music listener knows this, as does one listening to a voice speaking. Even a written text has an element of listening encoded into it. Reading a text is much like listening in that it is read in time with melody and rhythm.

Our subjective consciousness of time was important for German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl. Working psychologically, he diagrammed our focused *intention* of events in everyday life by considering how we experience music. (This "intention" is a technical term in his phenomenology—music and time "make sense" in how the mind joins with the event to pull out its content and meaning.) Within a present moment there is the "retention" of a previous event that is now in the past; there is also, in the same moment, a "protention" or anticipation of an event to follow in the immediate future (Husserl, 1991). Music and language are similar here in that a single note or a single word only "makes sense" as a relation of other notes or words in the past and future.

Let's look at some examples of both. The word "sign" is different from "sighing." At an abstract, formal level, there is an obvious "lexical" difference; both words exist in the English vocabulary. As spoken, at least in an American accent, the two are close to what is called a homonym—they sound similar even though they are lexically different. But this similarity only happens when each word is isolated and compared to the other. In time, we hear the word *in the context of* the other words that come before and after. This context gives rise to different ideas or concepts, which causes us to hear them differently at both the lexical and semantic levels. That is, we hear different meanings because we hear different words. Similarly, the musical note F-sharp is different from B-flat. We can hear this difference. But the exact same B-flat note will sound different depending on what comes before and after and what the key, scale and melody are. That is, it takes on significance because it is heard *in the context of* the other notes in the scale or key of the musical piece. This happens because we experience a breadth of time that includes the past and the future within the present duration.

A final correlation to note is that speaking language is musical in delivery. It is both melodic and rhythmic. Every language and dialect has conventions of dips and rises, variations in speed and enunciation, etc. that occur over the course of a few sentences. This tonal and rhythmic variability expresses non-linguistic signification and emotion to anything spoken. But this—the melody of speaking—is not under study here. Instead, in the question "Is music a language?" the focus is whether there is a formal correlation between the two. Melody is the only formal element in instrumental music that has the possibility to correlate to anything like "meaning." Therefore, if one is to attribute a notion of meaning in music and language, the formal difference between them is this: Notes in European music conform to a scale whereas words conform to a logic of associations. A logic of associations produces some external relationship to meaning; a scale is internal to itself which expresses outwardly. To borrow again from Byung-chul Han, melody is empty of meaning. This emptiness is its art.

An Implied Harmony

Harmony in music deepens this experiential structure. Let's allow the following correlation: Melody corresponds to *what* is said and rhythm to *how* it is said. Harmony is the third element. But here, we have a correlational problem. In music, harmony is another note

(or notes) that shares the same time as the main sequence of notes in any melody. Conceptually, we can think of harmony as providing a supportive depth of significance to the melody and rhythm. But it also expresses something the melody alone is *not*“ saying” in that moment. While this works for music, the analogy to language becomes less clear. Poetry has something like melody in its construction. A word is contextual to other words before and after it in the composition of an idea. Poetry often evokes ideas and mental imagery by how a word changes meaning over time depending on the other words that surround it. Music does this as well. Any note can change its significance depending on how the melody plays out. In both, the linear element of time reveals its emotional impact. But this remains linear and is not yet harmonic. At the formal level, language can only be linear in its unfolding, regardless of whether it is descriptive, explanatory or poetic. There is no such thing as a grammatical harmony in speaking because there is only one word possible in time. The word said, its choice of use, its function, its purpose, its context in relation to other words in a totality, and in its rhythmic arrangement—all of it is linear and melodic.

The closest a word can get to what musical harmony does is through *allusion*. That is, a word says something but also alludes to something that is *unstated*. This is another area where poetry works its magic. But if one can call this “harmony,” it can only be *implied*. In music, harmony formally provides what the melody alone cannot. It is something like a subconscious resonance of depth and complexity—a broadening of emotional impact. In poetry, a word does this as well, implying some deeper, parallel or juxtaposed meaning to *something* outside the melody while continuing to maintain its semantic signification.

As an example of this “something,” consider the word “love.” It may initially describe something seemingly pleasant, but reveal itself to be something darker through the other words that come. This is melody. The harmony would come from something that lies outside of the melody’s formal construction. For example, the word “love” has both its semantic meaning while also resonating some other meanings along with it. This ambiguity may signify some *other* idea, image or experience. Such a double-meaning brings the kind of emotional tension you might find in musical harmony. Whereas musical harmony shares an actual note, poetic harmony comes in sharing simultaneity with another meaning within the word *itself* since the word’s meaning is rendered ambiguous.[6] In this way, poetic harmony comes close to what music does—the word transcends or even evades its semantic signification.

Much of the beauty in poetry is its combination of melody, rhythm and creative allusion. Allusion, again, could perhaps correlate to “harmony.” In our listening, we “hear” words passing by, perhaps evoking images; depending on how the melody plays out, those words may change meaning. But if there is a harmony, it comes not in the word but in what *isn’t* said. It can only be implied in the word, offering a depth in the melody that passes in time. Such a notion of harmony thereby lies not in the form, as in music. Instead, the choice of word or phrase compels our attentive mind to build the associative idea that is implied. Formally, a *poetic harmony is silent*; it only exists if one’s attention *makes the association* that deepens the significance.

There are theories of poetry to support the notion of harmony, and it’s an interesting argument to contemplate.[7] Nevertheless, such an implied harmony can only reveal itself through an abstract negation. At the formal level—this is true in poetry, description, narration

[6] For more on the ambiguous signification of words, see Ferdinand de Saussure’s classic and influential account of linguistics (1959).
[7] The French *Encyclopédie*, written in France during the Age of Enlightenment, has an entry on poetic harmony. Written by Louis de Jaucourt, it describes poetic harmony as stylistic, melodic or abstract. The entry is available online at Jaucourt (2015).

and dialogue—two words cannot occupy the same duration. If they do, it becomes noise. Only music can build depth through a formal application of harmony.

More to the point, while harmony is essential in the European musical tradition, it's not an element of what poetic, narrative, or descriptive language does. Speaking is an exchange of melodic and rhythmic lines. The other speaker listens and must wait to speak. Music is different because it is harmonic and additive, because it can simultaneously "say" *something else* to deepen its significance. This, in the European tradition particularly, is what lends music its richness of experience that transcends language. Non-European music, such as the classical music of India, is different. While there is some element of harmony, it finds its most potent expression through rhythm and melody. It is more akin to speaking. A sitar and a tabla, for example, exchange lines that complement each other much like conversation. They do this through a shared rhythmic structure, which might be quite complex, and a fundamental tone, which is relatively simple.

We turn finally from significance to *signification*. Significance is about meaning, while signification is about signs. A *sign* is a pointer to some meaning, idea or thing outside of itself. (Think of a stop sign on a road. The sign isn't stopping, but is a pointer indicating the idea that you must stop your car.) From a semiological perspective, if music is a language, then why does it require no translation to be felt and understood? Why do its signs, its notes, add up to something that evades signification? Language is based on signs and signification. Music is not because it points to nothing outside of itself. At the formal level, the notes are meaningless. In language, a word like "tree" *signifies* (points to, or indicates) an idea or object *tree* in the real world.[8] Language, Langer writes, has "separable terms with fixed connotations, and syntactical rules for deriving complex connotations" (p. 188). Music, by contrast, "has no literal meaning." A note on a scale lacks signification and does not represent any *thing*. Its relation is to the other melodic, rhythmic and harmonic elements. Music in an objective sense is only relational to itself as it unfolds experientially in time. (Consider again, the ideas of "intention," "protention," and "duration"; we feel the music because of how the past and future notes fold into the present note. Any note only references its own compositional arrangement.) As a subjective experience, the listener forms a relation to it that is emotional and non-conceptual.

Finally, we return to the Romantics. A prevailing notion in the spirit of its time is that there is nothing knowable to music other than itself. Returning as well to our collisions of music and reason in the question of whether it is a language, we find expressions of time that have no reason. Nor are they irrational or anti-reason. Music exists outside of the dialectic, living in its own made duration of wholeness and ineffability within itself. The Romantics were far more comfortable in their relationship with nature unfolding as itself, in full awareness that names for what nature does do not capture or contain what it is. As Schelling suggests, art and nature do not need philosophy or the language that speaks it.[9] The art of music is its own nature, one expressed by human will. If one wishes, one could *endow* it with a name—God, the Absolute, the Sublime, etc. But as with nature, what it is and is doing is something else. As Langer writes, "the strength of musical expressiveness" comes in the fact "that *music articulates forms which language cannot set forth*" (p. 189). Music, from a Romantic perspective, drives thought outside of language and toward a kind of *freedom* that requires no name.

[8] See Saussure (1959).
[9] See Schelling, "System of Transcendental Idealism" (1800), in Schelling, 2021.

Conclusion

The question of whether music is a language does not end in any conclusive and universal answer. As with the reception of art itself, how one thinks about how one gathers music depends on how one interprets what is underway in consciousness, composition, and physical acts of performance. That is, we must turn to the musicians and composers today. Frequently, professional musicians insist without hesitation that *music is a language*. This may not be for reasons of structure or significance, rather because it comprises its own shared knowledge and shared form of expression that is universally expressible. All European music conforms to its notational structure, which allows music to be communicated and performed even between those who don't share the same spoken language.

The "Western" style of music that shares most kinship with the expressiveness of language as spoken in time is jazz. To know jazz is to know its form and the ways in which this form is expressed. But what fuels jazz is improvisation—that is, the ability to creatively and confidently express oneself depending on what others are expressing. The art and skill of performing jazz comes through years of having deeply integrated its history to a near-unconscious level. From this experience, a player "quotes" the tradition in some interpretive manner. Jazz teachers speak of the need to learn the "vocabulary." This can only come through years of learning, after which this knowledge situates itself in the preconscious readiness of any player. The form is expressed from the "phrases" one executes within this seat of knowledge. Fellow band members hear and recognize such expressions of form and then respond, refer and modify. There is a listen-and-speak activity within the moment, but it is all happening simultaneously. Of course, such speaking is metaphorical. What's really happening is that one is playing this note or chord at this moment in time, which depends entirely on what else is happening melodically and harmonically—not only in response but in a simultaneous duration of time's continuance. The notes themselves are meaningless. If music *means* anything, it is in how it expresses a sense of unified time. This shared time is made through a simultaneous exchange of overlaps that composes a total experience. This movement of unified time defies language and objects.

Music-as-language also points to music as participatory in real time, unlike, say, a couple of painters taking turns with brush strokes. Aesthetics philosophers thereby find themselves in an *aporia*, or an unresolvable paradox. In one regard, music is commonly thought of by Romantic era philosophers as having its own language that is not language. It has a *formal* structure that expresses, depending on how one thinks of language, as "being" or "having" its own language, as defying or transcending the limits of language, or as an absence or negation of language. In this sense, music *is*, *defies*, and/or *transcends* language. These don't have to be mutually exclusive concepts but can be, and have been, thought in a multitude of ways. This points to the enigmatic force and power of music, particularly instrumental music. It frees the mind from linguistic or conceptual thinking. Or, viewed another way, it provides a ground that offers this sense of freedom and transcendence.

From a Romantic perspective, music is non-representational; it evades identity and presents difference, change and uncertainty within time. It is akin to *thinking* in its process but a thinking free of the burden of associations that language brings. For Rousseau, who helped inspire the Romantic spirit, music *is itself* and requires no other. As Slavoj Zizek writes,

> "It was Rousseau who first clearly articulated this expressive potential of music as such, when he claimed that, instead of merely imitating the affective features of verbal speech, music should be given the right to 'speak for itself'—in contrast to the deceiving verbal speech, in music, it is, to paraphrase Lacan, the truth itself which speaks." (Zizek, 2004, p. 18)

Borrowing from Schlegel, Bowie writes that music fails to represent the Absolute (2003). But in the artistic life of *striving*, failure is not the same as defeat. It is the very reason music stirs the Romantic heart—accepting the sublime failure to *understand* while continuing to *strive* regardless. The Romantic spirit needs no reason or *telos*, only the freedom to keep expressing the wildness of the restless heart.

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