

Music, Language, and Meaning

Music has often been called a universal language. Unlike spoken languages, which require familiarity with syntax and semantics to be comprehended, the musical language seems to be understandable by all. Whether it be Japanese gagaku, Indonesian gamelan music, or Mexican son, musical works can bring listeners in any culture to a moving aesthetic experience. Even the many diverse styles of music within Western culture, such as jazz, country, or rock, can be equally appreciated.

by Anna Unyk

Many listeners believe that this universal appreciation is possible because musical meaning resides primarily in the musical form itself, especially in the case of instrumental music. Unlike the auditory patterns which make up words in spoken language, melody, harmony, rhythm, and timbre do not refer to concepts or meanings beyond themselves which must be learned. The form of music is its meaning, and if one takes the time to listen to and appreciate the patterns of tones that make up a musical work, one has grasped the meaning of that work.

The understanding and apprehension of musical form, however, is not simply a matter of hearing auditory patterns. Although the meaning of music, especially instrumental music, may reside primarily in

the patterns and relationships within the musical sound or form itself, a universal musical language must be understood in the same way by all listeners for its meaning to be universal. Given a piece of sitar music from India, both Indian musicians and musically untrained Canadian listeners should be able to extract the same meaning from the work. Intuitively, this does not seem to be plausible. Untrained listeners may not have the acuity of hearing that the musicians have developed to distinguish all the nuances in the sound. The same meaning, therefore, could not be extracted from the form by the untrained musicians, whether they be Indian or Canadian. This does not imply that the music has no meaning for the untrained listeners. Obviously,

untrained listeners can enjoy music as much as anyone else. The question, really, is whether the apprehension of the form is the same as for trained musicians.

But there is an even more important point to be illustrated by this example. A universal language should also be understood by listeners regardless of cultural background. The sitar music from India should be understood in the same way by a musician from India as by a Canadian musician. Again, intuitively, this seems unlikely, but how can we really know if two listeners are understanding musical form in the same way? In spoken languages, the goal of conversation is to share meaning. If we are listening to someone and are confused about what the person is saying, we ask for clarification. If we are talking, and we notice a puzzled look on our listener's face, we might translate our intended meaning into different words so that our listener will understand us. In spoken language, clarification of, and communication about meaning can take place through further discourse.

Communication about musical meaning, however, is problematic. Two listeners could talk about their experience of a piece of music to see if they describe the music in the same way, but even if they did use similar words, how could we know that these phrases actually refer to similar musical experiences?

One way that musicians translate and communicate what they hear into a standardized method of description is through musical notation. Most music students, and especially students of ethnomusicology, train and refine their ability to transcribe the musical patterns they hear into this notation. Professional ethnomusicologists continue to use this skill to record the music of other cultures when they are in the field. This transcription gives an indication of how a listener is actually perceiving musical patterns without using spoken language as an intermediary step.

By inspecting transcriptions of unfamiliar ethnic music, ethnomusicologists have found that any two expert transcribers will not transcribe a piece of music they are listening to in the same way. This creates an interesting problem for the use of transcription as a recording device and for the notion of music as a universal language. On the positive side, it is possible

that these unique transcriptions are a result of the crudeness of musical notation. Everything that we hear cannot be captured in musical notation. Musicians are well aware of this when they are first learning a piece of music from a score. Many of the subtle nuances that add to the emotional impact of a piece of music are absent in the score. The musician must involve his or her creative energies in elaborating upon the framework provided by the notation. A transcriber, therefore, may actually apprehend the complexity of musical events that he or she is hearing, but be unable to transcribe them because of the limitations of musical notation in capturing all of these subtleties.

Another possibility, however, is that the perception of the formal properties of music may vary from listener to listener. In observing music students engaged in the task of transcribing short simple melodies in a musical

style familiar to them, one finds that not all of them transcribe the melodies in the same way, regardless of the fact that they are all good transcribers. The musical notation system in this case is certainly capable of capturing the musical event in its entirety.

The most likely explanation for these results is that the music students were not sharing the same musical experience, even though they were listening to the same tonal patterns. Rather than the music carrying a universal meaning to its listeners, it

seems that listeners impute their own interpretation of form upon the music. They actually participate in creating a meaningful experience for themselves.

The causes behind these individualized interpretations of music are only beginning to be studied by psychomusicologists. It seems that the perception of music is not only influenced by acoustical features, such as pitch, loudness, and timbre, but also by the relationships between musical elements. As the Gestalt school of psychologists would contend, the whole is not the sum of its parts. When we listen to a particular piece of music, our perceptions not only depend on what acoustical events are impinging on our senses at the moment, but also on how these events relate to the events we have just heard, the events we think we will hear in the upcoming moments, and the entire history of our experience with music.

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In recent experiments, musicians were presented with a variety of two-tone melodic beginnings and were asked to sing what they expected the continuations of these melodies to be had they not been interrupted. Surprisingly, the musicians easily produced the continuations. These continuations, or expectancies, were then analyzed and sets of melodies were created for each musician based on his or her expectancies. These melodies either followed the expected continuations sung by the musicians or contradicted them. The melodies were then presented to the musicians for them to transcribe into musical notation. It was found that while the musicians could accurately perceive and transcribe the melodies that included their expectancies, they were not very successful at transcribing the unexpected patterns correctly. It seems that the musicians' perceptions of music were influenced by what they expected to hear,

Even more interesting is the fact that the individual musicians produced differing expectancies of continuation for the same melodic beginnings. This suggests that the listeners must perceive music in unique ways. As the results of the transcription experiment illustrate, these individual differences in expectancy will lead to different perceptions as to which melodies contain expected and unexpected elements. A melodic pattern may be expected for one listener, but unexpected for another, leading to a variance in perception.

These findings have lead psychomusicologists to explore the factors which influence expectancies. Studies have shown that expectancies differ cross-culturally. In one experiment, musicians from three countries were asked to sing expected continuations to the same melodic beginnings. In terms of the average expectancies for these three groups, it was found that they produced different expectancies. Given these differences, musicians from these various cultures would probably perceive the formal aspects of music in different ways.

Cultural differences, coupled with the individual differences in expectancies within each culture, point to the influence of past musical experience upon expectancy. Each listener has a unique repertoire of exposure to music, whether it be through listening to lullabies, nursery rhymes, t.v. productions, concerts, or records. These musical patterns converge in memory to produce

unique cognitive representations that help the listener to interpret new musical experiences. They guide the listener by allowing him or her to predict what upcoming musical patterns will be, just as our memory of city streets helps us to predict what an upcoming street corner will be and guide us to our destination. We would be confused without these expectancies.

Living in a particular culture, however, narrows our experiences with music. Many Canadians, for example, have never heard the folk songs of Latin America or Indonesia. Naturally, this affects their expectancies, and therefore also their perceptions of ethnic music, just as visiting a new city with an unfamiliar street plan affects our ability to find our way around. The listeners belonging to one culture, as a group, have more similar musical expectancies because of similar musical

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Given these cross-cultural and individual differences in expectancies, and the knowledge that expectancies affect perception, it appears implausible that music could ever be a universal language. The formal features and hence meaning of a single instrumental work must surely be perceived differently by individual listeners, especially if they have different cultural backgrounds. But this does not necessarily deter from the beauty or aesthetic value of music. Free from the function of communicating a particular meaning, music becomes a vehicle

for creative self-expression. Listeners interact with the form to create an experience that is most meaningful to them. Unlike so many of their daily activities, listeners are unencumbered by a social framework which dictates what meaning they should be deriving from an event.

This individualized appreciation need not inhibit a sharing of aesthetic experience by those involved in a musical *event*. In fact, music often heightens our feelings of unity with others, especially when the music is a patriotic song. In these cases, the cultural influences upon expectancies are probably quite strong, thereby uniting listeners in a common experience.

The power of music to reflect both the unity and diversity of its audience, and to cultivate both individual and cultural creativity surely fills an important social need. In so doing, music moves beyond cultural boundaries and becomes a universal form of art.