

Once again on Language and Music

(A semiotic approach)

In order to be able to raise the question of the relation between music and language at all, one has first to find a basis of comparison. Such a basis can be material, genetic, functional, etc. (cf. Harweg 1968). The present paper is putting forward a functional-semiotic basis of comparison and starts out from the opinion that "music is language, i.e. one of those systems of communication whereby human beings can exchange meanings and values" (Ruwet 1972. 26). As a starting point, then, we have to admit that music, just like language, is a code with a specific organization, which reflects the reality outside it in a specific way. In the past decades this recognition has proved fruitful in the phonological and syntactic approaches to the relation between language and music (see e.g. Jakobson 1932, Ruwet 1972), and later also in the development of a semantically oriented musicology. (This latter development has been associated especially with the names of Asafyev in the Soviet Union, Zich, Sychra, Jiránek and others in Czechoslovakia, cf. Doubraová 1981).

Music expresses the inner world of man, i.e. primarily his feelings, emotions and the ideas dissolved in these. This statement is by no means new: it can be found in the ethos-theory of the Ancient Greeks, as well as in the philosophical and aesthetic literature of the 18th and 19th centuries (in Rousseau, James Harris, Twinning, Kant, Hegel, etc.; cf. the relevant places in Pfrogner 1954 Zoltai 1969). It is not a new idea either that music conjures up the inner life of man by imitating it as such, rather than by representing the external world: music is the mimesis of inner life (Lukács 1963. 346). The most important feature of this mimesis is what Lukács calls indeterminate objectivity. Needless to say, this notion also has its antecedents. For instance, when comparing music and the visual arts, Kant remarks that the path of music leads from sensations to indeterminate ideas ("von Empfindungen zu unbestimmten Ideen"), whereas the path of the visual arts leads

from determinate ideas to sensations ("von bestimmten Ideen zu Empfindungen") (Kant 1790. §53).

In connection with musical mimesis we must have a brief look at emotions. Emotions are extremely important regulators of human activity; they are specific internal signals which reflect not the external reality in a direct way, but man's relationship to that reality; more precisely, they reflect the relationship of man's need to the possibility of fulfilling those needs (Simonov 1975. 26ff). Emotions permeate all spheres of the mind (thinking, volition, attention, memory, etc.) and are inextricably interwoven with them. From this it follows that the emotions in everyday life are always concrete, individualized, closely linked to a sensitive subject and to a particular situation in the life of that subject. Without knowing all these circumstances, emotions are hard to distinguish: "... it will only be possible to distinguish one emotional state from another by taking account of specific psychological, specific cognitive and specific behavioral patterns—and then only in conjunction with given eliciting conditions". (Encycl. of Psych. 1972. 323).

Now it is precisely this objectivity linked to the external world that musical expression radically removes from the emotions, cancelling "the hic et nunc of what elicits them" and thus representing them "in their uninhibited completion and entirely undisturbed purity". In this way "music is simultaneously as far as possible from life and also as close as possible to it" (Lukács 1963. 366). Although musical expression is divorced from the concrete circumstances which elicit emotions, the language of music becomes neither vague, nor an unarticulated eruption of emotion. The peculiarity of music is in the fact that it gives form to the typical as such, without "reaching down" to the field of individuality for it (Lukács 1963. 368). This is possible because music itself is socially-historically determined, just as well as its subject-matter, the inner world of man, is a product of social-historical evolution. After all, even our most individual emotions reflect a host of diverse social relations. Music, then, is not emotional in general: it always expresses the emotional tone of a particular period and in a socially determined code.

As a consequence of the indeterminate objectivity of music, differences in the interpretation of musical content are, in principle, inevitable. However, it would be a mistake to consider the different interpretations as mere associations arising from the "occasion" of the piece of music (Lukács 1963. 391). The language of music, like that of poetry, "has to be learnt". but this learning is a different process from the acquisition of the vocabulary or syntax of a natural language; it is rather the developing and drilling in of a particular skill of interpretation (Lukács 1963. 122).

Summing up what has been discussed so far we can say that the meaning of a musical sign (its *signifié*) is the inner world of man (above all its emotional sphere) in its indeterminate objectivity—abstracted from any concrete circumstances, causes, situations, etc. Now the question is whether a similar type of sign occurs in natural language as well, and I think the answer is affirmative.

There are different devices at the disposal of natural language to express or communicate the emotional attitudes of the speaker. Some of these devices are realized on the plane of expression as self-contained phoneme-strings, i.e. words or morphemes. On the plane of content, these words or morphemes transpose the emotions into the conceptual sphere, they express them as emotionally evaluative features of meaning-complexes (e.g. *snob, spiv, lassie, womanish*). Another group of devices, however, do not form self-contained phoneme-strings but are attached to such strings. They include word-order and, above all, intonation.

Intonation is the most complex phenomenon of human language. Its primary function is the formation of utterances as the basic units of speech. In accordance with the double articulation of language, intonation performs this function both on the content side and on the expression side, i.e. on the one hand it constitutes the sense of the utterance, on the other hand it imposes structure upon the utterance itself. The most important aspect of the sense-constituting function of intonation is carrying out the illocutionary act of the utterance, i.e. representing the purposefulness and expediency of speech as a conscious human activity. Illocution includes the communicative type of the utterance (whether it is a statement, a question, or a wish, etc.), and the topic-comment articulation as well as the emotional content, and it is often precisely this emotional content that is responsible for the sub-categorization of illocutionary acts (consider for example the wide variety of incitement types, such as entreating, requesting, persuading, advising, warning, commanding, ordering, etc.). A great part of emotional intonation is specific, differing from language to language and in fact from dialect to dialect, is difficult to acquire, and may cause serious disorders in communication when incorrectly used. All this suggests that we should not—though many linguists do—regard intonation as a natural and universal code which works parallel to (i.e. “before” or “below”) language, but we should recognize its linguistic status and try to define its nature as a specific sign.

It is obvious, that emotional intonation, differing in languages and even in language-varieties, is not emotion itself, and thus it also fulfils the basic condition of being a sign: *aliquid stat pro aliquo*. At the same time, however, emotional intonation differs from the majority of linguistic signs in that its meaning does not contain conceptual generalization. The

signifié of the intonational sign in this case is a psychic content, an internal experience, signified in a global and generalized, but not conceptual form. Emotional intonation as a sign acquires its denotative (referential) capacity in the verbal context and/or the situation.

Musical signs and emotional linguistic intonation belong to a type of sign whose specific feature is that the meaning of the sign is not a conceptual abstraction but rather the generalization of an internal experience, and this generalization is both changeable and socially-historically fixed. Neither music, nor the intonation of language can be regarded in the concrete totality of its manifestations at any time as an ancient and natural code that extends across historical periods and societies (although there are components with such features in both of them). With regard to the reference of this type of sign, however, music and intonation differ considerably. Music is an art, so ambiguity, i.e. the theoretical possibility of having several interpretations, is an essential feature of it. In the course of musical communication, the musical expression obtains its "reference" in the images and associations which it elicits in the hearer. These associations function, as it were, subsequently as "eliciting conditions", fictitious or real, for the hearer's inner experience. The range of possible associations is quite wide but not entirely arbitrary: it depends not only on the hearer's personal sensitivity and previous experience but also on his knowledge of the musical code. This process is made even more complex by the fact that a piece of music is normally heard through the interpretation of a performer. The range of possible interpretations is much narrower in the case of linguistic intonation: although individual differences are possible—this is a feature of linguistic communication in general—, intonation is always attached to a verbal context and other concrete situational factors (such as mimicking, gesturing, etc.).

The specific function of the type of sign to which both musical signs and linguistic intonation belong, influences the properties of the signifying side (the *signifiant*) as well. It is still instructive to see what requirements an 18th c. German aesthete, Heydenreichs set up for "signs that copy feelings and passions ("Zeichen, wodurch Gefühl und Leidenschaft kopiert werden können soll"). Briefly, such signs 1. are bound to time, their tempo can be changed, 2. are gradable in the expression of the intensity of qualities, 3. have permanence and continuity, and 4. have variations in union with permanence (quoted by Pfrogner 1954. 245). Using more up-to-date terminology, we can sum up the requirements as follows: the musical sign, just like intonation, has a dynamic and analogous character, in contrast with the static and digital character of words. The fact that human language uses not only digital but also analogous signs, is being increasingly recognized nowadays (cf. Wilden 1972), and serves as important evidence

against regarding language as a structure based solely on the relations of opposition between discrete elements.

By defining the musical sign and linguistic intonation as belonging to the type of dynamic and analogous signs, we have not yet exhausted the full complexity of their structure. Research in this field has begun relatively recently, but it already has some promising results, especially in the works of Asafyev, Sabouk and Jiránek. It seems that the sign character of both music and intonation has several aspects that can be distinguished: an indexical aspect (the timbre of human voice, or of particular musical instruments), an iconic aspect (tempo, pitch-intervals, dotted rhythm, etc.), and a conventionalized, i.e. socially-historically fixed aspect (to which, for instance, lullabies, marches and liturgic music belong on the one hand, and "clergymen's intonation", "soldiers' intonation", "advertisers' intonation", etc. on the other). With respect to music, one naturally has to take into consideration the effects of language as well (the influence upon music of the phonological system, articulatory basis, characteristic intonational contours of the national language, and the "tectonic stylization" of speech in music, etc.) (cf. Jiránek 1967 and 1981).

In language, special attention is to be paid to interjections and modal particles. From the point of view of their function, these have a striking similarity to intonation. The common semiotic status of intonation and these elements is also shown by the synonymic relationship that can be found between them (cf. Schubiger 1965). At the same time interjections like *alas!*, *hurray!*, etc., though organically linked to certain intonational forms, are basically digital signs and may even carry some vague conceptual meaning as well (e.g. *what the deuce!*, *God bless you!*). All this shows that the semiotic heterogeneity of language manifests itself not only in the general composition of the inventory of its signs, but also within particular types of signs, and even within the particular signs themselves.

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