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MUSIC AS VIRTUAL EXPRESSION

Razprava / Discussion

Abstract

It is argued that, through the tonal system, music projects possibilities of experience created by another person or persons. This virtual expression enables the audience to be, as it were, blended with the expressive dimension of the work in a way that is not possible through other art media. The education of feeling and imagination that this involves is constitutive of music's uniqueness as a form of experience.

Keywords: virtual expression, meaning, education, feeling, imagination, experience, tonality

Izveček

Glasba kot virtualna izraznost

Prispevek poudarja, da glasbena dela skozi tonski sistem omogočajo izkustva, ki jih je ustvarila druga oseba ali osebe. Ta navidezni izraz omogoča, da se poslušalci povežejo z izrazno dimenzijo na način, ki ni možen v drugih umetniških medijih. Vzgoja občutljivosti in predstavljenosti je temeljni del edinstvenosti glasbe kot oblike izkustva.

Ključne besede: virtualna izraznost, pomen, vzgoja, občutenje, predstavljenost, izkustvo, tonalnost

This paper develops the theory of music set out more fully in Chapter 7 of my book *Defining Art, Creating the Canon: Artistic Value in an Era of Doubt*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2007

I

It is important to explain the depth of music's importance in human experience. This involves clarifying its role in the education of imagination and feeling, and the self-fulfilment that is consequent upon this. Pedagogically speaking, this educative role, in itself, justifies music as a curriculum subject in schools. For music's effects do not simply happen. They require initiation into both performance and appreciation.

First, then, like literature, music is an art of temporal realization based on a successive linear order of presentation. True, there are some avant-garde works where the order in which one hears the parts of the work do not matter, but these are highly marginal. The narrative content of music is much more ambiguous than that of literary works and I have described it at great length elsewhere. Here is a summary of my position. Music has an intimate connection with the emotions. Emotions are involuntary states but they can be expressed through features – such as the voice – which are amenable to voluntary control. The voice, in fact, provides an important clue as to the basis of meaning in music. When listening to a conversation – even at a distance where we cannot actually hear what is being said – as the conversation develops, the protagonists' vocal tones will undergo

change. We may find transitions from, say, a matter-of-fact character, to a sense of urgency; or, alternatively, a mere sense of accumulating significance. In such cases, simply listening to the vocal tones of the conversation exclusively, we can follow the cumulative progression of a narrative of emotional intonations.

Now, the decisive point is that the gestural aspects of an emotion can be mimicked so as to make a point, or to deceive, or to amuse other people. In other words, vocal gestures can present possible emotional responses rather than actual ones. This is the case with singing or instrumental articulations of sound. They present possibilities of expressive experience, irrespective of whether or not the performer or composer actually experiences or experienced such feelings. Expressive features are presented at the auditory gestural level so as to create narratives of intonation and its development as possibilities of experience for a performer or listener. Music, in other words, is virtual expression.

The narrative factor involved in this is closely tied to the tonal system. It allows the intonations to be developed through structures that allude to real life feelings but without being having to be tied to any actual real-life situations. Major keys have strong general associations of positive and assertive feeling and/or movement, whilst minor keys have more introspective or melancholic association. The meaning of individual musical units and phrases within such keys and, indeed, the transitions from one to another is a function of their place in the developing whole of the work in which they are parts. They anticipate both that which is yet to come, and reconfigure the meaning of parts that have preceded them.

The upshot of all this is that the tonal scale-system is a kind of formalization of the intonations of auditory conversational narrative. Indeed, it enables the relation between units of sound (be they vocal or instrumental) to be formalized to such a degree, that the developing narrative of emotionally intonated notes, rhythms, and harmonies becomes much more complex. A narrative structure of virtual expression is formed not just through the evocation of vocal tones but also from patterns of interaction or conflict between them. They can be described in terms akin to those which pertain to the emergence and development of emotional states in personal and group narratives.

Of course, one might describe a piece of music as ‘cheerful’ or ‘sad’ but if that was all that could be said about it, the piece would be fairly mediocre. The real substance of musical meaning and expression lies in the way that tense, relaxed, or anticipatory phases are transformed into others – usually in an extended way on the basis of melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic factors. The point is that music engages us not just emotional associations as such, but through the way these are given narrative development of a unique kind.

In this respect, let us consider the children’s nursery tune *Frère Jacques*.

‘Frère Jacques, frère Jacques,
Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?
Sonnez les matines! Sonnez les matines!
Ding, dang, dong. Ding, dang, dong.’

This is a simple tune consisting of small musical and verbal phrases each repeated once at a gentle tempo. The ascending/descending progression of notes and words evokes a calm and reassuring world. It asks Brother John whether he is still sleeping – with the clear implication that he shouldn't be, because the morning bells are already ringing. Of course, what makes this simple tune so magical is how the rhythm and melodic progression of the words and music blend - to evoke the sound of bells ringing. This extraordinary formal unification of notes, words, and a second order of musical association deeply enhances the overall sense of calmness and reassurance, thus making the tune especially suited to children.

And there is more. Earlier, we noted how in order to appreciate an artwork it is not presupposed that we have any collateral information about the artist's own life, or the circumstances in which the work was created. But, of course, we often do have such information – and it can deepen our enjoyment. For example, we may know that the ringing of bells in pre-Revolutionary France was often the job of local orders of monks. 'Brother John' may be intended as one of these. But, if is the case, the simple song becomes a mystery. For if Brother John is still sleeping, then who is it who is ringing the bells? Has he hired a surrogate; is it an impostor. Has he been done away with?

Many pieces of music – from nursery tunes to symphonies will yield such interesting outcomes if considered in the right way. They will sensuously present fascinating possibilities of experience, that can be deepened through appropriate secondary knowledge. However, let us keep our focus on the immediate significance of musical formats.

Some have tended to be historically specific – such as the madrigal, a form that arose in the European renaissance as an idiom of secular choral music. However, no matter the historical specificity of a musical format, it can still find an audience across time. Consider Jacobus Gallus's *Musica Noster Amor* (*Music, Our Love*). This late sixteenth-century madrigal is a work that explicitly praises music as an inspirational power. Whether its audience is Renaissance or Postmodern, it has a efflorescent joy that is hard to resist. The singing launches itself with breathless enthusiasm, and – just over half way through the piece – even gives the humorous impression of voices bumping into one other, excitedly, before rhythmic composure is regained. Given that the work is a celebration of music it is hardly surprising that it also overflows the boundaries between vocal and instrumental. At the heart of this is its repeated use of the vocal device 'tarantara' as both a melodic and harmonic feature – thus crossing from linguistic sense to an evocation of the world of dance and of instrumental rhythms.

All this energy is built on an equally enthusiastic formal play. For whilst the work is a secular madrigal, it is written and performed in Latin - the language of the sacred motet, and, at some points, even includes passages reminiscent of sacred polyphony. If one regards the work in terms of musical knowledge, in other words, it is not only a joyful crossing of boundaries between song and dance, but also achieves these effects through a deeper crossing of musical formats, per se.

II

There are, of course, other musical formats that have proven much more enduring than the madrigal. The sonata form, for example, has been a dominant feature of music from the 1750's even into high modernism (for example, in the piano works of Boulez). A less formal but equally productive format (that often incorporates sonata structure) is that of the concerto for instrument and orchestra. Let us consider, for example, the first movement of Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Minor*. The work commences with an orchestral exposition of the grave and resolute main theme, with the clarinet event going on to introduce the second main subject in the minor key of e-flat major. The piano's entry is in the form of a dramatically rapid ascending scale in c minor, then repeated twice – each time an octave higher, but with a pause between each repetition. The entry is, in effect, both an announcement of arrival, and through the gaps between the scales, also an inquiry.

At the end of the last repetition, the piano then picks up the initial orchestral subject, and in the development, the themes introduced by orchestra and piano respectively are frequently swapped between them, with key modulations at decisive moments. An emotional climax to the movement is achieved when, in the cadenza, the piano repeats and develops the main orchestral theme for the last time - embellishing it and probing it introspectively with complex arpeggios. In the course of building towards a climax the main orchestral theme appears unexpectedly as a bass line for the piano. The thematic development is then completed in a modulated sequence of trills, and taken in descending arpeggios to a point of apparent repose before the climax. The repose is emphasized – given, indeed, an astonishing introspective stillness - by simple two note motifs – repeated and then made more complex in successive three note and two note phrases - before a plunging descent of arpeggios from which the original piano c-minor scale returns to close the movement.

Now, in all this exposition and development of themes across different keys and harmonic structures, there is an overwhelming sense of narrative – of different voices or gestures, or different personal situations constantly developing and responding to one another – building into moments of confrontation, resolution, and fulfilment, sustained throughout by moments of introspective insight. The cadenza, indeed, in its very pianistic gathering up and developing of the earlier thematic and harmonic materials becomes itself, emblematic of a subject reflecting upon and responding to its own recent history.

It is possibilities such as these which explain why the sonata form and other features of the tonal system have established themselves as recurrently compelling. They set conventions wherein the possibilities of emotional exchange between formal structures become conventionalized. Indeed, the interest of the Beethoven example is the particular way in which the structural interplay of major and minor keys is revealed as the basis of emotional meaning in an especially clear way. For example, as noted earlier, the piano's entry involves simply the scale of c-minor played rapidly, three times with a pause between the second and third statement. But the orchestral exposition has prepared us in

such a way that this simple formal device takes on the form of a dramatic yet, at the same time, tentative outburst that both interrupts and complements the first subject.

Indeed, there is a wonderful and striking contrast. At the start of the movement, the playing of the scales with a separation between each one serves, in effect, to both introduce a presence and to ask questions of the context in which it finds itself. But, at the end, the scales return in a climactic and continuous run over four octaves. They now assert an acquired psychological authority.

Contextualised rightly, in other words, a simple formal device can be deeply evocative in emotional terms. This is why music has a unique character. In it, emotion and, more importantly, emotionally charged auditory narratives are expressed in virtual terms. Whereas in the actuality of real life, emotions are enacted as states of persons, or are described second-hand in purely linguistic terms, music offers a virtual expression of them. This means that it is an image of emotional intonation and its narrative development – one that is presented quasi-sensuously, but which is not tied to any actual emotionally significant narrative of tones or gestures that ever existed. (Even in the case of programme music meant to evoke some specific real life situation, how the music evokes this is open; it cannot reproduce the emotional narratives involved in some kind of documentary way.)

When it comes to music as virtual expression or any other mode of art, what we identify with is the possibility of experience that the work presents, and not those unknowable personal states of the artist that were involved in its creation. In the Beethoven *Piano Concerto*, what the composer is doing is not a report of his own feelings but the projection of a range of structured emotional possibilities that develop and play out in a unique way – just as the situations in life do. Precisely because the narrative emotional intonations of the work as embodied in the music are not tied to any actual individual then all the aforementioned parties can appropriate it, enjoy it, and even live it on their own terms to a degree that other art media do not allow.

Other representational media, in contrast, tell stories about definite individuals and/or represent them visually. Even if the individuals in question are not identified except in schematic terms and even if they never existed in real life, they are still presented as individuals - that is to say as beings presented as existing independently of the reader or viewer of the work. Music, in contrast, involves expression which arises from particular narratives of intonation that, nevertheless, are not assigned to any represented individual either fictional or real. They represent a kind of purely imaginary possibility of experience.

This is why one might say that, in music, the composer, performer, and listener inhabit one another without significant restriction. The impression arises that we are actually 'in' the music rather than merely encountering it as an object of auditory experience. Indeed, whilst any artwork allows empathic identification with its creator's style, the lack of individual reference in the musical work allows this identification to attain a unique level of phenomenological intimacy for the reasons just described.

It should be emphasized that this is far more than escapism. Art that is escapist, simply allows us to dwell imaginatively in a different world, one where we merely become 'caught up' with what happens there. It may be that formulaic music can sometimes be like this, but works of higher quality are different. In such cases, music's virtual expression involves a dimension of direction and/or control wherein narratives of emotional possibility are not just passively consumed in escapist mode, but are embodied in a cognitively enhanced way. Virtual expression of this kind achieves an intrinsic education of the emotions by sensibly exemplifying some of their key cognitive aspects at a publically accessible level.

For example, the very fact that such emotional content is embodied in an aesthetic whole means that the narrative structure which has enabled it, and which it further refines, is presented much more lucidly than in our normal introspective or observational emotional experiences. To perform and listen to music is follow the development of emotion aesthetically rather than be pressurized and controlled by its everyday occurrent and involuntary structure. What we respond to, in other words, is emotional/imaginative narrative possibility that has been released from the controlling and/or transient conditions under which those cognitively significant states of mind are normally experienced. In music, the development of emotional possibility exists in a purified form.

And, in this respect, it is not only the work as such which we learn from; it is the composer and/or performer's style of articulating the possibility which moves us. This, of course, is why even the evocation of negative factors such as tragedy is so often a key factor in our aesthetic responses to music and the other arts. It is not just the sadness of it all which is affecting, but the fact that the tragic has been revealed and made to speak its own nature through the creative power of individual human artifice and imagination.

Two objections must be considered. The first is that the interpretation proposed here is tied to the tonal system of western music, but much world music does not use this system, and much advanced work in the high modern western tradition abandons tonalism – sometimes quite radically. In respect of the first point, it is true that many scale systems other than the tonal one can be found all over the world. However, there is no intrinsic reason why the function of those scales should not parallel that which I have identified in relation to western music. This is a matter for empirical research.

The point concerning non-tonal western music requires rather more elaboration. The advent of twelve tone and note row systems offers dynamics of sound that thwart expectations based on the tonal system. Its positive content is in the logic of how sound is organised in the particular case. For the informed listener this structure may be of interest in its own right. Indeed, some such works may be assimilable in the terms I have described. Other avant-garde pieces most certainly are.

For example, Karl-Heinz Stockhausen's *Kontakte* (1958–1960) uses aleatory effects and phrases presented as incidents or short episodes. There are allusions to tonal structure – but in a fragmented and acoustically ghostly form (emphasised through the sound being

produced by electronic devices and tapes). The remarkable thing is that much of the material develops in a conversational way, or, on occasion as a presentation of quasi-voices or points of view – sometimes in conflict, sometime in a kind of nervous harmony with one another.

In a work such as this everything hangs on the timbre and rhythms of sound and the uniqueness of their phrasings. *Kontacte* seems, in particular to present different ways of imaginatively spatializing temporal duration. In some passages or episodes this serves to make us feel at home with the imaginary environment thus created; in other passages, it alienates us from it.

Much of Stockhausen's work involves a combination of traditional instruments and electronic devices. And in some of his work, elements of the tonal system are involved but somewhat concealed within an extraordinarily complex structure *Mantra* of 1970 (a work for two pianos and electronic accompaniments, notably a ring-modulator) is a case in point. The electronic devices give the rhythms and timbres of the piano parts a kind of uncanny penumbra. In formal terms, there are a few improvised elements, but the work is scored – and centres on two counterpointed formulae or melodies sustained by devices such as driving rhythms and repeated notes. Throughout the work, the two pianos seem to come together in phrases that create a kind of disassociational whole, i.e. one which discloses a sense of things lost, losing, fading, disappearing, fraying, or decomposing. However, whilst these factors have a negative meaning they also involve new things coming into being, and it is the unsettling emotional ambiguity of this coming apart into new creation that *Mantra* successfully evokes.

It may be that a great deal of other avant-garde music – at the extremes of tonalism or going beyond it – exploit this same general area of association. But each piece does this in its own particular way. It establishes the association by engaging with the listener's own personal history to revivify the ambiguity in terms of things previously experienced or in terms of imagined possibilities.

The point is, then, that even music outside the traditional tonal system, or which works at its very limits, can evoke features bound up with aesthetic self-becoming – albeit with a narrative structure that is much more allusive than it is descriptive.

In this discussion, then, it has been argued that the musical work projects possibilities of experience that are created by another person or persons, but which do not require reference to the circumstances of the work's creation in order to be intelligible. Its expressive features can be enjoyed on the performer's or audience's own terms. More specifically, through the tonal system, music's vocal or instrumental melodic/harmonic/rhythmic structures parallel the way that emotional intonations of voice and gesture (and their developments) are intelligible from a distance. This virtual expression allows the audience to be, as it were, blended with the expressive dimension of the work in a way that is not possible through other art media. This theory was supported by sustained discussion of a number of examples, namely the childrens' song *Frère Jacques*, Gallus's

Musica Noster Amor (Music, Our Love), Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3*, and Stockhausen's *Kontakte*.

The burden of argument, in all this, falls upon music's role as a self-fulfilling education of imagination and feeling. Without it, we lack a dimension of experience that is not available from any other source. No matter how practically accomplished we may be in terms of making a living, we do not fully appreciate what living actually means, without music.

Povzetek

V razpravi je poudarjeno, da glasbeno delo omogoča pogoje za izkušnje, ki jih je ustvarila druga oseba ali več oseb. Ne potrebujejo referenc o okoliščinah umetniškega ustvarjanja, da bi bile razumljive. Njihove izrazne značilnosti je mogoče doživljati ob zvočnih predstavitev. Natančneje, skozi tonski sistem, vokalno ali instrumentalno glasbo, melodiko, harmonijo, ritmične strukture, vzporedno z emocionalno intonacijo zvoka in izražanja (v njunem razvoju), razumljivih v razmerjih. Virtualna izraznost dovoli poslušalcem, da se povežejo z izrazno dimenzijo dela, kar ni možno v drugih umetniških medijih. Teorija je podprta z razpravami v številnih primerih kot v otroški pesmi *Frère Jacques*, Gallusovi *Musica noster amor (Glasba naša ljubezen)* Beethovnovem *Koncertu za klavir št. 3* in Stockhausnovih *Kontakte*.

Bistvo dokazovanja se v glasbenem okviru nanaša na samouresničevanje vzgoje predstavljenosti in občutenja. Brez njiju izgubljeno dimenzijo izkustva ni mogoče pridobiti drugod. Ni pomembno kako to dosegamo, v oblikovanju življenja pa premalokrat ozaveščamo kaj je življenje brez glasbe.