DISCOURSE AND MUSIC: ICON, INDEX, OR SYMBOL?

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The problem of talking about music, which is non-verbal, in verbal terms bothered Charles Seeger throughout his long career as a musical thinker. As early as 1935, he questioned the validity of linguistic activity in relation to music. He asked whether such discourse helped, hindered, or influenced (either positively or negatively) the music it described. For him, the answers to these questions lay in the cultural functions of language and music. He did not hesitate to say that music needed "freeing . . . from linguistic formulations" (1935: 31) although he did not say what those formulations were or just how language actually affected musical formulations.

It was in 1952 that Seeger first elucidated his concept of the *musicological juncture*, which he defined as the dilemma the musicologist faces in talking about music verbally, that is, "to treat of one art in terms of another" (1952: 364). He said that (1952: 364):

> the mere recognition of a musical knowledge as possibly distinct from speech knowledge, in a speech undertaking, introduces a linguistically uncontrollable element that is intolerable to the conventional undertaking of the nature of the deliberately methodical use of a language in any field.

It was in 1960 that Seeger again addressed the problem. This time, he viewed the dichotomy from the standpoint of symbolic logic. The confusion in understanding music, he said, came from speech logic being applied to a different kind of communication (1960: 66, 69). Further (1960: 72):

> It might be expected that a speech logic differing so profoundly from the music process might give varied and irreconcilable accounts of it. That it does, and the fact that opposite speech rationales of music produce contradictory music logics is attested to by such controversies as whether musical scales are based upon the harmonic series and whether music can communicate any content other than itself. It seems strange that such problems are regarded not as the speech problems they are but as music problems, which they certainly are not, considering the remarkable progress in the development of speech logic since Pascal's adumbration of a logic probability and especially since Boole's open challenge of the supremacy of the Aristotelian logic in 1854.

Where Seeger struggles with the problem of describing music in language from the ethnomusicologist's point of view, Benjamin Boretz has struggled with the problem from the point of view of the contemporary avant-garde composer who has no model for explaining new music. Boretz approaches the problem of discourse about music from philosophy and logic. The thinkers who have influenced him are Carnap, Quine and Sellars. The crux of Boretz' argument is his identification of classifications for discourse about music (1970: 52). These are not types or philosophical stances, but analogical representations. The criteria for using one or another of these types rests with their explanatory power, relevancy, or confirming power. The first five are concerned with music as a *language*; the sixth is an extension of this metaphor into the philosophical realm. The six categories as stated by Boretz are (ibid):

> TEXTS IN WHICH (1) It is simply asserted as a position of the discourse that music is . . . a language . . . a heuristic metaphor not offered as any more explicitly explanatory than by the appropriateness of the "aura" of the term-name, "language". TEXTS WHICH INTRODUCE (2) . . . a method of producing theoretical terms just to transfer *names* of terms from some linguistic theory . . . to musical entities . . . whose *musical use* may be explicated but whose transference from language rarely is. TEXT IN WHICH (3) Criteria for the application of linguistic terms in language are given musical-theoretical interpretations as justifications for their introductions into musical discourse, showing how the "musical" functions may be regarded as *instances* of the linguistic functions. TEXTS IN WHICH (4) An entire syntactic-structural model of language is interpreted by a system of musical-theoretical entities and relations, showing how the "deep structure" of linguistic utterance corresponds with the "deep structure" of musical events. TEXTS IN WHICH

> (5) The principles of theory formation and model construction developed in connection with linguistic-typical domains are invoked . . . to produce a contextual-theoretical model for a *given* musical structure . . . AND TEXTS WHICH INVOKE (6) . . . principles for the formation of uninterpreted formal-linguistic calculi . . . [in order] . . . to construct a logistical system which is offered . . . as a "measure" for the "admissibility" of individual musical instances as "members of a literature" defined in terms of the "language" of which the model is a model. Or, alternatively, the model is regarded simply as a model for some or all musical manifestations, whose "goodness of fit" under interpretation with respect to that model is regarded as an explanatory "fact" either about the composition or the model in question.

Boretz is the first musical thinker to attempt to classify discourse about music. Like Seeger, he recognizes that such discourse is formulated in one medium in order to explicate another. He recognizes that language and music are both cognitive processes with different foci. Boretz (1970: 71) considers the investigation of the relationship between verbal discourse about music and the discourse of music important, because he feels that music needs a cognitive model of its own to grant it "as high a place in the spectrum of human intellectual activity" as language.

Supplementing Boretz' divisions for discourse about music is Joseph Kerman's considered plea for the analysis of music to become more balanced, and for scholars to recognize the merits of critical as well as analytical discourse. He defines criticim as a journalistic style which makes value judgments, and analysis as a "more accountable professional criticism" (1980: 311). Kerman advocates a synthesis of these two *descriptive* procedures. He approaches the problem of discourse about music historically. For him, the roots of music analysis are in 19th century thought, specifically in the metaphor of *organicism*. This is the ideology which has fostered belief in progress. Since 1950, another metaphor has infiltrated music analysis, the metaphor of *science*, which invokes the authority of mathematical assumptions (1980: 313). Along with recognizing these underlying themes in analytical discourse, Kerman insists that musical works based on verbal texts are equally as valuable and worthy of discussion as are purely instrumental works. He illustrates further how the literature of music analysis has widened to include focus on a more precise vocabulary, upon balance and coherence as analytical structures, upon systems of relationships, upon musical symbolism, and focus upon cycles, genres, and performance practice, as well as upon the very intentions of the composer. Kerman's point is that "the verbal messages included with a musical composition have a strong prima facie claim to be counted in with its contents, along with its analyzable sounding form" (1980: 320). What Kerman is

stressing is the fact that *organicism* as an analytical metaphor, has no power to explicate musical works based on texts, no matter how well the metaphor may work for symphonies and string quartets.

The most recent discussion of *organicism* as the underlying principle of music analysis, is Janet Levy's article entitled "Covert and Casual Values in Recent Writings About Music" (1987). She describes organicism as the metaphor of nature and biology, and she finds it used in the literature about music as a value judgment rather than as a rhetorical device. Music which is explicated by this metaphor is music which is considered great and worthy of analysis. This includes the repertoire of purely instrumental works from Bach to Brahms--i.e., the great German tradition. Levy's study shows how the weight of a traditional vocabulary can influence aesthetic judgment by propagating the values of a particular philosophy. The metaphor of *organicism* encompasses such ideas as: economy, simplicity, latency, inevitability, growth, development, and progress. For instance, the value of *economy* has been translated into music analysis as "transparent" "intense" "concentrated" and "natural", and *progress*, as "greatness" "depth" and "mature" (1987: 9-17). She says (ibid.: 27):

> We cannot escape from kinds of descriptive language in which covert values are embedded. By . . . challenging the cherished absoluteness that many [values] seem to have acquired, we may move toward replacing slogans with explicit reasons for judgments . . . [and thereby] create the possibility for changes in time-honored values.

An even more insidious metaphor is the one which considers music to be a language. Klaus Niemöller has traced the use of this metaphor from the 16th century to the present and finds that the question whether music is a language or not is now being viewed from many perspectives, especially in the light of recent linguistic theories and theories concerned with communication and information theory, reception theory, mathematics, computer science, intonation studies and semiotics (1980: 52). He finds that music cannot really be compared with other phenomena, because it, itself, is an *ultra*-linguisic sign system which is able to express what is deepest in the human spirit without depending upon outside referents (1980: 54).

Like Kerman, Thomas Clifton also advocates a balanced description of music, but one which reflects the *logic*, not of mathematics or language, but of music itself. For him, the description of music should result from direct encounter with sound (1975: 92). He finds that musical space is permeated with qualities which language cannot account for, and, more importantly, that musical logic is "intuitive" rather than "scientific" (1975: 106):

> Musicians are the last persons in the world to have to be told that there are many kinds of logic, [or] that the intuition of musical processes is logical in a way that analytical philosophy does not seem to comprehend.

This poses a problem for discourse about music, because there is as yet no

> comprehensive exploration of the way in which musical processes are intuitively logical, of the possibilities of description which this logic opens up, and of the complex relations between intuitive experience and its objects.

Further, Carl Dahlhaus claims that music is eloquent enough without having to be explained or made absolutely clear in verbal texts. For music is, itself, an emphatic, expressive language (1973a: 83). Meaning in music is its very expression, which is specific, non-conceptual, non-graphic, and, thus, non-metaphorical (1973a: 83). Dahlhaus discusses the relationship of text to music, but concentrates, in this article, not on the content of musical and verbal texts, but upon their writing systems (1973a: 86). Musical notation and alphabets are both codings of sounds, not of meanings. He finds that both media do not convey acoustic information, such as dynamics, articulation, pitch, or rhythmic modification. Even the rhythmic notation of a waltz cannot represent the irregularities of meter which are the basis of its charm, just as written language gives no indication of its paralinguistic features. The point Dahlhaus makes is that these very features, of secondary importance to the understanding of verbal messages, are primary to the meaning of music (1973a: 87). So, if an analogy is made between music and language, that is, between notation and writing, then the interpretation of the symbols rests with aesthetics not science. More germane to the concept of discourse about the content of music are Dahlhaus' comments about specific types of descriptive analysis. Interestingly enough, he finds that the style of discourse about music can reflect something which is in the music being analyzed. As an example, he cites an analysis of Beethoven's "Eroica" symphony (1973: 44). This analysis presents a shifting point of view which Dahlhaus says reflects the simultaneity of divergent perspectives in the piece. He also discusses an article on a Beethoven sonata in which metaphorical language is used to explicate what cannot be read in the musical notation (1973: 45). For Dahlhaus, like Boretz, a musical composition is a process, a thinking of thoughts (1973: 46).

What I have presented is a summary of recent studies dealing with the relationship between theoretical discourse about music and music itself. These studies reflect the variety of foci in this area, and each one recognizes various difficulties in affecting a meaningful musicological juncture. These difficulties concern the very nature of music and language. The musical work is an integrated

continuity (Lidov 1980: 390), while language is a system of immanent dependencies involving content and expression, and substance and form (Sebeok 1986: I, 314). Opinions vary as to the form of language and music--as pure form made up of the totality of relations (Boretz 1970a: 62), or as communications of man in social contexts (Seeger). Language and music are structured differently; language is discursive, while music is connotative and semantically vague. As discourse, language and music display different properties and forms to effect their meanings. Even Lotman's compelling statement that language is the primary modelling system (Sebeok 1986: 558) has been countered strongly by John Blacking who considers music to be the primary modeling system (Blacking 1984: 363). Tantalizing insights have appeared linking the structures of discourse about music with those of the music itself, but without strong evidence to back them up. More work needs to be done in the areas of cognitive science and music psychology before the relationship between text (sign) and object (music) can be adequately explained. For the moment, let it be said that each discourse about music reflects some aspect of the music it addresses, whether it be social function, integrated structure, aesthetic meaning, thematic ambiguity, or pure sound. Superimposed upon these aspects are various metaphors: organicism, science, and language. The analogy with language has a long history which this new field of analyzing the discourse about music is doing much to dispel. The differences between language and music seem to be greater than their likenesses. Discourse about music has been *iconic*. With the information we are receiving from research into music and semantics, the tide is shifting. Discourse is becoming *indexical*, and music may vary well be seen to be like language, a primary modeling system.

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