

CHAPTER 8

LANGUAGE AND MUSIC - ANALOGIES AND COMPARISONS

8.1 Introduction

Can music in any way be called a language? Are they in any way analogous? With regard to the musical phrase and the phrasing thereof what, if anything, can one learn from any form of comparison?

Attempts to describe music in terms of language are essentially artificial - although in wide general terms there are obvious points of contact, both being involved with notation, sound and communication.

8.2 Are comparisons valid?

Many people are prone to describe music in terms which equate it, on some level or other, with language - either the written or the spoken word. Some writers will make quite unequivocal statements, such as: "A phrase or musical idea is like a sentence." (McCaskill & Gilliam 1983:64); or "Each phrase is a musical thought, much as a sentence in spoken or written language" (Marion in Goll-Wilson 1992b:9); or "Notes are used in music as words are used in speech; they serve to construct a sentence or form an idea" (Baillot 1991:289). (It is at this point that a case is often made out for music being a Universal 'language', for it needs no prior setting up of, and learning of, patterns of meaning.)

But how accurate are these analogies? and how far should they be taken? For instance, in what possible way can it help the performer should he decide that it is true that a note = a word, a phrase = a sentence, a section = a paragraph, a movement = a chapter, etc?

There is, perhaps, some merit in the concept that the phrase is analogous to the

sentence, for it does give the impression, correctly, that in some aspects it can stand on its own. It also gives the impression of forward movement, in as much as one cannot successfully stop the argument in the middle of a sentence. But an equal case might be laid out for comparing the phrase to a paragraph, as opposed to a sentence.

Baillet has suggested that a note is equated to a word. But a single word has, by definition, a meaning (although there may be more than one), whereas the individual note has not and needs a context (vertical and/or horizontal) in order to define a contextual meaning. So if a note has no individual meaning then perhaps the note should be equated to the single sound. Certainly most individual sounds will also have no communicatory value. Both a note and an individual spoken sound need to be placed in some logical context. Thus the note would be equated to the sound; the phrase to the word; the section to the sentence; the movement to the paragraph, etc. Altogether a fruitless exercise.

Perhaps Weston (1976:89) goes just far enough in suggesting that both musical and grammatical sentences must be "expressively narrated" (i.e. performed) in order to be "intelligible". (This performance/narration can be silent, in the mind.) "To carry interpretation to its fullest meaning each sentence must be considered as a shape complete in itself yet forming part of the total conception." This, at least, can be said of both music and language.

8.3 Grammar/Syntax

If attempts to equate the building blocks of music to those of language prove relatively fruitless, then perhaps a study of the building process will reveal meaningful analogies.

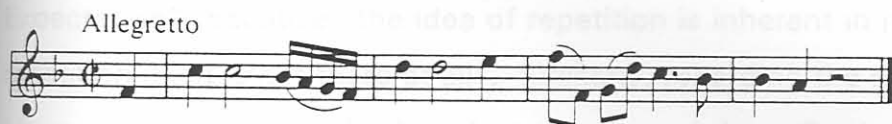
Koch, writing in the late 18th-century, sets out the clearest and most convincing arguments with regard to equating the grammar of language to the construction of music. After admitting that it is not really possible to do this, he makes the

following proposal (1983:4):

If one could distinguish subject and predicate in melody as definitely as in speech [...] [t]hen an incomplete phrase [...] would be a melodic segment which lacked either a subject or a predicate. The completeness of a basic phrase would be shown through the joining of a predicate with a subject. An extended phrase would be either one in which more than one predicate had been joined with a subject, or one in which the subject, the predicate, or both had been defined more exactly through subordinate ideas.

Koch continues by pursuing the argument through musical examples. The first example states a "complete basic phrase"; complete because it consists of two bars of subject (or main idea), followed by a two bar predicate. The predicate gives the subject "a certain direction, a certain definition":

Example 8-1a:



By substituting the second two bars (i.e. the predicate) with another two bars "the subject acquires another meaning, another turn" (Koch, 1983:5):

Example 8-1b:



After a series of examples in which he juggles and redefines the subject and the predicate Koch (1983:4) lays to rest his attempts to synthesise and define musical phrases by linguistic means and admits that, after all is said and done, one must "let feeling determine the completeness or incompleteness of phrases".

Nevertheless, in a footnote (1983:6) he states that his reason for not pursuing the analogy further is that his treatise is aimed at "beginning musicians who wish to learn composition". He laments that further investigation of the matter will not be useful to these students as they "seldom have either grammatical knowledge of speech, or familiarity with that of logic which explains the different types of phrases and their closures". This suggests that there is in reality much more to be explored and learned about analogies with language, given a higher, more educated audience. Certain authors have explored this and other avenues in much detail.

Bernstein throughout his series of lectures *The Unanswered Question* (1976) also probes with great insight, but from a different viewpoint, the origins of music and language and offers several analogies - but they are more on the level of figures of speech than on the construction of language. For example he (1976:162) equates the concept of variation, in both music and literature, as being the "Violation of Expectation", because "the idea of repetition is inherent in music even when the repetition itself is not there at all". Similarly, regarding the gentle elaboration of a phrase in order to avoid a literal repeat thereof, he calls the transformation thus achieved "auxesis" (1976:167), which is generally applied to figures of speech and means "an increase in intensity". On this level the comparisons may offer some insight into both compositional techniques and the musical meaning. To the performer a concept such as "an increase in intensity" can be readily translated into musical terms and techniques; this, in turn, can lead to a more subtle or dynamic performance, influence the phrasing and enhance the musical meaning.

Rowland-Jones (1992:88) writes of the Recitativo section from the Sonata for recorder and piano by Murrill, that the composer marks it with "phrasing slurs indicating the imagined word-groups". He suggests that in the first two bars, "if each of the two opening groups of four quavers [...] were actually slurred, [the two groups] would be separated from each other too much. They each need to cohere only as much as would the syllables of two four-syllable words within a sentence." The suggestion, within the context of an instrumental recitative, that words be either imagined or the passage phrased as one would a vocal line, is obviously a

valid one. Teachers often urge students to "sing the phrase more!".

Bernstein (1979:97), while probing the concepts of linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky, uses a Mozart extract to demonstrate the use of "deletion" in music, whereby boring, exact symmetry is avoided, and a better overall balance is thus achieved. He makes the wonderful statement that Mozart, by means of its use, "makes the leap from prosy symmetry into poetic balance, that is, into art [...]. Mozart achieves thereby not the mere grammar of a sentence, but the *super*-grammar of an aesthetic surface".

That refined "aesthetic surface" must consequently demand of the interpreter a refinement of his interpretative skills (perhaps we could coin the term 'super-phrasing'). This is another way of describing the whole concept behind this dissertation.

8.4 Speech and musical performance

Can a musical performance be equated to a recitation of poetry or prose?

8.4.1 Inflection

Bogorad (1991:12) says of the teaching of Marcel Moyse that for him music "had much in common with the inflections of speech. For example, the weak ending occurs in music as it does in every language". She provides the following example:

Example 8-2:



Using a phrase from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Bogorad (1991:14) provides this example of bad inflection: "To be or not to be, that is the question". Thus, in the

area of inflection, we can equate the undulations, accentuations, and dynamic and timbral modulations of speech with those of music. Rowland-Jones (1992:160) states the situation thus:

In the same way as an orator does not emphasize every word or even every point, or as a writer deliberately uses insignificant turns of phrase in a sentence in order to draw attention to those words that matter most, a good musician does not lovingly model every phrase in his music. Too much attention to detail may cause the player and the audience to lose sight of the structure and significance of the sonata as a whole.

Different languages, and the different dialects thereof, have different inflections - according to tradition and custom. These, in turn, are brought about and conditioned by the character of the local people. It is for this reason that the delicate nuances and inflections of, say, a French *mélodie*, while flowing naturally for a French soprano, will usually require careful study and intense preparation by one from, say, Japan or American. To overcome this the singer will assiduously study pronunciation and inflection with some linguistic expert. Nevertheless, few singers who specialise in, say, Italian opera will be expected to 'expertly' sing a Schubert lied or a Britten song.

With instrumentalists the picture is very different, and any flutist of any nationality will be expected to play Poulenc, Hindemith and Prokofiev with equal insight. The different inflections inherent in the various national characters of the composers, and suggested in the (imprecise) notation and harmonic structures, will have been learned by the instrumentalist by some musical osmosis during lessons, lectures, concerts and through listening to the media.

Chisholm (1992:25), in an article on the Cantilena movement from the Poulenc Sonata, says that "[f]lutists might benefit from listening to performances in French of Poulenc's vocal works, especially as interpreted by Pierre Bernac or Gérard Souzay. The French language itself has certain characteristics which contribute to dynamics and phrasing." She then specifies that "French syllables are extremely equal in stress, unlike English. The vowel is all-important: singers are advised not

to stress the consonant to the degree they would in English or German." The flutist with this in mind will interpret this Cantilena with smooth flowing phrasing, and not indulge in the more turbulent stressed type of inflections, which would be more applicable to music based on the Germanic character and inflections of Hindemith, or the Russian of Prokofiev. This listening to idiomatic interpretations of French vocal works, as suggested by Chisholm (1992:25), should "promote a better understanding of some of Poulenc's markings". The same advice applies across the musical spectrum.

Boehm, a hundred years earlier in 1871 (1964:147), understood the connection between wind playing and singing:

[The flutist] will learn by the study of good song music when and why a note should be played staccato, or be slurred with the next following; and when an accent or a crescendo or diminuendo in the tone strength, is necessary to bestow upon the music an expression corresponding to the words; and when a breath can be taken without breaking the correct declamation.

That the wind player can learn a good deal from vocal music and vocalists is not in question, but Barra (1983:35) takes pains to point out that "[p]hrasing is particularly problematic in vocal music". Here he is referring to areas where the "natural accents of the text" do not coincide with the metrical accents of the music. He provides the following example from the "Hallelujah Chorus" from *Messiah* by Handel where the musical emphasis falls on the closed vowel sound "lu", whereas the more ejaculatory open sound "jah" needs less emphasis:

Example 8-3: Handel, *Messiah*, "Hallelujah Chorus"

Hal - le - lu - jah! Hal - le - lu - jah! Hal - le - lu - jah! Hal - le - lu - jah! Hal - le - lu - jah!

When this conflict arises he suggests the following (1983:35):

The solution then depends upon the context. Usually the phrasing of

the music is the most flexible element. In these cases the natural emphasis of the text should predominate. At other times the accent patterns of the text and the music are simply irreconcilable. The choice in such cases must always be with the music.

The wind player does not have this particular problem. Nevertheless, much can be learned about a piece by considering where the regular metrical emphases do not coincide with those (textural emphases) defined by the phrases themselves.

8.4.2 Punctuation

Punctuation, in both music and language, is both breath-related and meaning-related. Wye (1985:9) states that commas and semi-colons influence a sentence in three ways:

- 1 They contribute to the *sense* of the sentence.
- 2 They assist in the *forward flow* of the meaning.
- 3 Your breathing can be part of the way you express the meaning of the writer.

It is, he avers, equally so in music.

Toff (1985:150) delineates two schools of thought regarding phrasing, "one more intuitive, the other more analytical". She states that the intuitive school "uses a verbal model, equating the function of phrasing with that of punctuation in language". She later refers the reader to Boehm's transcription for flute of a Mozart aria in which Boehm marks "articulation to match the verbal declamation" (see Ex. 8-5). Thus this so-called "intuitive school" apparently covers both the punctuation and inflection aspects of language and phrasing.

Baillet (1991:289) equates punctuation with inflection. He states that "we must use periods [i.e. full-stops] in music just as we do in written language, to distinguish the ends of clauses and sentences and to make it easier to understand".

Weston (1976:89), being a practising clarinetist, provides a more practical viewpoint in suggesting that punctuation "produces a 'fall of voice' to a greater or

lesser degree and its equivalent in music is the cadence".

Rosand (in Goll-Wilson 1990:9) refers to both punctuation and breathing, and says that the performer "should not be afraid to make a period, to let the music settle; too often we are in a hurry to play the next note". The following provides a good example of a section that can either be played metronomically (excellent practice, but not musically meaningful), or with due regard to the inherent punctuation and requiring commas at the places marked *:

Example 8-4: Gaubert, Nocturne, mm. 18-25

It is not only the placing of accents in "To be or not to be, that is the question" that render a delivery either meaningful or meaningless, but also the punctuation. "To be or not? To be that is! The question..." would totally pervert Shakespeare's intended meaning. For a musical phrase to be equally misrepresented one would need some gross inaccuracy; e.g. playing in the wrong key. But inappropriate phrasing would also go a long way towards rendering the phrase less meaningful.

The above perversion of Shakespeare's text underlines the fact that neither punctuation nor inflection can ever be separated from one another. The inflections of speech are analogous to musical attacks, articulations, accents and dynamics; whereas the punctuations have basically to do with the syntactic compartmentalisations of the written text into meaningful slurred groups, phrases, sections and wholes. But punctuation also has an effect on voice modulation, and

hence on inflection. For instance, punctuations like !, ? and ... will influence the accentuation and dynamics (voice modulation) of certain words or word-groups, as in the above Shakespearean misrepresentation.

8.4.3 Summary: Punctuation and Inflection

If one can ever equate wind instrument playing with a vocal model, then it must surely be in the area of musical punctuation that success is assured. A phrase cannot be said to have 'meaning' as can a sentence constructed of specific-meaning words. It may, though, approximate the inflections, undulations and modulations of speech patterns; but the structure and the meaning are only fully portrayed if the punctuation is correct. This infers that not only should one 'pause' at the end of a sentence or paragraph, to represent the end of that particular area of statement or argument, but also that the internal colons, semi-colons and commas must be given due cognisance.

Within the musical phrase these punctuations provide heightened drama and meaning through anticipation, breath, nuance, subtlety, understatement, slight exaggeration, retardation, hesitancy and many other elements that the composer can only hint at - as can the author of the written word. Thus it becomes the performer's duty to punctuate and otherwise inflect the phrase - even if it requires the musical equivalent of adding to or subtracting from the written text a comma or colon; i.e. an articulation or a slur.

8.5 Vowels and consonants

To what extent need an instrumental performer take cognisance of the words when interpreting what was originally a vocal piece?

As far as meaning goes, it will certainly help to know whether the original words were "I dance gay and bright" or "I feel sad and blue". Besides guiding the emotional content, this knowledge could well influence the articulation and slurring

chosen to best portray this emotion. The second is more likely than the first to be slurred; adding to the sadder and smoother feel. It will also tend towards a softer, slower and less articulated interpretation, with a gentler tone quality and a slower, less intense vibrato.

As for the actual sounds of the words, they could well influence the tone quality employed - a type of onomatopoeia. They could equally well influence the other elements of phrasing. A two-note group whose words employed open sounds such as "You are..." is more likely to be translated into a slurred group than would the more closed sounds of "This night...".

In order to illustrate and equate "the function of phrasing with that of punctuation in language" flutist and pedagogue Nancy Toff (1985:150) uses a transcription for flute by Boehm of an aria by Mozart (Ex. 8-5). In Boehm's transcription he provides, she claims, articulation "to match the verbal declamation". But one has to ask why it is that Boehm slurred the words "Bildniss" and "Regung"; and why the word "mit" (mm. 8 and 11) was not articulated. Presumably the former two words were slurred to maintain the unity of each individual word. The word "mit" was not articulated, in order to unify the groups of notes. Also, the semiquaver "diess" (m. 6) is left out in order to maintain the quaver up-beat pattern. These last two changes would appear to have been made for purely musical (abstract) reasons; these seemingly prevailing over the "verbal declamation".

It can be added that in the instrumental version no attempt was made by Boehm to differentiate between the various strengths of the different consonants. For example "kein" (m. 3) and the "-ter" in "Götter" (m. 9) receive the same treatment. To a wind instrumentalist a "k" articulation is vastly different to a "t" articulation. The same applies to vowel sounds, where, for instance a relatively weak vowel sound like "ü" is found on four strong beats (mm. 5,6,10 and 13). Conversely, strong vowel sounds as in "mein" and "kein" occur on weak beats.

In actual fact the instrumental version aims to produce a more homogenous whole

in terms of sound, slurring and articulation than the vocal original. Neither the 'meaning' of the text, nor the varied sound palette of the sung syllables are "matched", as Toff claims. Indeed, Hannoncourt (1982:44), in the course of discussing how Bach's vocal parts and instrumental parts often contain different articulations, states categorically that:

The orchestra articulates in a different way than does the chorus. Even most 'Baroque Specialists' [...] want to even things out, to have everything as much alike as possible and to hear beautiful straight columns of sound, but not diversity.

In other words, vocal precepts do not in essence run parallel to instrumental precepts.

Example 8-5: Mozart, "Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön" from Die Zauberflöte

Larghetto. (Singstimme.)

2 3 4 5 6

Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön, wie noch kein Au-ge je ge - sehn! ich fühles, ich fühl es, wie dies

(Flöte)

7 8 9 10 11 12 13

Göt-ter-bild mein Herz mit neu-er Regung fällt, mein Herz mit neu-er Regung fällt.

8.6 Notation

Tromlitz (1991:158), in discussing the performance of groups of notes, says that they should be approached in the manner of speech. Unlike the printed word where a space is provided between words on a page in order to render them immediately intelligible, in speaking (the performance of words)

wordsareruntogether. Their intelligibility is provided by inflection, nuance, pause and volume. Similarly in music, groups of notes are rendered 'intelligible' by means of syllabic inflection, while the notes are joined up "with no audible space between them" to make phrases. Peck (in Estevan 1978:10) puts this concept into a practical context when he relates that "[m]any times I would like to have a very smooth phrase, so I will hold one note and sing the phrase in my mind while I'm holding that one note [...]. That gives me the feeling of what it's like to hold one air through the phrase."

Tromlitz (1991:158) notates similar advice by means of a line connecting the syllables (notes):

Example 8-6:



His footnote then relates that "since this connection of letters cannot be expressed in print in the same way as with a quill [pen], it has been necessary to make use of a straight line introduced between the letters". The most ancient of languages, Sanskrit, on which modern Indian languages are based (some having changed but minutely), and which also provided the basis for European languages, connects most letters/characters by means of a horizontal line, from which they are suspended. This line is termed "the line of consciousness" and runs through and connects words and word-groups.

Example 8-7:

तदेजति तन्नैजति

Performers would do well to consider this concept of a line of consciousness running through phrases. Its musical equivalent might be the much maligned

'phrase-slur'. Thus, just as one does not pronounce the line of consciousness, so one does not play the phrase-slur. Its influence is a subtle one, where the performer should be aware of its implications; and the audience made aware of its influence - the individual notes of the phrase being linked not only by the performer's breath, but also by his 'line of consciousness', i.e. his constant awareness.

8.7 Communication

It was earlier stated that both language and music share an ability to communicate. (What is, or can be, communicated is not under discussion here.) Surely, through an investigation of their points of contact and comparisons between the two, the effectiveness of either as a means of meaningfully communicating can be enhanced? Thus, especially in the field of teaching others musical insight, comparisons and analogies may well go a long way towards meaningful musical discourse.

The exact possibilities inherent in a musical phrase may best be unlocked through a consideration of the nature of notes, motives, sub-phrases, phrases, etc. in the light of our knowledge and understanding of language - and the syntax, the inflections and the punctuation thereof - without in any way trying to make similarities fit into some artificial pattern.

Harnoncourt (1982:39) relates that music from about 1600 to 1800 was basically related to speech. Indeed it was often described as being "speech in tones". Harnoncourt coins the aphorism that "music prior to 1800 *speaks*, while subsequent music *paints*". This leads to the statement: "The former must be *understood*, since anything that is spoken presupposes understanding. The latter affects by means of moods which need not be understood, because they should be *felt*." This takes us into the world of aesthetics.

Bernstein (1976:79) states that language "leads a double life; it has a

communicative function and an aesthetic function. Music has an aesthetic function only." In this he is not inferring that music is therefore inferior to language. For, as he says, a prose sentence may merely carry a statement, as in a weather report, whereas always "a phrase of music is a phrase of art". The only linguistic equivalent of music, he says, is "poetry".

In his renowned lectures *The Unanswered Question* one of Bernstein's hypotheses (1976:131) is that "music has intrinsic meanings of its own". These are "generated by a constant stream of metaphors, all of which are forms of poetic transformations". Music is, he says (1976:139), "a totally *metaphorical* language". A metaphor, to be more than just intelligible, to be more than just a glorified simile, to take the reader/listener beyond the surface level of conceptual understanding, must juxtapose different aspects of the Truth. Aristotle, he relates, puts metaphor "midway between the unintelligible and the commonplace". The use of metaphor is akin to the poet/composer presenting the reader/listener with a pair of red and green tinted glasses in order for an indistinct-looking picture to leap into 3-D, with all its perspective and vitality. "It is metaphor" said Aristotle (in Bernstein 1976:139) "which most produces knowledge."

Poetry offers the reader more than just the written word; more than a construction of letters into words, into sentences, into paragraphs, etc. Poetry is constructed of motives and phrases; suggestions and metaphors. In this sense music can be equated to poetry. The meaningful recitation of poetry is dependent upon nuance (including inflection and pronunciation): the meaningful performance of music is dependent upon phrasing (including articulation and slurring).

8.8 Conclusion

All the above discussion must be weighed up in the light of the fact that melodic-based (as opposed to dance-based) instrumental music is based on (not in imitation of) vocal precepts. Indeed E.T.A. Hoffmann is quoted (in Neubauer 1986:205) as stating that "instrumental music is an intensification of vocal music". But avant

garde vocal performers, like Cathy Berberian, consider the need for vocal music to follow a text to be its biggest drawback and limitation. It might be said that they sing according to instrumental precepts. This would tie in with Boehm's flute transcription of Mozart's vocal line (see Chapter 8.5).

Taking the contrary stance in asking "[m]ust pure instrumental music not create a text for itself?" Novalis (in Neubauer 1986:202) must surely be suggesting that the interpretation of instrumental music can be enriched by treating the music as a medium for communication - as a type of language. This must be especially valid for the wind instrumentalist who, as do the reciter, the orator and the singer, works primarily with the breath and tongue. In this, the performer's sense of, and use of, phrasing will determine the efficacy of his communication - and hence the meaningfulness of his interpretation.

Once we understand the shape of a phrase, then it will guide us to the bowings needed to give it its substance; in the end it is not