

# Music and Language: A Fragment

## T. W. Adorno<sup>1</sup>

Music resembles a language. Expressions such as *musical idiom*, *musical intonation*, are not simply metaphors. But music is not identical with language. The resemblance points to something essential, but vague. Anyone who takes it literally will be seriously misled.

Music resembles language in the sense that it is a temporal sequence of articulated sounds which are more than just sounds. They say something, often something human. The better the music, the more forcefully they say it. The succession of sounds is like logic: it can be right or wrong. But what has been said cannot be detached from the music. Music creates no semiotic<sup>2</sup> system.

The resemblance to language extends from the whole work, the organized linking of significant sounds, right down to the single sound, the note as the threshold of merest presence, the pure vehicle of expression. The analogy goes beyond the organized connection of sounds and extends materially to the structures. The traditional theory of form employs such terms as sentence, phrase, segment, [and] ways of punctuating—question, exclamation and parenthesis. Subordinate phrases are ubiquitous, voices rise and fall, and all these terms of musical gesture are derived from speech. When Beethoven calls for one of the bagatelles in Opus 33 to be played *parlando*<sup>3</sup> he only makes explicit something that is a universal characteristic of music.

It is customary to distinguish between language and music by asserting that *concepts* are foreign to music. But music does contain things that come very close to the *primitive concepts* found in epistemology<sup>4</sup>. It makes use of recurring ciphers<sup>5</sup>. These were established by tonality. If tonality does not quite generate concepts, it may at least be said to create lexical items. Among these we may start

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<sup>1</sup>*Quasi una Fantasia, Essays on Modern Music*, Theodor W. Adorno (Translated by Rodney Livingstone), VERSO, London, New York: 1956

<sup>2</sup>semiotic: a general philosophical theory of signs and symbols that deals especially with their function in both artificially constructed and natural languages and comprises syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics.

<sup>3</sup>*parlando*: from Italian, verbal of *parlare* to speak. Delivered or performed in a style suggestive of speech—used as a direction in music.

<sup>4</sup>*epistemology*: the study or theory of the origin, nature, methods, and limits of knowledge.

<sup>5</sup>ciphers: a: a method of transforming a text in order to conceal its meaning. b: a message in code.

by singling out those chords which constantly reappear with an identical function, well-established sequences such as cadential progressions, and in many cases even stock melodic figures which are associated with the harmony. Such universal ciphers were always capable of entering into a particular context. They provided space for musical specificity just as concepts do for a particular reality, and at the same time, as with language, their abstractness was redeemed by the context in which they were located. The only difference is that the identity of these musical concepts lay in their own nature and not in a signified [item?] outside them.

Their unchanging identity has become sedimented like a second nature. This is why consciousness finds it so hard to bid farewell to tonality. But the new music rises up in rebellion against the illusion implicit in such a second nature. It dismisses as mechanical these congealed formulae and their function. However, it does not dissociate itself entirely from the analogy with language, but only from its reified<sup>6</sup> version which degrades the particular into a token, into the superannuated<sup>7</sup> signifier of fossilized subjective meanings. Subjectivism<sup>8</sup> and reification go together in the sphere of music as elsewhere. But their correlation does not define music's similarity to language once and for all. In our day the relationship between music and language has become critical.

The language of music is quite different from the language of intentionality. It contains a theological dimension. What it has to say is simultaneously revealed and concealed. Its Idea is the divine Name which has been given shape. It is demythologized prayer, rid of efficacious<sup>9</sup> magic. It is the human attempt, doomed as ever, to name the Name, not to communicate meanings.

Music aspires to be a language without intention. But the demarcation line between itself and the language of intentions is not absolute; we are not confronted by two wholly separate realms. There is a dialectic<sup>10</sup> at work. Music is permeated

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<sup>6</sup>reify: to regard (something abstract) as a material or concrete thing.

<sup>7</sup>*superannuated*: obsolete; old-fashioned; outdated

<sup>8</sup>*Subjectivism*: **1.** the philosophic theory that all knowledge is subjective and relative, never objective. **2.** any philosophic theory that restricts knowledge in some way to the subjective elements, as by limiting external reality to only what can be known or inferred by subjective standards of truth. **3.** an ethical theory holding that personal attitudes and feelings are the sole determinants of moral and aesthetic values.

<sup>9</sup>*efficacious*: producing or capable of producing the desired effect; having the intended result; effective

<sup>10</sup>**1.** the art or practice of examining opinions or ideas logically, often by the method of question and answer, so as to determine their validity. **2.** logical argumentation **3.** a) the method of logic used by Hegel and adapted by Marx to observable social and economic processes; it is based on

through and through with intentionality. This does not just date from the *stile rappresentativo*<sup>11</sup>, which deployed the rationalization of music in an effort to exploit its similarity to language. Music bereft of all intentionality, the merely phenomenal linking of sounds, would be an acoustic parallel to the kaleidoscope. On the other hand, as absolute intentionality it would cease to be music and would effect a false transformation into language. Intentions are central to music, but only intermittently. Music points to true language in the sense that content is apparent in it, but it does so at the cost of unambiguous meaning, which has migrated to the languages of intentionality. And as though Music, that most eloquent of all languages, needed consoling for the curse of ambiguity—its mythic aspect, intentions are poured into it. “Look how it constantly indicates what it means and determines it.” But its intentions also remain hidden. It is not for nothing that Kafka<sup>12</sup>, like no writer before him, should have assigned a place of honour to music in a number of memorable texts. He treated the meanings of spoken, intentional language as if they were those of music, parables broken off in mid-phrase. This contrasts sharply with the “musical” language of Swinburne<sup>13</sup>, Rilke<sup>14</sup>, with their imitation of musical effects and their remoteness from true musicality. To be musical means to energize incipient<sup>15</sup> intentions: to harness, not indulge them. This is how music becomes structure.

This points to the question of interpretation. Interpretation is essential to both music and language, but in different ways. To interpret language means: to understand language. To interpret music means: to make music. Musical interpretation is performance, which, as synthesis, retains the similarity to language, while obliterating every specific resemblance. This is why the idea of interpretation is not an accidental attribute of music, but an integral part of it. To play music correctly means first and foremost to speak its language properly. This calls for imitation of itself, not a deciphering process. Music only discloses itself in mimetic<sup>16</sup> practice,

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the principle that an idea or event (*thesis*) generates its opposite (*antithesis*) leading to a reconciliation of opposites (*synthesis*) b) the general application of this principle in analysis, criticism, exposition, etc.

<sup>11</sup>*stile rappresentativo*: A style of singing developed in the early Italian operas of the late 16th century that is more expressive than speech, but not as melodious as song. It is a dramatic recitative style of the early Baroque era in which melodies move freely over a foundation of simple chords.

<sup>12</sup>Kafka: Franz Kafka (1893–1924). writer

<sup>13</sup>Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909): British poet.

<sup>14</sup>Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926): writer

<sup>15</sup>*incipient*: in the first stage of existence; just beginning to exist or to come to notice.

<sup>16</sup>*mimetic*: **1.** of or characterized by imitation; imitative **2.** of or characterized by mimicry

which admittedly may take place silently in the imagination, on an analogy with silent reading; it never yields to a scrutiny which would interpret it independently of fulfillment. If we were to search for a comparable act in the languages of intention, it would have to be the act of transcribing a text, rather than decoding its meaning.

In contrast to philosophy and the sciences, which impart knowledge, the elements of art which come together for the purpose of knowledge never culminate in a decision. But is music really a non-decisive language? Of its various intentions one of the most urgent seems to be the assertion “This is how it is”, the decisive, even the magisterial confirmation of something that has not been explicitly stated. In the supreme moments of great music, and they are often the most violent moments—one instance is the beginning of the recapitulation in the first movement of the Ninth Symphony—this intention becomes eloquently unambiguous by virtue of the sheer power of its context. Its echo can be heard, in a parodied form, in trivial pieces of music. Musical form, the totality in which a musical context acquires authenticity, cannot really be separated from the attempt to graft the gesture of decision on to the non-decisive medium. On occasion this succeeds so well that the art stands on the brink of yielding to assault from the dominating impulse of logic.

This means that the distinction between music and language cannot be established simply by examining their particular features. It only works by considering them as totalities. Or rather, by looking at their direction, their “tendency”, in the sense of the “telos” of music<sup>17</sup>. Intentional language wants to mediate the absolute, and the absolute escapes language for every specific intention, leaves each one behind because each is limited. Music finds the absolute immediately, but at the moment of discovery it becomes obscured, just as too powerful a light dazzles the eyes, preventing them from seeing things which are perfectly visible.

Music shows a further resemblance to language in the fact that, as a medium facing shipwreck, it is sent like intentional language on an odyssey of unending mediation in order to bring the impossible back home. But its form of mediation and the mediation of intentional language unfold according to different laws: not in a system of mutually dependent meanings, but by their lethal absorption into a system of interconnections which can alone redeem the meanings it overrides in each individual instance. With music intentions are broken and scattered out of their own force and reassembled in the configuration of the Name.

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<sup>17</sup>telos: an ultimate end.

In order to distinguish music from the mere succession of sensuous stimuli it has been termed a structured or meaningful totality. These terms may be acceptable in as much as nothing in music stands alone. Everything becomes what it is in memory and in expectation through its physical contiguity with its neighbour and its mental connection with what is distant from it. But the totality is different from the totality of meaning created by intentional language. Indeed it realizes itself in opposition to intentions, integrating them by the process of negating each individual, unspecifiable one. Music as a whole incorporates intentions not by diluting them into a still higher, more abstract intention, but by setting out to proclaim the non-intentioned at the moment when all intentions converge and are fused together. Thus music is almost the opposite of a meaningful totality, even when it seems to create one in contrast to mere sensuous existence. This is the source of the temptation it feels to abstain from all meaning from a sense of its own power, to act, in short, as if it were the direct expression of the Name.

Heinrich Schenker<sup>18</sup> has cut the Gordian knot<sup>19</sup> in the ancient controversy and declared his opposition to both expressive and formal aesthetics. Instead he endorsed the concept of musical content. In this respect he was not unlike Schoenberg<sup>20</sup>, whose achievement he failed to his shame to recognize. Expressive aesthetics focuses on polyvalent<sup>21</sup>, elusive individual intentions and confuses these with the intentionless content of the totality. Wagner's theory<sup>22</sup> misses the mark because it conceives of the content of music as the expression of the totality of musical moments extended into infinity, whereas the statement made by the whole is qualitatively different from that of the individual intention. A consistent aesthetics of expression ends up by succumbing to the temptation to replace the objective reality with transitory and adventitious meanings. The opposing thesis, that of music as resounding, animated form, ends up with empty stimuli or with the mere fact of organized sound devoid of every connection between the aesthetic form and that non-aesthetic other which turns it into aesthetic form. Its simple-minded and

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<sup>18</sup>Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935): music theorist, composer and pianist. In his theory of structural hierarchies in music, he reduced all composition to a fundamental structure (*Ursatz* and *Urfinie*). This method is especially popular in the U.S.

<sup>19</sup>of King Gordius of Phrygia promised that whoever untied it would become the future king. Alexander the Great “solved” the problem by slicing through the knot with his sword.

<sup>20</sup>Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951): composer.

<sup>21</sup>*polyvalent*: **1.** *Bacteriology* designating a vaccine effective against two or more strains of the same species of microorganism **2.** *em Chem* a) having a valence of more than two b) having more than one valence

<sup>22</sup>Richard Wagner (1813–1883): composer.

therefore ever-popular critique of intentional language is paid for by the sacrifice of art.

Music is more than intentionality, but the opposite is no less true: there is no music which is wholly devoid of expressive elements. In music even non-expressiveness becomes expression. *Resounding* and *animated* are more or less the same thing in music and the concept of *form* explains nothing of what lies beneath the surface, but merely pushes the question back a stage to what is represented in the *resounding, animated* totality, in short to what goes beyond form. Form can only be the form of a content. The specific necessity, the immanent logic, evaporates: it becomes a mere game in which everything could literally be something else. In reality, however, musical content is the profusion of things which obey the rules of musical grammar and syntax. Every musical phenomenon points to something beyond itself by reminding us of something, contrasting itself with something or arousing our expectations. The summation of such a transcendence of particulars constitutes the *content*; it is what happens in music. But if musical structure or form is to be more than a set of didactic systems, it does not just embrace the content from outside; it is the thought process by which content is defined. Music becomes meaningful the more perfectly it defines itself in this sense—and not because its particular elements express something symbolically. It is by distancing itself from language that its resemblance to language finds its fulfillment.