

# The Universals of Music

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The often-quoted poetical statement that "Music is the universal language" is indicative of the communicative quality of music, and at the same time is indicative of the elusive and ambiguous nature of whatever it is that music communicates. Is music a universal language? Is it a language at all?

Because music is a stimulus to our sense of hearing, it is clear that music can, and inevitably does, carry information. What is the nature of that information? What does it express? These questions have long been and continue to be the source of considerable debate.

Music expresses, at different moments, serenity or exuberance, regret or triumph, fury or delight. It expresses each of these moods, and many others, in a numberless variety of shadings and differences. It may even express a state of meaning for which there exists no adequate word in any language. In that case, musicians often like to say that it has only a purely musical meaning. They sometimes go further and say that all music has only a purely musical meaning. What they really mean is that no appropriate word can be found to express the music's meaning and that, even if it could, they do not feel the need of finding it.

Universal-'adj. of, belonging to, or done etc. by all: applicable to all cases. -n. term, characteristic, or concept of general application'

It is through this very definition that the problems of music as a universal language arise. Many scholars and musicologists have applied literal concepts of language and universalities of language to music. Fundamental problems occur as a result of this. Music and language are simply not the same, their purposes, meanings, understandings and components (harmony rhythm and pitch in music and phonetics, punctuation and comprehension in language) which make up the outcome are infinitely varied and different. It is true to say however that certain patterns and coincidental similarities between the two occur and overlap. I maintain that single musical elements have no meaning at all, like language, fragments of words and letters have no meaning. It is only when the singular elements are coherently pieced together (as in composition or paragraph) that the meanings take place.

Language-'1 n.use of words in an agreed way as a method of communication. 2 system of words of a particular community or country etc. 3a faculty of speech. b style of expression; use of words etc. (poetic language). 4 system of symbols and rules for writing computer programs. 5 any method of communication. 6 professional or specialized vocabularies [Latin lingua tongue'] .

Music and language without the view of universalities often seem to go together in one form or another. These contextual differences lie in a complex and varied network of thought which gives

rise to a number of confused, speculative arguments. To straighten out these perplexed idealisms one could address language in music from a variety of angles, some of which could include:

1. Certain harmonic happenings which identify a specific musical genre (e.g. the language of Baroque or Bebop).
2. Harmonic clichés which denotes a music (e.g. the V-I cadence)
3. A style of expression within musical type i.e. the language of the dynamics
4. A language of symbols and Semiotics e.g. chord symbols in jazz or musical structure as a language game

At first glance of this definition one could quickly assume similar qualities which both language and music hold. For example 'use of words in an agreed way as a method of communication'. One could argue that lyrics to songs or Opera's do just this however the concept of universality within this is a substantial setback. Lyrics appear in different languages and dialects, universals in spoken language used in music would become necessary to understand meanings. Simply, you would have to be able to speak the language in order to understand it. The definition that particularly interests me is number 5 – 'any method of communication' which is also linked to number 6 'professional or specialized vocabulary.' This definition is applicable to music and bares some use when talking about specific classes or styles of music. It may be that the very application of this definition could be used to classify musical types not regionally but in terms of harmonic sound and musical labeling.

Definition number 5 leads onto to the analysis of the communicative nature of music. Before proceeding, it is necessary to question the definition (Oxford English Dictionary) of 'music'. In the dictionary the definition uses terms such as tones (the building blocks of music to the Western thinker in music), beauty and intelligibility (relating to music as art and as science), and expressiveness (giving the sense that music is a kind of communication). On first glance there appears to be universals for example spoken language can be beautiful and intelligent and one could change the meaning of spoken language by altering the tone of which it is said, however this is a very western definition of music and so this definition is 'culture-specific'. All music has an expressive power, some more and some less. All music has a certain meaning behind the notes and it is that meaning that constitutes what the piece is saying, and what the piece is about (provided the music is central). The problem lies in the fact that it is impossible to understand every piece of music in its full meaning. There are cultures and musics where these criteria make no sense at all. This very subject is another study in itself. One could go on to talk about getting views from 'typical' people in the western world as to what music really is. Bruno Nettl argues that the general public believes that music (in the western sense) has to be a 'good' thing and therefore it is probably good for a sound or silence to be accepted as a component of music. Music does not have to be a positive entity, depending on factors which influence how we listen to music e.g. memory, social context, alone or with other people etc. In this context music has various social outcomes, for example western concerts, almost assuming at any sound made at a concert must be music. Universally the western aesthetic of music must not be

forced upon other musics of non-western culture. Music is such that one could even argue that applying certain aesthetics to music from the same culture is equally as bad. Music and all the activities and beliefs that accompany it form a part of culture. Humans are born into a world of sound and we learn from other people what sounds are music and what sounds are not defined by our predecessors. At this point we are already starting to make our own assumptions of what music is. To people as non-musicologists our environment is where we subconsciously decide on what music is. In most cases the environment allows us to choose what we do and do not like. To some only one type of music is available; to others too many varieties are available. Assigning a western aesthetic and the western words and concepts of language, universals and even 'music' to a non-western culture is a failing in terms of understanding the culture in question. In lots of cultures during ceremonies or rituals the music is the secondary element, dance is considered as being more important than the music. Visualize music as a big jigsaw puzzle. One piece of the puzzle is one meaning of that culture's music. It could be that one piece of the puzzle is one piece of music, that is it is likely that one piece of music is used in different rituals but have completely different meanings? How is one supposed to tell if the same piece of music has a different meaning if the accompanying dances change? It is even more difficult if the music is not as important as the dance which goes with it. There is no way of knowing the ins and out of a particular culture's music without spending considerable time in the field. Even still this would be a small snapshot into the music without addressing issues such as language problems and possible inabilities to translate indigenous words. Within the western world of tonality, composers have always been bound by certain expressive laws of the style, laws which are similar to those of language. Music is, in fact, 'extra-musical' in the sense that poetry is 'extra-verbal', since notes, like words, have emotional connotations. In this sense music can function as a language of the emotions. The emotional connotations come from the person not the music.

One given piece of music may cause remarkably different reactions in different listeners. Emotions and reactions of people must be scrutinized. Päivi-Sisko Pajala of the University of Jyväskylä, Finland has conducted study in this field . He uses psychologist Ulric Neisser's Cycle of Perception to illustrate the fact that the experience of listening to music changes every time. In Pajala's paper he asks people with no musical background to listen to Mussorgsky's Night on a Bare Mountain. The purpose of this is to try to quantify to some degree what people hear in music. He played the music to them (which lasts 10 minutes per play) twice. After the first hearing the subjects told their first impressions of the whole piece. On the second time the piece was played in shorter section. The purpose was apparently to give the subjects a chance to describe every thematic change in detail. This instantly changes the nature of the piece thus changing the results. If you start playing abstracted sections of the piece the listener would naturally start to latch onto sections that he/she finds most pleasing whether or not they have listened to the whole piece or not. Which leads me back to Nettl's suggestion that the 'typical persons' think music is a good thing. Music is not all about hearing pleasant sounds (as in the very definition of music) . The definition instantly describes music as being 'harmonious' which implies meanings such as pleasant-sounding, tuneful, sweet and melodious. Words which hardly make us cringe and feel uneasy which are of course, two very common reactions to

music and yet somehow put to one side. To some degree Pajara's study has to be void because he changed the subject's perception by playing fragments of the music which denies the music its purpose. People react in different emotional and physical ways to a given piece of music at any given time. Time is a factor which largely contributes to the changing nature of a musical meaning. The greater the time period between hearing the same piece of music for the second time the greater the change. More time equals more image, word and emotional association. The brain intakes more information over time, therefore the probability of associating music with an image, moving picture, word or emotion becomes larger. But is every reaction equally justifiable? Is it true and fair to say that some listeners are incapable of understanding the feeling of the music properly? Certainly some people have better perceptions of music based on cultural aesthetics and understanding of the music than others. This does not make their emotional or physical reaction more important though. In the concluding section of Pajara's paper he says that 'he ended up in a dead-end when I could not measure my results'. One has to question his method for studying this area but at the same time his concluding results may have been valuable. Pajara found that the music produced similar images to people of all ages. He describes in his paper that his subjects:

'Built a coherent story out of the music. The story was either about stormy weather, in the woods or at sea, or a medieval war where men fought with swords, reasons for this must come from the music'.

Given his results unquestionably the images spoken of came from the subjects themselves not the music. The music was just the stimulus or the link between one's imagination and pre-conceived imagery, motion and emotions from the real world. It is possible that music does not carry an emotional language at all but serves as a trigger? I doubt whether people from differing non-western cultures would imagine men fighting with swords but possibly stormy weather. When looking at universals in culture one has to look at entities that all cultures experience. For example everybody is aware of the weather and the changes in weather so it is possible that certain music could conjure imagery of thunder or rain. It is possible to argue this because although cultures have conflicting beliefs about weather (from the Gods etc.) this factor is exempt since we are dealing with the raw elements (sound and images) of the weather. Again this challenges the definition of music; someone making a loud banging noise on a dustbin lid might not sound very musical to westerners but to other cultures primitive instruments used for playing rhythms are very exciting and expressive. It may be that this would invoke similar images and emotions to people of all culture given that they all know what thunder sounds like. It would evoke different meanings directly as some cultures in drought would greatly welcome rain and thunder. Therefore their perception of the music would be different and something that has negative connotations to others might pose as being more positive. This ultimately does not change the nature of the sound and is still recognisable as sound/music. This is nothing but speculation as the logistics of carrying out a field study to determine if there are universals between certain music, sound or noise to images and emotions of something that everyone is familiar with is unavailable. This is an area for further study; I am merely suggesting the possibility of universals in this context.

Igor Stravinsky's (1882-1971) view on the communicative nature of music however has reiterated up my theory that music is a trigger for emotions.

"I consider that music is by its very nature essentially powerless to express anything at all, whether a feeling, a state of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature, and the like. Expression has never been an inherent property of music. This is by no means the purpose of its existence. Music to me is a power which justifies things."

Stravinsky said that 'to me music is a power which justifies things' therefore he views music as an 'invisible' force that somehow validates important things in our lives. Before this statement he goes on to say that music is 'powerless to express anything at all'. It is easy to confuse these two statements because on the one hand he is saying that it is a power yet it is powerless. The music becomes a force in which it becomes reasonable to think or feel certain things. Either that or it's an effort to distinguish himself from the Viennese 'expressionists'. Nevertheless, his professed belief was that, if music is "about" anything, it is about music. This reinforces my idea that music is a trigger for emotions rather than a means of carrying a communicative emotions and feelings.

In the other extreme British musicologist Deryck Cooke maintains that music is a language for expressing emotional states and that it should be seen as a strictly codified language in which each degree of the scale signifies a certain emotion and permits only a single specific reading. The problem with this is that instantly this becomes biased to western culture, not every culture views or writes music in terms of scales and hears cadences with pre-conceived emotions of those cadences.

Aaron Copland's view that music may express both musical and extra-musical meaning strongly suggests a communicative power in music:

'The whole problem can be stated quite simply by asking 'is there a meaning to music?' My answer would be, 'Yes.' And 'can you state in so many words what the meaning is?' My answer to that would be, 'No.'

His belief that music may even express a state of being for which there exists no adequate word in any language indicates that he feels music does not possess anything like the nature of language. I agree with this statement. The very purpose of music is to express in whatever way (from the composer or performer's view) feelings that cannot be expressed in normal language. Music in this sense is a 'specialized vocabulary' for saying things which cannot be said verbally or with normal dialect. This can only exist for the composer or performer; I feel that it is virtually impossible to convey accurately direct and detailed emotions through music. You can imply certain general feelings by musical gesture (i.e. sad, happy, angry) but the intricate details that make life interesting are embedded in a codified language unique to each composer. We can gain access to snapshots of the codified language by asking the composer but this is a pointless exercise. Talking about music is like dancing about architecture. The very nature of the art is

what the art is all about.

### The Ability of Story Telling

Through the use of personally authentic musical gesture jazz musicians are fond of applying the metaphor of storytelling. Through this the artists are able to convey a personal sound which people can latch onto and discover. Trumpeter Thad Jones likens the experience of listening to Roy Elderidge's solos to 'being caught up in a thrilling mystery novel that you can't put down'. One can almost realise a solo as a book. First an introduction, then chapters, each one coming out of the one before and building to a climax. What this really means is that aside from being able to play 'nice' notes in idiomatic rhythms there lays a basic treatment of the solo. They must have coherent, logical evolution. Disjointed, uneven solos can sound random and abstract. While that might be a desired effect, in the genre of bebop the solo's construction is just as important to the notes. Through a combination of continuity of ideas, playing the right notes and playing with rhythmic variety comes the overall ability to convey the emotional content of the solo.

The music of bebop (compositions, interpretations and improvisations) can like any music be described in terms of social, political and historical events. It is important to understand these elements in order to fully appreciate the music and its context. The radical appreciation is somewhat lost because our ears have developed and come to accept certain chord and discord within both the sound aspect of the music and issues surrounding its conception. The sounds that bebop produced had a profound effect on jazz in the 1940s. This 'new' sound was focused on virtuosic instrumental technique and what seemed as formidably new harmonic concepts. It was formed at around 1943 three main innovatory figures in jazz namely Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk. The overall premise of bebop was a mutinous digression from the swing era players of which the focus was on big-bands. The socio-musicological issues surrounding this change are not in the nature or purpose of this paper.

The audience of the music is required to be aware of this language (not necessarily to understand it). By musical awareness I mean the listener must appreciate on whatever level the technical implications of producing these sounds. They would not be interested in the technical details of making the sounds but some level of appreciation occurs. This was nothing but pure music since it was too fast to dance to and too hard to sing to the untrained musician. The bebop craze changed jazz forever and literally re-shaped its future. I often hear non-trained musicians or amateur musicians going on the quest to find the infamous 'jazz scale'. To trained musicians and those who are aware that the jazz scale is a ridiculous myth these statements only reinforce the strength that jazz has a unique voice and a certain ambiguity which can not be explained in terms of scale degrees and such like. Is this the part of the music which can be described as the language? Andre Hodeir in his book *Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence* suggests that jazz has no reason at all to take pride in a harmonic language:

'Jazz musicians have no special reason for taking pride in an harmonic language that, besides being easily acquired, does not really belong to them but rather a light harmony that North

America borrowed from decadent Debussyism.'

His arguments bare some truth in that a great deal of jazz music has borrowed (harmonically) from musicians and composers from the Romantic period including Debussy, Ravel and modernists such as Bartok and Messian. However there are some issues which Hodeir maintains are speculative and incorrect. Jazz's development has come from a huge variety of music and that is the very nature and purpose of the music. The fusing of different music is the meaning of jazz and therefore can not be described accurately in terms of where it came from. It came from everywhere and anywhere, it just happened to be coined and to be most popular (in the very beginning) in North America. Hodeir fails to point out that the blues is one example where jazz has a unique harmonic language. The blues is found in many other areas of the world such as India but the blues that exists in jazz comes from North America. Again the blues is an amalgamation of African music, Gospel Vocal music and African guitar techniques, but for the most part was born in America secular to the South. As far as I am concerned Jazz is a melting pot of a wide variety of music; it is the jazz musician's job to build on things that have gone before and to innovate newer sounds and concepts. Hodeir's book was written in 1975 which at that time there were a lot of contrasting views on jazz mostly in a negative way. The typical view of the jazz musician was unable to read music had poor instrumental technique and had a drug problem. However by 1975 most of the performing jazz musicians had some formal training if not degrees in classical music from conservatories (hence one of the reasons jazz altered harmonically- borrowing from classical music). Hodeir tells us that as a result of this 'borrowing' from European music and art that:

'Jazz musicians ears are better than their education, and that they often have more feeling than taste'

Even in 1975 jazz education was relatively new but by no means rare. One wonders why he has written a book about the evolution of jazz given his tone of writing throughout his work. He is constantly comparing and contrasting against those who are classically trained and jazz musicians who have not. He goes on to dictate that:

'Occasionally Teddy Wilson's counter-melodies touch up a commonplace background with real musical intelligence. But such summits are all too rare'

In his overall conclusion of this section he suggests that harmony is not the only thing in music and that in jazz its importance remains secondary. Indeed the rhythm in jazz is a very important factor in the overall jazz language however; one can not say that it is more important. Both are equally important, one without the other will breakdown the music's very nature.

It is truly impossible to completely understand music unless you engulf yourself in the same environment as the musicians. You have to understand the culture and way of life in order to completely understand their musical trends and practices. On the other hand some ethnic music is becoming more recognised through the media and more widely available recordings. This

subconscious familiarisation makes it easier to listen to if you were to listen to the music from that area. For example most people are familiar with the sound of the didgeridoo, a fairly strange sound compared to a piano. The more familiar and closer to home the sounds are the more interchangeable they become to our own aesthetics of music.

To summarise, music is a trigger to memory, expectation and surprise. Music means different things to a whole diversity of people, music is culturally varied to such an extent that others might not consider as being music. Cultural aesthetics determines for the most part what music conveys in general. The perception is then personified by the individual; each perception is unique and valid. The notion of music as a universal language is largely accepted by those who link emotional tendencies to the music. It is also accepted by those who feel that it brings people of all cultures closer together. I accept and acknowledge these thoughts; my argument though has been through a strictly musicological methodology of criticism. In light of this, music is not a language and it is not universal unless you fully understand its purpose and practice in every culture which means understanding the minds of the creators of the music. Everyone can relate to music and everyone can play music across cultural barriers, this is all true to a certain point. For music to be fully universal you would have to completely understand and experience all cultures, be able to speak all languages and know exactly what everyone is feeling when a certain piece of music is played, I think you will agree that this is quite impossible. Certain applications of language theory can be beneficial to musicological techniques of analysis in the categorization and classification of music. This paper has shown that the application of language is not a straight-forward process. I maintain that literal translocations of language with music are not of direct use in the culmination of producing sound theoretical ideas to musical meaning. However one can use theories which bind elements of language with elements of music to explore notions that the relationship between the two is anything but universal. Paradoxically they have similar units of information that when broken down resemble the same artefacts. Just as we have different languages, we have different musics this is by far the only true universal relationship between the two. Music however does not need language for us to understand it. Does language 'need' music? Music is a spoken word, is a particularly strong trope existing within language that speaks of language's never-ending failure to meet its object directly. It is a kind of metaphor that symbolises our very need to create metaphors in the first place. The essence of music is unexplainable in words, music and language share a distinctive characteristic with each other, and one is not particularly privileged over the other. If language reaches a descriptive wall when confronted with music, then music likewise cannot appeal to language to vindicate itself. Yet they both try, anyway. This question paradoxically must find something that cannot be resolved. Rather like time, how can we conceive that it has no beginning or end, and the same time, conceive that all things must begin at some point? To me music carries no force; the force, will come from us. We decide on what we do and how we do it.