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What is "meaning" in music?

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It is vital to start with a definition of what we assume by meaning in this context, as we will apply it to music in general, in fact one that we can apply to all kinds of music. First of all, what is meaning to one person may not be meaning to another if we take meaning as a way of relating a set of preferences about what music should be like. Neither can we speak of meaning in a general manner if we assume it to be bound to personal experiences. For instance, for Harry, a certain song has a very special meaning since it happened to be the song that was played when he kissed his girlfriend for the very first time ("Honey, they are playing our song..."). Not even if we apply it to a whole group of people, as in: "*Blowing in the Wind* by Bob Dylan meant a lot to a whole generation". In the latter case, meaning is derived from a complex set of social, cultural and political processes where the music itself plays a rather limited role.

In linguistics, meaning is often described as an interactive referential system where we, through mutual sharing of codes, can communicate in ways that both the sender and receiver accept as meaningful. In music, although it does not always necessarily share the linguistic properties of meaning, decoding of relations (to some degree) still act in the same manner. A musical style, for instance, can simply be defined through a set of agreements that a number of people have made as mutual understanding of codes that are recognisable to them, so that they may share their understanding of the music. It also allows them to discuss the relative quality of various musical expressions within the style. Thus, meaning in music or any form of art at least partially arises from the brain's ability to decode the inherent structure of a common coded system.

Signs, signals and symbols

Signs

A difference between humans and animals is the human ability to distinguish and make connections between signs and their abstract representation. Some other mammals like chimpanzees can learn to understand the connection between a sign (like for instance an image of a glass representing water). Humans, however, are able to understand much more abstract relations and are also able to interact with these abstractions of physical or mental phenomena. The simplest form of meaning/understanding is the relation between action-reaction. If I touch a hot plate it will burn me. That is how any living being that is not totally genetically pre-programmed learns how life works. Representing action-reaction on the abstract level of signs is only meaningful to intelligent life forms such as ourselves. Signs are thus understood by learning the meaning of a representation of consequences. Signs are

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[*]   Aufgeführt wurden die Werke *Alias* (1990), *Les objets obscures* (1991), *Renaissance* (1994), *Dreaming in Darkness* (2006), *Crystal Counterpoint* (2009) und *La vie mécanique* (2004) in multiphoner Wiedergabe unter der Klangregie Åke Parmeruds.

basically lingual since language was born through signs. The interesting thing is that signs were transformed into spoken language by the use of sounds. I make this sound ("ark-ark") and it means this or that thing or action. The very early forms of music might very well have been an extension of the language in the sense that certain sounds would have a very special meaning going beyond the words. So for instance, swinging a piece of wood rapidly through the air would make a buzzing sound which eventually got connected to the spirits of dead ancestors. Since you could not talk directly to the spirits you could at least provoke their presence by creating a sound that meant "the presence of the spirits". Signs in this sense are thus unambiguous interpretations of phenomena shared by a community.

Signals

In the animal world, signals are very common. Animals make sounds to tell others of their own kind to watch out (if some predator is close) or to stay away from their territory. Through various other behaviours they can also signal their readiness for mating, their social relation to others of the same species, etc. Humans have also been using signals throughout history: calling to war, calling to church, calling for help, etc. Anybody living in the Christian world will understand the sound of church bells ringing. Anybody in the Islamic world will understand the meaning of the sound of prayers called out from the minarets. Signals can of course appear in the form of gestures or light or some other modal means of communication, but very often sound is the carrier of signals. So when, for instance, a composer like Arvo Pärt uses the sound of a bell in his music, the religious implication is clear.

Symbols

There is a floating border between signs and symbols. Very often you will find the same definition of both, that is to say, an abstract representation of some physical or mental phenomenon. However, it seems that through discussion and understanding of historical, cultural and psychological implications, a clear difference emerges. Where a sign is a representation that is understood as an unambiguous interpretation by anyone (at least if you share the cultural community defining that sign), symbols need interpretational decoding. For instance, a snake is understood as a carrier of the seductive evil of knowledge (possibly originating from a natural fear of snakes that is carried on for natural reasons) only to those who read the bible. It can, however, also have a sexual implication (as in psychoanalytical interpretation) or, as it happens to be in Sweden, it can symbolise a pharmacy (which in turn will be understood only by those familiar with Greek history). On top of that, symbols may carry what Jung defined as signs of archetypal consciousness, meaning that certain signs are shared among all humanity as a reference that affects our understanding of ourselves once we recognise their meaning.

Symbols are thus ambiguous signs with an underlying historical, cultural or psychological interpretation. In music, symbols are most often thought of and used as signs, since otherwise they would not fulfil the function of being recognisable. However, today's composers may play with ambiguous signs simply because of a larger awareness that certain sounds by themselves provoke an association to ambiguity. This is sometimes used in film music to play at the borders of understanding signs as symbols.

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Searching for patterns

The human brain is constructed to search for patterns in any kind of modal input. It's a matter of survival. Since we are born, we are consciously or unconsciously searching for meaning through our perception of the world. The human brain is highly capable of extracting patterns from the immense flow of information registered through the senses. It even comes to the point where patterns are recognised as emerging associations of well known phenomena, although there are no real implications of these associations. It can, for instance, be that we see the shape of a pig in a cloud or hear the sound of footsteps in the whispering of leaves. It has been argued that the reason for this is that it is safer to overly interpret the world (seeing as how the footsteps could come from a predator) than to do the opposite. Pattern recognition is a basic survival kit for most living creatures and as such also a basic foundation for finding meaning in any flow of information, music not excluded.

The conflict between meaning and concept

Since we are born as beings searching for meaning, we cannot escape ourselves. But since we are also creative and adventurous beings, we do our very best to try. Given that art is the deepest interpretation of ourselves, it is only natural to assume that artists at some point will dive into the ocean of philosophy, cultural criticism as well as the need for singular ego definition in search of the limits of understanding the world and the self. As we enter the stage of contemporary art music, sound art, sound installations, etc., those of us not invited by chance or deliberate interest into the heads of the artists may find it a rather confusing experience from time to time. Through the deconstruction of the historically canonised codes of music, the egocentric view of the individual artist has brought about defining sets of codes related only to a specific line of works or even to a single work of art. In order for the observer to catch the meaning of a piece of art or music, it is often the case that he/she, instead of relying on predefined codes, needs to learn the specific codes associated with the artist or the work of art. This is the dilemma of much of contemporary art music, as the need of constantly redefining the code system alienates the listener from the music and, in the best of cases, turns music listening into a purely intellectual experience. So before we go deeper into what the codes for generating meaning in music are, we should ask ourselves, is there meaningless music? Let's have a look at the well-known statement "music is organised sound", or, if you wish, "music is sound with a thought behind it".

Imagine listening to a stream of sounds from various objects tossed around in a totally unpredictable manner. This does not seem to make much sense other than possibly associating the perceived sounds with yet another 'pointless' piece of sound art (assuming that we are sitting in a concert space of some kind). However, in the program notes it states: "This piece was created by asking a number of unprepared people to enter a room filled with various objects and pick up the first object that attracted their attention throwing it into the wall. These sounds were recorded and later organised using a video recording of the movements of ants in the desert of New Mexico." Obviously, this is organised sound with a thought behind it and thus music if we stick to the definition. Yet in this example we could

speak of meaningless music or sound art or whatever we would like to call it. Unless we are aware of the conceptual intentions leading to the sounding result we would have no way of decoding what we hear, and so there would be no attachable meaning to it. Completely conceptual constructions in music (or any other art) will always need an intermediate explanation of its organisation and idea in order for the audience to grasp its meaning. So wherein lies the meaning? In the sounds we are listening to or in the construction of their relations to each other? Or are sound and construction/thought always interconnected?

In music, meaning in terms of decodable structures that a community of listeners can share has been taken for granted through history until recent times. Schönberg's dodecaphony, and later Webern's development of total serialism ultimately leading to early electronic music, was the start of a new era. The organisation of notes (sounds) became so charged with information that it finally was practically impossible to decode it through more than a purely theoretical description of its inner mechanics. For the first time in history, music had become conceptual, meaning that the mental image of a composition was to some degree as vital a part of the music as the actual sounds that were produced by it. This in turn was commented by John Cage, who drew the conclusion that since there in practice was no way for a listener to predict the next note (or sound) in a totally serially constructed piece of music one might just as well use chance as a way of organising sound. This is coherent with the information theory stating that the more information that is put into a system, the less predictable and therefore ultimately chaotic and void of real information it will be. Again, this led to a conceptual approach to music tending towards a philosophical way of composing and a new demand for the audience to adopt a new way of listening. Without the conceptual background as a decoding device, however, there was no way for the listener to find any meaning in the music. So from using casual intuition and predictive reasoning (if A, then most likely B), listening to music became a rather passive process where the music was assumed to be the 'sounding evidence' of an idea. It is maybe no wonder that when asked if they preferred Beethoven or Stockhausen, a majority of music lovers would choose the former over the latter.

The musical experience was made further abstract when traditional musical components such as melody, harmony and rhythm were abandoned in favour of the quality of timbre. This became extremely clear in electronic and concrete music, where the sound (any sound) in itself was the major building block for musical composition. Even more so since the music was no longer 'performed' by musicians, but rather presented through loudspeakers, which peeled off another layer of causality (the performer acts – the instrument sounds). The listener had no idea of how the sounds they heard were produced. Listening to music had become an alienated experience and consequently the audience grew smaller. As a listener of modern music you are supposed to learn some basic intellectual connotations in order to be able to appreciate listening to it. However, even as an experienced listener, some compositions may elude your ears and appear as 'meaningless' and thus boring. Since – apart from some very rudimentary codes based on experience from earlier listening – each composer often makes his/her own rules in terms of style, the kinds of sound to use, etc., the listener is in a difficult situation unless the composer uses some codes in the construction of the music to build a more transparent field of view into the composition.

The building blocks of "meaning" in music

So again, how does the artist create "meaning" in music? In a historical context, "coding" of musical elements has been used to create structural content which, through its canonisation, becomes a language-like set of rules relating to the way it is supposed to be understood by anyone familiar with its superimposed meaning. Apart from more specific rules, as found in counterpoint and other tonal regulation systems, some very basic forms of building meaningful context can be extracted as fundamental parts of most musical styles and traditions.

1. Repetition

Cause-effect or causality (if A, then B) repetitions create the first level of learning in any 'smart' organism, resulting in the ability to predict a reaction from an action. The repeated observation of causal phenomena lies at the basis of learning and understanding relations. In music, repetition has been (and in most music still is) one of the most fundamental elements. Simply by repeating a certain musical element (a note, a sound, a rhythm) the composer can maintain a level of quasi-meaning even in a more or less chaotic set of unrelated sounds.

    The fact that repetition by itself inflicts a decoding opportunity for the observer is also valid for other modalities. Try to picture an animated film with no voiceover, no characters talking and no sound track. The film is showing an infinite series of completely uncorrelated images. Where will you find meaning? Now picture the same film, but this time with a close up of a human face with eyes wide open appearing for just a second, and then reappearing at some intervals in time. Suddenly you might start to think (after, say, the third or fourth repetition) that maybe what YOU are seeing is what that PERSON is seeing while YOU are watching him/her seeing it. Perhaps this is not much of a meaning, but therein lies a possible associative understanding/decoding of relations.

2. Identity

Identity in a sound is a very strong means of communicating relations in a musical context. Identity can either be found in the fact that a sound is associated with a phenomenon that anyone will recognise (for instance a galloping horse or a gunshot; see also 5. Imitation), or in the sound's morphology, given that the properties of one particular morphology are distinctive in relation to other morphologies. In music, identity is often (but does not have to be) used in combination with repetition, at least when the identity is not of the associative kind. Once the composer establishes a number of identities, possibilities of creating various relations that will be transparent to the listener appear. Identity in classical music (as well as some contemporary art music) is more often thought of as a motif, or in its more atomic state, a melodic or rhythmic nucleus. And I have to stress that identity in music has nothing to do with the personalities of composers or performers (although they can inflict a lot of meaning surrounding their appearance), but rather with what they transmit and how it is done. Of course, identity can be created through practically any parameter, not just pitch or rhythm.

3. Sequence

A sequence of musical events (such as pitches or sound objects) is a series of sounding events taking place over time, mostly in a repetitive way. In the counterpoint set of rules, sequences were regarded as simplistic and were thus rejected, whereas in baroque music, they were frequently used. Often a sequence would be altered in some way during repetitions by transposition or change in instrumentation. In modern electronica, sequences are very common and often altered by a gradual change in some parameter governing its timbre (filtering being the most loved). Loops are in fact to be regarded as repeated sequences. Sequences can theoretically be of any length, but in practice are normally kept short as to make them recognisable over time and thus create identity. In the 'classical' acousmatic tradition, sequences are most often avoided, since they are again regarded as being too simplistic. Today, as acousmatic composers become more and more influenced by electronica, this is, however, starting to change.

4. Pattern

In music, patterns are normally created from sequences of events. However, compared to sequences and simple repetition, patterns can become vastly more complex. In classical music, patterns more often than not appear as fairly simple alterations of a melodic phrase. This can happen in the form of operations on sequences like playing backwards, 'upside down' or more elaborate ways of shifting the relative positions of notes in a phrase. Often (as we find it, for instance, in a fugue) several sequences can be stacked on top of each other to create complex but still recognisable patterns. Loops, as we know them from various forms of electronica, techno, tribal music, etc., can be regarded as both repeating sequences and patterns, depending on their nature. In techno or electronica, they tend to pass through transformations over time, but in a much slower way and with less elaborate transfigurations of their origin than what you would find in classical music or in contemporary art music. Patterns are often used in combination with various permutation techniques in order to make them seem less repetitive. Through various ways of reordering the components of the sequences in a pattern, very intricate but still transparent structures can be created. Stacking (overlaying) sequences of different lengths, for example, can create fascinating patterns with a slowly evolving change of perspective.

5. Imitation

Imitation in music comes in two flavours. Either in the form of association (as discussed before), mimicking some known phenomenon. This can be observed in romantic music, especially in the so called symphonic poems or in program music which would use references to some historic event, a text or some other non musical event. The other flavour is that of imitation within the music. One musical identity will appear in a slightly different but quite recognisable form as a slightly distorted mirror image. Imitation can sometimes be hard to distinguish from variation or quotation, where imitation and quotation also can be used for referencing other musical styles, historical artefacts, etc.

6. Variation

Variation is most commonly associated with classical musical forms such as the rondo or theme and variations that come in plenty. However, it is possible to use variation as a means of projecting meaning into music in any style of music and on a much smaller scale. It is basically a way of changing the identity of a musical object or even a whole section of music without loosing the original aspects that created this identity. In acousmatic music or sound art, this can be done using simple opposites like fast-slow, high-low, light-dark, backwards-forwards, or by applying some processing such as adding reverb, filtering or other more advanced types of audio processing.

7. Gesture

Using gestures is a very popular way of imposing a dramatic quality on music. Composers of film music are compulsive users of gestures, but they are almost as popular among some art music composers. They are efficient in the sense that they reinforce the causal expectations of the listener. They are built on obvious movement in the music representing some kind of tendency: upwards, downwards, slowing down, speeding up (ritardando-accelerando), dynamic changes, accents, etc. Gestures often end up being clichés, since they are so efficient in a dramaturgical sense. It is thus quite natural that they, after some time, become somewhat overexploited.

8. Permutation

Permutations are normally (but not necessarily) applied to sequences of musical parameters. These can be pitch, rhythm, timbre, duration and so on. Permutations can be most easily described as various ways of continuously reordering a given sequence of parameters or events.

9. Transformation

Transformation and permutation can be quite indistinguishable in instrumental music. However, in acousmatic or electronic music, they behave a bit like the kind of image 'morphs' where one face is seamlessly transformed into another. Transformation is basically the seamless change of one morphology into another. Transformation though has very little meaning unless one can understand the relation between its "to" and "from" parts and their relation to a surrounding backdrop of meaning.

10. Quotation

Quotations are references to some music preferably known to the audience in order to work. When used at their best, quotations act like a "meta layer" commenting on the cultural or stylistic relation to the "music in the music". They are signs, but on a very high level of interconnected historical/cultural association. Quotations can also be used as a means of paying homage to music created by some other composer or artist, as can be found in some jazz music. Apart from that, quotations are most commonly found in art music.

Conclusion?

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In this discussion I have intentionally avoided the emotional aspect of finding meaning in music. This is not because I regard emotional response to music as irrelevant to meaning – rather the opposite in fact. But whereas musical language is something that is at least shared among many, emotional responses are basically individual. And even though there are many theories concerning how music affects us on all levels (from the neurological upwards), emotional response carries a much less understood part of our relation to music. I do believe that although emotions may be triggered (in different ways from one person to another), the concept of "meaning" takes place at a level where it is understood more as a language through which we receive the implications that trigger emotional response. Just like a good writer, the composer of classical music becomes remarkable by the way he/she combines the commonly accepted codes into a message that may provoke different intellectual and/or emotional reactions. These reactions are triggered by the very codes that make up the message. It may seem as if all these codes were taking place in a slow and easily perceivable pace, but that is rarely the case in music. Most of the building blocks that I mentioned above are present in both composed and improvised music. However, often it is happening so fast and in such an intricate fashion that you might not even be able to distinguish the various codes at work, although you will most likely be able to recognise the sum of the codes as musical "meaning". The presence of meaning is always important, no matter what kind of music you are listening to, and the attempt to decode what we are hearing is always at work, since it is a part of the nature of the brain. So where lies the meaning in music? Is it simply a set of codes and formulas as described above, or is music an intricate subset of our understanding of the world, our culture and ourselves? It seems to me as if the definition of music as "organised sound" is not enough. Music seems to be more than just a fashion of projecting ideas, but at the same time it is quite obvious that it is exactly those very ideas that constitute meaning.

Marcus Erbe: You addressed the category of the gesture as a building block of musical meaning and said that gestures can become stale when used repeatedly. Now there are many people concerned with electroacoustic or acousmatic music supporting the notion that this music is in fact very much gesture based. Wouldn't this imply that acousmatic music can be clichéd sometimes?

Åke Parmerud: Yes, absolutely. There is it a lot of clichéd acousmatic music.

Erbe: And if you were to name some of those clichés?

Parmerud: Since I created some of those clichés, I am indeed a good person to ask. One of the probably most popular stereotypes is what I would call the brutal rest cliché. Sometimes when listening to a piece it is obvious that the composer had this idea which is going on and on, but then he did not know how to move on to the next section. And suddenly we are in a different space. Then of course you have these glissando structures. There are a lot of different typical things that you will find every now and then. It's clearly just as bad as in any other type of music. And why shouldn't it be?

Erbe: It may also extend to the choice of materials or certain sonic models. In this respect, there is a remarkably large amount of birdsong in acousmatic music, but hardly any, say, pig squeals.

Parmerud: It's funny you should mention that, because I recently met an Argentinean composer who was working on a 'pig piece'. Anyway, I guess birds are popular for they have an intricate singing pattern and make all kinds of noises. Also it is possible to create little electronic birds, so you can imitate them quite easily. This could be one reason why you find birds every now and then.

Suzanne Josek: Your ideas on musical meaning – especially one's personal quest for meaning – reminded me of a theory by Eric Kandel, a Nobel Prize winning neuropsychiatrist, who basically said that we are who we are because of what we learn and what we remember. Music is perhaps in between the two fields of remembering and learning. It could help us keep on learning and listening to new sounds and discover new patterns or new signs and symbols, as you put it.

Parmerud: I think it actually works like that. There has been some research to see how music can be used to stimulate memory, to restore the health of people who suffered a stroke and need to relearn by moving processes from the damaged part of the brain to a different part. Music seems to be a very helpful means of training one's memory. Therefore it is used in many therapeutic contexts. Learning new patterns indeed stimulates your memory. But unless we have a mnemonic system in the music, which are these codes, then it is very hard to learn about it, because it is hard to remember. You can try to sing a piece by Webern, for instance, and see how easy that is to remember. It is again about the balance in the information system. It has to be a balanced system, not to little, not to much. Then our brains can actually decode it and you will get something that will train your memory.

Wilfried Jentzsch: What is the difference for you between imitation and inspiration? For example, Messiaen is not about imitation to my mind. He is more about inspiration from nature, where we can find different levels of sound which can be developed in instrumental music. Perhaps the problem of imitation is different when it comes to electronic music.

Parmerud: I used the word imitation because it is a coding device, whereas inspiration is more an emotional device. They are different by nature. Imitation is a compositional tool. Inspiration, as you say, you can get from many different things. You can get it from nature like Messiaen did. Maybe he was inspired by nature, but the way he composed was through imitation. So there are tools for composing and sources of inspiration, although it is a little bit like speaking about apples and bananas at the same time.

Josek: What are your sources of inspiration?

Parmerud: Well, I have many different sources of inspiration, basically one for each piece. It can be anything that grabs my interest, in which I see a potential. The resources for inspi-

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ration are virtually infinite. It is about opening your eyes and viewing all the potential that is there and that can become the motor of driving the compositional process.

Josek: When and why did you decide to become a composer?

Parmerud: I think I made up my mind when I was fifteen or sixteen. It was more of a dream at that time of course. But the urge to write music came around this age.

Josek: Did you play an instrument back then?

Parmerud: Yes, I am a guitar player.

Christoph von Blumröder: You were talking about different codes and compositional techniques which are useful to produce meaning or which can carry meaning. There is just one concept which, I think, since the beginning of the 20th century has been made prominent by some authors: the concept of process. And I understand that, for instance, transition can be one way of composing a process. But this general idea that composing a piece should be understood as organising a process which the listener should be able to follow, what would you say about that? Is it just very general and does not give special answers to this question of meaning? Could you differentiate it to individual compositional use?

Parmerud: I did not speak about form, which is another thing that is quite important to our sense of understanding and finding meaning. I also did not bring up processes. It is somewhat tricky, because the way I see it, processes are overlaid special versions of permutations, where you have a continuous permutation, where you can even drive the permutation in certain ways by applying parameters to how the permutation behaves over time. And that is what you probably would call a process. It takes time to build and develop such processes. And it probably takes time for the listener to be able to deconstruct them and understand how it eventually works. One could draw some distinction between process and permutation, but basically they are of the same nature.

Transkription: Karolin Pohle