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THE STRUCTURE OF MUSICAL DISCOURSE: THE PROBLEM OF THE SONG TEXT

by John Blacking

Discourse About Music

'Musical discourse' can be discourse about music, or the discourse of music. My argument belongs to the first, but is chiefly about the second. It is musical discourse about the discourse of music. It uses the language of words to discuss the language of music. Musical grammars can organize words as well as verbalize music; and so its introduction, this prelude, these opening words, use some common structures of the discourse of music to discourse about music.

The exposition of music with words has always raised methodological and philosophical problems, just as the marriage of words and music has been a recurrent issue in musical composition. The problem of the song text, the problem of words and music, is a problem of composition as old as the sung word, and it occupied Richard Strauss and Clemens Krauss in the opera *Capriccio*, which they called 'A conversation piece for music in one act'. The relevance of musical discourse, as people's verbal exposition of musical meaning, has been illustrated, for example, in Anglo-Venda, Franco-'Are'Are, and Americo-Kaluli ethno-theories of musical organization and appreciation; the problems of musical discourse, as second-level musical analysis, have been well addressed by Charles Seeger and others, and must occupy the conscious thought of ethnomusicologists and all who profess to explain or analyse music.

Any single, supposedly universal method of analysing all music could never be scientific: it could only be dogmatic and ethnocentric. Scientific analyses of music must perforce be humanistic, and a major methodological problem is that all different interpretations of symbols become relevant in analysing their creation and use in society: all readings of a score, all 'ethnic perceptions of the semiotics of music' must be taken into account in discourse about music.

It is possible that music-making lacks historical origins, in the sense of being invented by human beings, and that there is a species-specific capacity for music, comparable to that for speech, or at least a special way of processing information that can be used for several kinds of skill and action, of which music is its most characteristic manifestation. Thus, we need to look for universals in the processes of music-making and to develop strategies to construct a science of music that can incorporate the varieties both of discourse about music and of the discourse of music. From this could emerge an understanding of the structure of musical discourse, as a mode of human thought. In spite of the efforts of many ethnomusicologists, most analyses of music are still rooted in European

concepts of music. One way out of this impasse would be to ask musicologists reared in, say, a Japanese or Indian musical tradition, to analyse European music *in their terms*, rather than aspire to an objectivity that would really be subjective.

The philosophical problem presented by musical discourse is that discourse about music, as about any nonverbal communication, really belongs to metaphysics, because it is, strictly speaking, an unknowable truth. Without a verbal language, we cannot transmit a truth. But the words required to explain anything that makes a claim to being verifiable truth, belong to a realm of discourse that is different from the subject of enquiry—music. This does not matter so much in the natural sciences, where truths about processes can be demonstrated without words, and the words that are used need only be approximate. Substances can be objectively seen to react, a catalyst can be seen to hasten a process without altering the result, and so on. In music, this is impossible because the 'substances' are not inert: each human being reacts individually.

Nevertheless, we need not worry too much about using one language to describe another; and we need not despair of verifying musical truths, *provided* that we recognize that verbal language is approximate, and objectivity impossible, and we build subjectivity into the model of investigation. That is, since an unknowable truth can only be approached indirectly or obliquely, the subjective verbal accounts of individuals have a special status as data in the search for continuities and discontinuities, homologues and contradictions, in the ways that people talk about what they believe to be music.

Discourse about music can also be unrelated to the actual structure of musical discourse. It may be an exercise in symbolism, religion, politics, sociology, or whatever. Even the process of musical criticism, of discussing music in words after performing or listening to it, may be a separate activity. I am not postulating a crude division between manual and mental labour, but suggesting that there are two kinds of mental labour in discourse about music, to such a degree that they constitute two different types of discourse: discourse about the world of music, and discourse about a musical world view.

Concern for this second type of discourse about music leads us to the second type of musical discourse: the discourse of music.

The Discourse of Music

Music-making, like speech, is always multi-media communication. But what is anthropologically and sociologically most interesting is the special character of the symbols which people invoke as the focus of musical activity, and which distinguish it most sharply and consistently from other social activities, even though the ways in which the symbols are described vary from one social group to another.

The analysis of systems of musical symbols is therefore the crucial task in any sociology or anthropology of music. But symbols cannot be taken out of their ritual context and interpreted as isolated units containing

meaning. Musical discourse is not an objective reality: it is the result of creator, performer, and listener (or transmitter, agent, and receiver) making sense of sounds, and the problem is to discover how people formulate the musical content.

Because individual experience is important in creating, performing, perceiving, and interpreting music, psychological factors cannot be ignored in analysing musical discourse. Indeed, structuralist and semiotic analyses, and computer-programmed analyses, all make psychological assumptions, implicitly, about the cognitive and affective processes involved in music-making. In all cases, the inferences about what is happening in the minds of composer, performer and listener are made by the analyst and expressed in the language of some academic discipline; and in many cases, the workings of the 'unconscious' or 'subconscious' are invoked to explain the recurrence of themes and motifs, stylistic features, and so on. The explanations range from the use of personal psychology to a kind of cultural psychology. Individuals are partially deprived of their right to act as free agents, and their creativity is explained in terms of psychic forces, drives, sexual impulses, repressed wishes, structural or cultural imperatives.

There is no doubt that such explanations provide both actors and analysts with coherent guides for understanding themselves and others and negotiating social situations. But proof that they are valid depends on their being worked out in practice, as in formal psychological testing or in the cure of a disturbed individual by a psychologist or a psychiatrist. When applied to the work of a dead composer who cannot answer back, Ken Russell's explanation is as good as any other. With such methods, anything goes; and the results may tell us more about the analyst and his/her environment than the object of analysis.

How, then, do we cope with the psychological elements in the analysis of musical discourse, without plunging into a bottomless pit of culture-specific generalizations about the 'unconscious mind', or outraging psychologists with naive explanations of complex processes?

I suggest that we treat music-makers, whether they be composers, performers, listeners, or analysts, as conscious agents in all cases of musical behaviour that are to be analysed. This does not rule out the existence of unconscious cerebration, transcendental experience, and other somatic states, or ignore their influence on creativity. But it does mean that they are not to be taken into account unless they are specifically invoked by people. The important things about music-making as a conscious human act are; which, of the myriad of impressions, feelings, thoughts, and experiences that happen to us all the time, do we choose to label, to emphasize, and to use in communicating with ourselves and others? And which, of all those intentional actions associated with music-making, can be accurately described as musical?

To illustrate this argument further, I want to take up one of the oldest arguments in discourse about music, and see if ethnomusicological research into the character of musical discourse can shed further light on it.

The Problem of the Song Text

FLAMAND	So then we are—	Da sind wir also—
OLIVIER	Loving enemies—	Verliebte Feinde—
FLAMAND	Friendly opponents—	Freundliche Gegner—
OLIVIER	Words or music—?	Wort oder Ton?
FLAMAND	She will decide it!	Sie wird es entscheiden!
OLIVIER	First the words— then the music!	Prima le parole— dopo la musica!
FLAMAND	First the music— then the words!	Prima la musica— dopo le parole!
OLIVIER	Music and word	Ton und Wort . . .
FLAMAND	Are brother and sister	. . . sind Bruder und Schwester.
OLIVIER	A bold comparison!	Ein gewagter Vergleich!

Combining words and music is not just a matter of uniting text and melody in an agreeable harmony. It is a basic problem of human expression which has far-reaching implications: can the music and the speech modes be combined with equal attention to both without subordinating one to the other? Will words detract attention from music? Or vice versa? and if so, why? Will the physical strength and cultural priority of the brother dominate, or the moral force and natural superiority of the sister? Will either words or music dominate under all circumstances, or only under special conditions?

The expressive powers of words and music are compared in Strauss's *Capriccio*. But the argument is slightly confused, because two types of verbal discourse are referred to interchangeably and without distinction. For example, the composer Flamand sings, 'Music is the root, the primary source. The sounds of nature sing at the cradle of all arts The cry of pain preceded language' ('Musik ist die Wurzel, der alles entquillt. Die Klänge der Natur singen das Wiegenlied allen Künsten! . . . Der Schmerzschrei ging der Sprache voraus'); the poet Olivier replies with the philosophical truism, 'But only speech can explain pain'. Then he goes on to say; 'The real depth of the tragic can only be expressed in poetry' ('Doch das Leid zu deuten vermag sie allein. Der wirklichen Tiefe des Tragischen kann nur die Dichtkunst Ausdruck verleihen'). To equate poetry with speech is to blur a crucial distinction between words and music. Speech can be propositional as music cannot be: you can argue with words in ways that you cannot argue with music. But poetry is more often like music—'redundant, illocutionary and performative'. Some societies do not even distinguish between poetry and music. In Venda, rhythmically recited verse is music, and classed as 'song'.

For the sake of argument and progress in theory, it is useful to draw clear boundaries between speech and song; and so I will not discuss poetry. On the other hand, it is equally important *not* to draw

boundaries between cognition and affect, as Olivier and Flamand tend to do, nor to characterize speech as cognitive and music as affective and to make Eurocentric psychological assumptions in analysing relationships between speech and song, words and music.

It is often assumed that song is an extension or embellishment of speech, which is the primary mode of communication, and that there is a continuum of increasing formalization from speech to song. But song is not inherently either a more or a less restricted code than speech: the relative dominance of song or speech, as of their affective and cognitive elements, in any genre or performance of a genre, depends not so much on some absolute attributes that speech and song might have, as on people's 'intentions to mean' in different social situations, and on their motivation and the psychological assumptions that they invoke. In order to understand how song and speech are generated and interrelated as products of the human body, we must first investigate different folk uses, perceptions and conceptions of words and music, speech and song, and the sets of psychological assumptions about human nature and society in which they are embedded.

The Venda are one of a number of societies in which people deny that there is a continuum between speech and song. There are formal links, but there is a sharp distinction between what are regarded as different modes of discourse. *Within* the realm of music, however, there are distinctions between melody that is free and melody that is word-dominated, melody that is influenced by the speech-tone patterns of words and melody that is influenced by the speech-tone patterns of words and melody that can follow the logic of musical discourse. Similarly, in the *ukom* drum-row music of the Igbo of Nigeria, Joshua Uzoigwe has shown that composers derive their melodic patterns from two contrasting sources, which are glossed as 'drum-text' and 'drum-sound'.

Again, in Irish traditional music, there is a distinction between songs that 'tell a story', in which the story is the most important element, and songs with words that express emotion *about* a situation or a story, but are not meant to tell a story. Further, *dance-tunes* are given names but carry no text.

One can find examples of a gradual transition from speech to song; but again this does not prove that it is based on a natural tendency to shift from one to the other. The kinds of cases that I have encountered are culture-specific and depend on context: a shift from the speech of a sermon to a hymn in a South African Independent Church, could be explained by the fact that the sermon itself was presented in a musical, call-response form and the aim of the whole event was spiritual expression.

There is not so much ethnographic support for the notion of a continuum between speech and song, as for psychological explanations of the distinction between speech and music and the idea that they are derived from different cognitive systems, or that speech and music are

characteristic of the modes of consciousness of the left and right hemispheres of the brain respectively.

As the work of Eric Lenneberg and others has shown, speech is not merely an application of the organs for breathing and eating to communication. It springs from an independent, genetically inherited system that is species-specific and has particular neurological and cognitive attributes, as well as using general cognitive process such as transformation and categorization. Speech also tends to be located in the left hemisphere of the adult brain, which is also associated with linear, sequential processing and analytic thinking.

Although the recognition of musical pitch has been described as belonging to the right hemisphere of the brain, and injuries to that hemisphere may impair musical ability, it has also been observed that the left hemisphere is exceptionally active when some professional musicians are making music. This may be the result of a process similar to the lateralization of speech that seems to take place as people grow up past puberty, because musicians devote as much time to making music as they do to speech. Or it could be that their professional activities have led them into basically unmusical ways of making music! Robert Ornstein has emphasized that the complementary workings of the two modes of consciousness permit the highest achievements, although most occupations value one mode over the other.

On balance, the evidence of the lateralization of brain function suggests that speech and music may be produced with the help of two different, though relatable, systems, and that they cannot be united on equal terms. They can be combined in song, but complementarity is not the same as unity (e.g. you could not *unite* the attention required to drive a car in heavy traffic and to carry on a complicated discussion without almost certain disaster, but you could combine them with unequal attention to each task.) Moreover, if we take Strauss's analogy, we should certainly not commit incest and unite brother and sister!

What was the solution of the heroine in *Capriccio*? She did not have the option of polyandry, and so she could not marry both Flamand the musician and Olivier the poet. Nor did she select one rather than the other, because she loved them both for what they were. And so she refused them both, and chose the pleasure of the situation in which they were united only in their unfulfilled love for her. Richard Strauss, as philosopher of the arts, takes the view that words and music can be united in song, and especially in opera. But Strauss, as musician and composer, seems to take a more personal view, and, if we follow the brother/sister metaphor, one appropriate for a patriarchal society. At the end of the opera, the music (the brother) dominates in a flourish of melody that makes the words quite unimportant.

The important point about Strauss's argument, as about the ethnographic evidence, is that neither words nor music are supreme, and they can never really be united on equal terms. The choice does not depend on psychic forces but on the decisions of individual human beings.

And so the problem of song texts can be approached without the need to resort to psychology. It can be treated as a genuine sociological or social anthropological problem. The analysis of human intentions becomes the key factor in understanding the relationships between music and speech and their significance in human experience. *Music and speech have no intrinsic power to dominate as cognitive systems, because of some proved or unproved hierarchy: emphasis on one or the other, or any attempts to unite them, are the consequence of their use by human beings in social contexts.*

Reprise

Music and speech (considered as ideal types) may be the produce of two different cognitive systems or modes of thought, and it may be impossible to merge one with the other without subordinating one to the other. Perhaps it is impossible to give full and equal attention to the content of music and speech at the same time.

How they are merged depends on human decision-making in social contexts, and not on any innate properties of the two modes of discourse. Thus, the only possibility of uniting music and speech rests in the ability of human beings to respond to the total sound impressions without regard to either the music or the speech meanings. This requires that the listener create for him/herself *new* meanings in response to the noises that reach his/her ears. Inevitably, these interpretations may differ from meanings that would be derived from the words or the melody on their own.

Perhaps this is how songs transcend cultural boundaries—not because there is something intrinsically universal in them, but because people are able to make sense of them on their own terms.

Structures of Musical Discourse: Tensions and Resolutions

Songs can provide test-cases for discovering more about the structure of musical discourse—if such a thing exists—because people's perceptions of and responses to tensions between words and music, text and melody, can indicate how they use and value contrasting but complementary modes of discourse. Problems to resolve are, for example, how words generate melody; how words suggest ideas that generate melody; how musical ideas find more precise forms through words; how words generate melody, which develops a force of its own and in turn generates new words. The forces can be musical and the forms verbal, or vice versa. The notion of a structure of musical discourse implies that human beings possess a capacity for 'musical' thought, and that there are musical forces which are more general and less culture-specific than, say, a dominant resolving to the tonic, a pathogenic melody descending from high to low pitch, or a rhythm increasing in speed and intensity.

If there is a structure of musical discourse, it will be discovered not through applying some analytical rule-of-thumb to a variety of musical

compositions and musical systems, but by describing the coherence of different musical systems and the structures of their musical discourse in terms that reflect as accurately as possible the concepts, intentions and perceptions of those who use them. If common factors emerge from such diversity, we may one day be able to talk of musical processes that are as universal as the elementary structures of kinship and verbal language.

The first step in the analytical journey is to concentrate on cases where the tension between song and text is properly exemplified. A song or its text may be taken out of the context in which it was originally composed, and given a new meaning for an occasion which need have no connection with its form or content. This is particularly common with songs used for political purposes, such as verses set to a National Anthem or to hymns. The texts may be very interesting, but they are not *song* texts properly speaking. Such situations may reveal much about the uses of melodies or the uses of words, but not about the dynamic tension of speech and music modes used together.

To identify the elementary structure of musical discourse, it will be necessary to peel away all features that can be explained in terms that are not specific to music. In song, in particular, it is necessary to discover how speech and music interact and how one mode affects the other.

For example, in Venda, there were several different kinds of relationship between words and melody, and in order to understand the relative influence of each mode on particular occasions, it was necessary to find out what people thought they were doing.

1) Words in a song did not have to tell a story. A string of words could be slotted in as appropriate for a particular occasion or type of song. They were presented as a finished artifact without requiring thought about the details of their content. They had symbolic meaning in the context of a song, without necessarily specifying or referring to what they could mean in ordinary verbal discourse.

2) There was not necessarily any connection between the mood or sense of words and the structure of melody. Even the same song could be described in one context as a song of joy and in another as a song of sorrow.

3) Words influenced the structure of melodies in a purely formal sense, because of the control which patterns of speech-tone had over the formation of the opening phrases of songs and of parts of each subsequent verse.

4) Music could shape the composition of words, especially in improvised passages. The musical framework of a song, established by the opening phrase, influenced the structure of additional verses that were invented, and sometimes connections of meaning could be musical rather than verbal. Thus one verse might succeed another not because it pursued a verbally expressed idea but because its words repeated a pattern of speech-tone that had been mirrored in the melody of the previous verse.

5) Words were abandoned altogether as a song progressed, so as to

allow for further *musical* development, with freer movement of parts in counterpoint.

6) The whole structure of a song could be influenced by structures characteristic of musical rather than verbal thought. For example:—

1. *Ihi, n̄wana wa n̄wananga!*
Ihi, n̄wana wa n̄wananga,
Vhasa mulilo!
Ihi, Vhasa mulilo?
Ihi, Vhasa mulilo,
Baba vha a vhuya.
Ihi, Baba vha a vhuya.
Ihi, Baba vha a vhuya;
Vha vhuya na nnyi?

2. *Thathatha! Thanga dzi a swa,*
Nde' Dzi a swa:
Dzi a swa na Vho-Maramba
Na Vho-Nyundo.
Vho-Nyundo vhe' Ri ya 'fhi?
Ri ya shondoni;

Coda

I have used the case of the song text to illustrate two main points:—

1) The need to consider the possibility of a system of thought that we might call musical thought, and to find ways of examining it as far as possible in its own terms, rather than in terms of other disciplines. We may use verbal language in our discourse on music, but we may *not* use linguistic methods to analyse the discourse of music.

2) The need to identify the parameters of musical thought first in the context of use and in the terms which its users have adopted, before attempting to generalize about the parameters of musical discourse as a mode of thought. These are but steps towards a general theory of music.

If, in the early stages, this means that there may emerge as many conceptualizations of musical thought as there are practising ethnomusicologists, that does not matter. It would probably mean that each one had been influenced by the musical system that he/she knew best, that the data had spoken for itself.

Ultimately, in the continued discourse about the discourse of music, consensus will emerge, especially when attention is focussed upon variations within areas that are comparatively homogeneous culturally.

The way towards a theory of music will not be achieved by successive dogma and counter-dogma, but by a recognition that all attempts to make sense of music must be given equal recognition, while at the same time maintaining a rigorous determination to discriminate carefully at what level the sense is being made and in what social contexts judgments are given.