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Reflections on music and meaning: metaphor, signification and control in the Bulgarian case

Musical meaning is examined from three perspectives, with ethnographic examples from Bulgarian music. First, music's significance for human life and its very nature are understood through metaphorical predication – for example, music is art; music is social behaviour; music is commodity; music is symbol or text. Interpretations of musical signification result from processes of identity, iconicity, association and contrast, which help to create multiple meanings for music. Finally, while states and other institutions often try to control music's meaning, its polyvalent nature and the differing social and historical positions of its interpreters militate against all such efforts.

The question of whether and how music has meaning has vexed musicologists for years. I recall a visceral encounter with the problem in 1974 during my first year of university teaching. A young colleague about my age but trained in historical musicology relished quashing all our students' attempts to suggest any referential meaning or expressive significance for music, citing as evidence contradictory interpretations of, say, the key of G minor as happy or sad. He preferred to describe what he thought was knowable in music – namely, its structural properties. Having been trained in ethnomusicology, I found this reduction of music to form and structure senseless, and yet at the time it proved difficult to articulate a coherent, rather than a felt, response. Then ethnomusicologists were struggling with how to formulate ideas about music's meaning (see Feld, 1974, for a contemporaneous, critical review of approaches based on language analogies) and, if this volume is any indication, we continue to wrestle with this theme.

In the intervening quarter century, ethnomusicologists and, recently, so-called “new musicologists” have become much more confident in proclaiming the meaning of music in particular situations and for particular people – so confident in fact that such discourse seems to have become a taken-for-granted feature of our discipline.¹ I became aware of this at a 1993 conference, organized

¹ McClary (2000), in taking up the question of musical meaning, positions her work explicitly in opposition to discourses on historical musicology which overlook (or at least

by Mark Slobin and sponsored by the Center for Russian and Eastern European Studies at Yale University, on the role of music in the recent political transition in eastern Europe. During the closing discussion a professor of comparative literature claimed to be astounded by the assembled ethnomusicologists' unproblematized assertions of music's referential meaning when in his field the notion that literature had meaning was under attack! (The published versions of those papers are contained in Slobin, 1996.)

If these personal experiences are indicative of more general trends, ethnomusicology has made important strides in understanding the nature of musical meaning. Yet this volume is symptomatic of the felt need for further work and clarification in this area.

Since I have not engaged in a systematic review of the literature on music and meaning as developed in ethnomusicology, philosophy of music and historical musicology, I offer here some reflections on the topic influenced by some reading in ethnomusicology and semiotics, Paul Ricoeur's writings on phenomenological hermeneutics, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's ideas about metaphor, Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of practice, Michel Foucault's ideas on discourses of knowledge/power and my own and other colleagues' research on Bulgarian music.

I make four principal points whose originality, if any, consists more in pulling them together and applying them to a specific case than in their newness. First, what we mean by meaning still needs clarification. I turn to the dictionary and thesaurus to point out that there are at least three meanings for "meaning", and we confuse ourselves when we fail to distinguish between them. Second, I posit the notion that musical meaning – that is, music's significance as human experience – is expressed metaphorically in claims about the nature of music. Third, using categorizations derived primarily from semiotics, I review some of the ways music seems to signify referentially. Fourth, I examine attempts to control music's signification and significance within hierarchies of power. In all these instances except the first I give examples from the Bulgarian musical tradition.

The meaning of meaning

A section with the above title in Martin Clayton's introductory essay to this volume inspired the following thoughts. He asks, quite reasonably, what do we, the contributors to this volume, mean by meaning? As I understand it, he wants to maintain a broad definition, and to do so he segues into a useful disquisition on the ontological status of music and how a clearer understanding of that status (as thing or imaginary form or meaningful action) will inevitably impact on our claims about musical meaning. He goes on to distinguish between "meaningful" in some broad experiential sense and what must, by implication,

underemphasize) music's capacity for reference. As she puts it, "Music studies have a [...] history [...] that has long denied signification in favour of appeals to the 'purely musical'" (pp. 7–8).

be the narrower “structural, syntactical and semiotic aspects of meaning described by musicologists”. I think he is right that, as I will discuss in the next section, our understanding of the ontological status of music is almost universally expressed in metaphors and that claims about musical meaning in his broad sense are linked intimately to our implicit or explicit understandings of its ontological status. However, I found myself still asking what we – not just the contributors, but indeed all musicologists – mean by meaning. The problem is that we seem to be using “meaning” in a number of senses. These need to be pulled apart and distinguished in order to make our discussions of musical meaning if not clear, then at least less ambiguous.

Meaning, as a quick look at my modest home dictionary and thesaurus reveals and as we know intuitively, has minimally three distinct meanings. (I shudder at the prospect of how consulting the OED might complicate this.) The first meaning given is “what is ... signified, indicated, referred to, or understood”. Close synonyms for this sense are words like signification, sense, import, purport and message and phrases like “semantic meaning” and “referential meaning”. This seems to be Clayton’s narrow sense of the word meaning. The second dictionary meaning of meaning suggests an array of linked synonyms like significance, importance, value and merit. (Complicating this simple dichotomy, one of the meanings of significance is signification.) Such a sense of meaning seems to provide a basis for the broader concept of meaning, which Clayton, appropriately, wants to keep before us. Third, meaning means intention or purpose. We hear this sense of the word in quizzical responses to avant-garde art and music: what does it mean? What, in other words, was the artist trying to achieve? What did he or she intend? Though we may hear this question most often in response to difficult works of art and music, such turns toward intention are probably a very frequently used interpretive strategy, used even when the interpreter is faced with common behaviours and works that are fully integrated into culturally shared practices and styles.

Another, perhaps more sophisticated version of the question, one that avoids the so-called intentional fallacy, might be: how am I to interpret this work? How am I to understand its formal logic, its references to worlds, and its artistic, cultural and social significance and value? This question yields a fourth sense for the word meaning, one somewhat undeveloped in my dictionary: meaning refers to (means) interpretation and understanding. (This question and the concepts of interpretation and understanding used here are developed in Ricoeur’s 1981 essays on phenomenological hermeneutics.) Both these last two senses – meaning as intention and meaning as interpretation and understanding – seem to me to combine the narrow and broad senses of meaning in a fruitful (even broader?) way and locate the concept of meaning not in the thing or the form or the action but in the people who make and reflect upon them.²

² Feld (1984:2–3) writes usefully on meaning situated in intention and interpretation. Pointing out that, in communicative interactions such as musical performance, we assume that others have “subjective intentions”, he writes: “We cannot speak of meaning without speaking of interpretation (whether public or conscious) Meaning fundamentally implicates interpretation”.

If meaning has multiple meanings, then, when we speak about music and meaning, we either have to be careful to specify the sense in which we are using the term or abandon its use altogether. It would be hard to argue that one or another sense is preferable in the abstract, though in particular instances one meaning may be more convenient rhetorically than another. For example, in a context devoted to musical reference it may make sense to refer to musical meaning in its limited sense of signification and use the words significance, value or function to refer to other aspects of music, musical performance and musical experience. In another context devoted to music's importance in human life, the opposite may be true: it might make more sense to use musical meaning to refer to a broad range of its functions and values while concurrently employing terms like signification, indication, index, icon, representation and symbol for one aspect of its significance. Some, faced with this problem, may prefer to abandon the phrase musical meaning in favour of contrasting terms such as signification and significance, reference and importance, semantics and value, realizing that in each case the former term is one aspect of the latter one. I try this last tack in most of what follows.

Metaphors and the nature of music

It seems to me that all human beings, including ethnomusicologists, understand the nature and significance of music (its meaning in the broad sense) by making metaphors that link music to other aspects of human experience. Each such metaphor makes a truth claim about the ontological status of music: music is art, music is meaningful action, music is humanly organized sound, and so forth. I would like to suggest that, as researchers, we not critique some of these metaphors as false while proclaiming others as the keys to the musicological kingdom: "music is not a thing at all but an activity" (Small, 1998:2). Rather, ethnomusicologists should take all musical metaphors they encounter, whether of their own making or that of their research subjects, seriously and for what they are: fundamental claims to truth, guides to practical action and sources for understanding music's profound importance in human life. Rather than true or false, each claim, it seems to me, is merely limited, one of many possibilities. A given metaphor probably achieves some goals and makes some sense in certain situations but fails to account for the full range of music's possibilities and significance. I further suggest that multiple musical metaphors probably guide action and thought in individual lives, in society and through time. Sometimes, I suppose, they happily commingle; at others they may become alternative, competing strategies.³

³ Bohlman (1999) deals with the ontological status of music in ways similar to and different from this analysis. Like this paper, he champions the analytical utility of keeping before us multiple ontologies of music, particularly as they may manifest themselves in other cultures. Unlike this paper, he is less interested in the role of metaphor as a mechanism for positing and recognizing the ontologies of music, though he points out that music as object is one of the most recognizable claims about the nature of music in the West, along with the seemingly opposing notion that it "exists in conditions of process" (p. 18).

If we look broadly at music cultures around the world, many culturally specific metaphors suggest themselves. For example, among the Navajo of the southwestern United States music is medicine, a form of therapy; it is performed to heal the sick. It doesn't represent something; it does something (McAllester, 1954; Witherspoon, 1977). Among some strict Muslims, music is the work of the devil; its performance and appreciation signify apostasy and contribute behaviourally to it. For some African-American jazz musicians, a musical performance is a story and, if you are not telling a story, no matter how technically accomplished you may appear to be, your playing is not part of the tradition. Such metaphors may be as endless as the cultures we study, and each tells us something important about the nature of music in that society (cf. Merriam, 1964:63–84, on “concepts” of music).

Musicologists also base their studies of music on metaphors that make fundamental claims about music's nature and significance. Among the common metaphors in current use and therefore applied cross-culturally are music as art, as entertainment, as emotional expression, as social behaviour, as commodity, as referential symbol and as text for interpretation. Our analyses are predicated on the truth of one or some of these metaphors – truth claims we perhaps too often champion to the exclusion of others we aren't using at the moment or have rejected for some reason. I would also argue that we sometimes demonstrate but often simply imply the truth of our favoured metaphors for our research subjects. We claim, explicitly or implicitly, that they behave as if our musicological metaphors were true for them as well. I look at a few of them here.

The music-is-art metaphor suggests that the nature of music is first and foremost about its making and the results of that making: the processes of performing and composing music and the musical products (dare I say “things”) resulting from that process. This metaphor leads us to consider how music is made (its techniques and forms and structures) and how effectively it is made (with craft, balance, virtuosity and beauty).⁴ Music is so powerful as an art, its techniques of production so formidable and the pleasures of its reception so enrapturing that such considerations can easily eclipse other views of the nature of music – that is, other metaphors, including the metaphor that music is a referential symbol or text. While ethnomusicologists have been at pains to move beyond the shadow of the music-as-art metaphor to others, we need to recognize that it informs the experience of music for those raised not just in the traditions of European aesthetics but in most musical traditions we study.

A second metaphor, which has been developed mainly by ethnomusicologists, claims that music is social behaviour. (Recent ethnomusicological monographs advancing this metaphor include Seeger, 1987; Sugarman, 1997; Turino, 1993; and Waterman, 1990.) Working with this metaphor, ethnomusicologists

⁴ A selection of recent ethnomusicological monographs that attend to the experience of music as art, usually among other things, includes Bakan (1999), Berliner (1994), Brinner (1995) and Tenzer (2000). Perhaps not coincidentally, all these books concern musically complex traditions (jazz, Javanese and Balinese music) that reward a certain analytical engagement with music forms and structures and their apprehension and appreciation.

have tried to demonstrate that, because music is made and understood by people in society, every performance of music is also a performance of social structures or social relations. Musical performances may enact past or present social structures, or they may model alternatives to existing structures and help to imagine future ones. Music's status as a performance of social relations lies within the domain of practice, often unremarked on and beyond discourse until a musicologist analyses them (Bourdieu, 1977). We have shown how musical practices mirror existing social structures, how they enact them and how they reinforce or challenge them in some way.

A third metaphor that has challenged ethnomusicologists in recent years has been the idea that music is a commodity. We have encountered this mainly in our fieldwork, as our subjects engage the commercial world of the music industry and as we take more interest in that world as a locus for our research. The reality of this metaphor is manifested in the ability of musicians to exchange their performances and the products resulting from those performances for money or other marketable commodities.

A fourth metaphor states that music is emotional expression. It claims that music is either the surface manifestation of inner emotions, and therefore expressive of them, or is generative of emotions. In other words, music doesn't simply reference emotions as a symbol might; it expresses or manifests them directly. This metaphor, while very powerful in Western cultural experience, has remained somewhat on the periphery of ethnomusicology. However, Turino (1999:221) recently challenged "the next generation" of ethnomusicologists "to develop a theory of music in relation to what is usually called 'emotion'".

Metaphors are not simply literary devices. They are constructions that help us to understand our world. When we take them as true they powerfully inform our view of the world and our actions in it (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980:156–84). When we are faced with five common and possibly cross-culturally useful metaphors about the fundamental nature of music (as symbol or text, as art, as social behaviour, as commodity, as emotional expression), a number of important questions arise.⁵ First, how do our subjects deploy these metaphors? Are some or all of them kept in some kind of balance or always kept in mind? Or do people bring one into the foreground while pushing the others into the background? Or does one actually eclipse the others, making them disappear at least for a while? In other words, we may want to consider how and whether our subjects use metaphors of music's nature and significance strategically to their benefit.

⁵ An anonymous reader was struck by the similarities between this list of metaphors and Merriam's (1964:209–27) chapter on uses and functions of music. In fact, my list of metaphors was not inspired by Merriam's chapter – though his book, and that chapter in particular, need to be credited as seminal for broadening ethnomusicological discussions of the significance of music, including this one. I didn't make the connection because metaphor and function are different. Merriam's functions flowed from a structural-functionalist paradigm, were analysed by the observer rather than by those under study and served the goal of social cohesion and stability. Metaphors are "ways of understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980:5), guide the actions of individuals operating in society and serve understanding and experience.

To move the discussion out of the abstract, let me give some examples from the traditional and neotraditional music of Bulgaria, where I have done field research off and on between 1969 and 2000.⁶ This music has its roots in a rural society, based on subsistence farming, most of whose members were illiterate until about 150 years ago. Elaborate discourses of the sort one finds in many literate cultures on music as art or as emotional expression do not exist traditionally, but Bulgaria has been modernizing for the past 150 years, and such discourses now exist in the country and have been applied to the music and its practices.

When one observes Bulgarian music being performed in traditional social contexts – for example at weddings and gatherings of friends – the music-as-social-behaviour metaphor stands out strikingly. In such settings the most prominent social structures and relations being performed through music are gendered behaviours and kinship structures. Such performances were undoubtedly more important to social life and social structuring before rapid modernization began after World War II, but I had the good fortune to observe it at work among a family of musicians with deep roots in pre-war village musical practice. Kostadin Varimezov, a skilled bagpiper (*gaidar*), moved in 1956 with his wife Todora, who knew hundreds of songs, from their village in southeastern Bulgaria to become a professional musician in one of Bulgaria's new professional folk ensembles.⁷

They continued to maintain their family structure through musical performance. In particular, it seemed to me that they understood themselves as a family at least in part through informal gatherings that included the performance of instrumental music, song and dance. By attending such gatherings and engaging in singing, playing and dancing, they and their extended family of children and grandchildren, brother and sisters and cousins, nieces and nephews performed their membership in the family. For example, at one such family get-together in 1988 Kostadin and Todora and some of their children and grandchildren were joined by a young man in his thirties who had married the daughter of Todora's sister. The young couple had travelled across the entire breadth of the country to join in the festivities on a national holiday. He in particular was anxious to learn some songs from Todora and to sing with his cousins-in-law as a way to cement his relationship to them and bring his membership in their extended family vividly to life (Rice, 1994:289–91). The wives of Kostadin's and Todora's own sons behaved in a similar way. Though they came from the western region of the country around the capital, Sofia, they had learned the dances of the south-

⁶ I apologize to readers who have already encountered these stories in my previous publications, especially Rice (1994) and (1996). I hope I am putting these old data into a slightly different analytic frame.

⁷ Rice (1994) amounts to a lengthy biography of the Varimezovs in the context of transformations in Bulgarian society from a pre-war, rural economy to a post-war communist command economy. Buchanan (1991, 1995) writes in detail about the process of professionalization of traditional musicians. She points out that their transformation from pre-war, unpaid village "players" (*svirachi*) to post-war, paid, urban "musicians" (*muzikanti*) accompanied and facilitated many changes in traditional musical practice and signification.

eastern Strandzha region where Kostadin and Todora had been born so they too could become effective members of this family. Another nephew had married a professional singer with a distinctive style from yet another region in central Bulgaria. After marrying into the family, she learned Todora's style and repertoire and taught them to her daughter as one way to insert herself into the extended patrilineal family structure that characterizes Bulgarian kinship.

When music enacts social behaviours, structures and relations, it often does so, as in this example, in the domain of practice, a domain beyond discourse (Bourdieu, 1977). In this domain music is social behaviour, not a symbol or representation of it. When this metaphor is operating, the power and effectiveness of music lie precisely in its existence as a performance of social behaviours, structures and relations beyond discourse.

Musical performance as social behaviour can turn into a symbol or text, however, during those moments when something happens that calls for commentary, that brings the behaviour into the domain of discourse. For instance, interpretation and commentary may be generated when something goes wrong or something happens that transgresses the unspoken norms of behaviour otherwise enacted at the event.⁸ At the 1988 Varimezov family gathering, for example, a neighbour – also a professional musician and player of the traditional bowed fiddle (*gǔdulka*) – and his wife attended. He joined Kostadin in playing instrumental music to accompany the singing and dancing, but she, in contrast to everyone else there, participated in neither activity. After the event Kostadin and Todora regarded her behaviour as strange enough to warrant interpretation. With their commentary they moved her behaviour from the domain of practice and social behaviour into the domain of text requiring interpretation. They interpreted her non-participation in the singing and dancing as evidence that she felt estranged from them, that she was probably angry about a perceived slight of her husband by Kostadin. In other words, if she were a friend she would perform as a friend by joining in the singing; her lack of participation must be a sign that she was no longer a friend.

This woman's musical non-participation then occasioned further reflection on and interpretation of the behaviours of members of the family, especially in-laws who had married into the family. Kostadin and Todora expressed their delight at the willingness of their children's spouses to sing and dance at social occasions and commented favourably on the in-laws who had married into the family. One exception, however, caused much anguished discussion. A nephew had married a woman who was "silent", who didn't join the "fun". From Kostadin and Todora's point of view, her silence at family celebrations indicated that she did not respect the family even though she had married into it.⁹

⁸ Cowan (1990:206–24), in a chapter entitled "Aphrodite's Table", makes this point and gives a wonderful example of a party with music and dancing that ended unhappily. She interviewed participants afterwards to illustrate the conflicting interpretations that helped each explain and interpret the party's failure.

⁹ Sugarman (1997:59) comments on similar attitudes at Albanian weddings: "Guests are expected to express their happiness in the occasion being celebrated ... through their singing

Her musical inaction put the family's future in jeopardy. In these instances of reflection and interpretation social behaviour is transformed into meaningful behaviour, that is, a text worthy of commentary (Ricoeur, 1971). In this instance, music as text is the flip side of music as social behaviour. Often something special or unusual or troubling happens to cause people to turn over the record.

The metaphors of music as art and as symbol became especially important and the object of extensive discourse when the state took over as the principal patron and organizer of traditional music, song and dance after World War II. The communist government in power from 1944 to 1989 appropriated village music to advance its ideological agenda.¹⁰ Prominent on this agenda was the idea that all people – but especially the working classes, including peasants – should be exposed to great art as part of the Party's progressive goals for the betterment of humankind under communism. For the communists, village music was a two-edged symbol. On the one hand, having been created, according to them, under conditions of feudalism and capitalism, it was a symbol (with a negative valence) of the very social and economic conditions the communists were trying to eradicate. On the other hand, at least since the national renaissance and the birth of ideas of independence from the Ottoman Empire in the mid-nineteenth century, traditional music, song and dance had been viewed by intellectuals in urban centres as symbols of the Bulgarian people and therefore of the Bulgarian nation (Buchanan, 1991). The communists understood the potential positive affect they could accrue to themselves by exploiting this positive symbol of the nation. Their problem was how to mediate the positive and negative valences of traditional music as symbol and create a new symbol to reference the progressive goals of the Communist Party.

The answer lay in transforming traditional music into an art by adding to it layers of Western art music such as harmony, counterpoint and orchestral and choral textures, replacing traditional variation and improvisation with fixed compositional form through the use of musical notation, and demanding new standards of intonation and precision in performance. (These moves are delineated in Buchanan, 1991 and 1995.) Such art, understood by communists to be one of the highest intellectual achievements of humankind, could then also act as a symbol of the goals of the Party for the spiritual advancement and progress of the working and peasant classes. Thus, the communists manipulated traditional music, song and dance away from the metaphor of music as social behaviour, embraced the metaphor of music as art and assigned completely new meanings to it partially through the alteration of its form as a sign.

The communist state also created the possibility for traditional music to exist as commodity for large numbers of Bulgarians. In the villages of pre-communist

and perhaps also dancing As an important means of asserting one family's respect for another, singing is regarded as a moral act" – yet another culturally specific metaphor about music's essence.

¹⁰ This section condenses an extensive literature by American scholars writing about changes to tradition and the politics of music under communism in Bulgaria. A selection of these works would include, among others, Buchanan (1991, 1995), Levy (1985), Rice (1994:169–233) and Silverman (1982, 1983).

Bulgaria, supported mainly by subsistence farming, instrumental music, song and dance were important parts of social life, but the economy did not generate enough money to support large numbers of professional musicians. A few landless Roma (gypsies) earned small amounts of money playing music, but for Bulgarian peasant farmers who supported their families by working the land and caring for animals this path was not a possibility and was even negatively marked (Buchanan, 1991:314–18, 1995:386; Rice, 1994:52–3). As the communists actively created their new symbols for the state, including new ways of making traditional music, they needed a cadre of instrumentalists, singers and dancers capable of advancing and performing their symbolic vision of the future under communism. The mechanism for achieving this was the formation of professional ensembles of folk music, song and dance at the national radio and television station, and, eventually, in nearly every city and town of any size, a total of 14 such ensembles by the 1980s (Buchanan, 1995:388). Skilled instrumentalists, singers and dancers from the villages of Bulgaria could now sell their skill to the state, in the process transforming a social behaviour into a commodity with new artistic values and new symbolic meanings.

This commodification of the tradition also changed traditional social structures. As Buchanan (1996b:195) has pointed out, “The incorporation of women into the state folk ensembles [as paid singers and dancers] during the 1950s flew in the face of the patriarchal social norm. ... The participation of women ... symbolized musical excellence, the emergence of music professionalism ..., and the construction of socialist society.” In the 1950s professional musical performance gave village women, probably for the first time, an independent source of income and status outside the traditional family structure. Women’s performance as professionals in state ensembles effectively restructured social relations within the families of participants.

Availing oneself of this new commodity value, however, was not always a simple matter. In Strandzha in 1988 I met a fine singer who, after I complimented her on her singing and asked why she was not a professional, told me that her husband – presumably realizing the implications of such a move – had prevented her from joining an ensemble. Todora, and I presume many other excellent singers, were so involved in the social life of the family, especially raising children, that they couldn’t free themselves to employ their skills in this new way. Instead, they continued to perform music primarily as an aspect of pre-war forms of social behaviour, many of which continue to the present.

Performing music professionally and also in village amateur “collectives” (*kolektivi*) was clearly a social behaviour, in particular a way to perform fealty to the ideals of the communist state. (Levy, 1985:167–74, and Silverman, 1982 and 1983, describe these village collectives.) Buchanan (1995:391) describes how the dominance in state ensembles of conservatory-educated conductors and arrangers over mainly provincial musicians with a deeper, experiential knowledge of the tradition “implement[ed] the value-laden hierarchy of power associated with the Western symphony”. I assume that for these musicians this musical hierarchy probably felt like a synecdoche for power hierarchies of the totalitarian state (though they wouldn’t have put it that way). Furthermore,

“The non-traditional emphasis on precision playing [achieved under the direction of conductors and aided by musical notation was] a trademark of West European music professionalism” and thus “iconic of the socialist philosophy of cultural progress” (*ibid*). In the terms of the present discussion I interpret Buchanan as suggesting that musical performance operated in this case both semiotically as icon and trademark and also, through performative implementation, as social behaviour. The musicians in effect performed in practice their social subordination to the state as represented by conductors and arrangers, a performance that could be read as text and interpreted symbolically by fellow Bulgarians and visiting ethnomusicologists.

What these Bulgarian examples illustrate is that these four qualities of music as social behaviour, as symbol or text, as art and as commodity coexist in complex relationships. Sometimes they seem to exist together, as they did during the communist period. At other times they follow serially one after another, as when a social behaviour is subjected to interpretation to become a text. And sometimes one metaphor can seem to eclipse the others, as when in the communist period the social significance of music for various types of rural social structuring was almost completely erased by music as political symbol and commodity. It seems to me that questions about music and its significance (its meaning) for human life should be asked with these kinds of metaphoric shifts in mind.

Musical signification

In this section I turn in more detail to one metaphoric claim about music, namely that it is a symbol with referential meaning or a text for interpretation. The terms symbol and text have been developed in different discursive traditions. The implications of the term symbol have been worked out in detail in semiotics. As for text, I have applied Ricoeur’s (1971) notion of meaningful action having textual properties to musical performance and claim that music is sometimes understood as a form of action interpretable for its reference to a world. Here I conflate these two ideas because they both make the claim that music can have referential meanings to things, ideas, worlds and experiences within and outside itself.

When considering music as symbol or text, three obvious questions suggest themselves. How do musical symbols acquire their signification? What types of musical signification are there? Why does music seem to have multiple and changing references?

Without citing the literature in detail, it seems to me that semiotics has established that someone always makes music’s symbolic reference – that is, symbols always signify something to someone. In other words, musical signification is always constructed; it is not simply there in the music. Because people construct references, music’s semantic meaning varies from person to person, from place to place and from time to time. As people move through social and historical space or when they occupy different spaces, their interpretations will differ and change. In the case of Bulgarian music, for example,

we have already seen how the meaning attributed to village-style music-making changed from the pre-war to the post-war period when the cultural and social system changed.

If people create musical signification, it seems to me that they do so in at least four ways: (1) by recognizing its identity or similarity to other musical forms; (2) by positing its iconicity or resemblance to forms outside music; (3) by noticing its association with other things or ideas; and (4) by inferring a reference (a meaning) when two musical forms contrast with one another. In the spirit of my fourth definition of meaning, I want to focus on categorizing processes of interpretation rather than sign types, as is often done in semiotics.¹¹

The identity or similarity of two performances of music, through either quotation or repetition, sets up the possibility for a signification generated by what some might call intertextuality. When a piece of music, its performance or some of its parts are identical or similar to other pieces, performances or parts, this identity or similarity – to those who recognize it – sets up an intertextual reference to that piece, performance or part.¹² In the Bulgarian tradition, for example, such intertextual references are recognized between instrumental tunes and song tunes and between nearly identical tunes in different meters. In the former case instrumentalists borrow song tunes, transform them rhythmically by adding subdivisions of certain durations and, in the process, create the basis for much of the instrumental repertoire. As Kostadin told me, referring to this process, “The richness of Bulgarian instrumental music is thanks to the wealth of songs” (Rice, 1994:103). For those who hear this association, the instrumental tune calls forth the associations or meanings of the song text and the contexts in which the song may have been heard. For those who don’t hear the association this aspect of musical signification is absent. Instrumentalists also use tunes in one meter to create new tunes in another meter. As a composer of instrumental tunes, Kostadin called it “his secret”, even though many musicians know it (Rice, 1994:198). This means that a new tune in 7/8 can reference its original in 6/8, creating for those who recognize it a type of reference for the new tune.

¹¹ Feld (1984:8) calls similar processes of interpretation “interpretive moves”, and his list of types, which moves beyond semiotics and combines ideas about the significance and signification of music, includes locational, categorical, associational, reflective and evaluative moves.

¹² As Turino (1999:226–7) points out, in C. S. Peirce’s trichotomy of sign types into icon, index and symbol such intertextuality or quotation would be classified as an icon, “a sign that is related to its object through some type of resemblance between them”. Peirce further subdivides icons into three classes: image, diagram and metaphor. Such musical intertextuality would be image-icons because of their “simple properties shared”. In my classification of symbolic processes I have chosen to reserve the term icon for resemblances between musical and non-musical things; that is, where the qualities shared may not be so simply apprehended. In Peircean terms this type of icon would probably be classified as a metaphor-icon. So the distinction I am making in this section between identity/similarity and iconicity/ resemblance would, in Peircean terms, be that between image-icon and metaphor-icon.

Iconicity refers to a perceived resemblance between a musical structure or performance, whether an entire piece or some part of it, and something non-musical, such as a religious belief, a political ideology, a kinship structure or a social practice. Positing music's iconicity with other domains has been a particularly fruitful area of recent ethnomusicology writings. The results have included Judith and Alton Becker's (1981) claim that the cyclical structure of Javanese gamelan music – marked by gongs sounding shorter cycles within longer cycles – is iconic of (that is, bears a resemblance to) more general Javanese conceptions of time, particularly a complicated calendar system with weeks of different lengths (for example, 5, 6 and 7 days) embedded within one another. The simultaneous sound of many gongs at certain moments in the gong cycle is an icon of the "full days" that result when the first days of many weeks coincide. Feld (1988) has shown that the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea sing in an overlapping style ("lift-up-over sounding") that is iconic of conversational style and the soundscape of the forest they live in, leading him to conclude that "the music of nature becomes the nature of music" (p. 102). The scholars pursuing this line of interpretation argue that such iconic relationships, often left uninterpreted by members of the culture and therefore requiring interpretation by ethnomusicologists, are a source of the affective power of music.

In the Bulgarian case, recall Buchanan's claim, cited above, that during the communist period many features of arranged ensemble playing, including its precision, were iconic of socialist ideas about progress and submission to state control. In this area of iconicity the link between aesthetics and ethics becomes clearest. A good way of making music, in other words, is often also a good way of being socially in the world. Turino (1993), for example, has demonstrated this clearly for the Ayacucho Indians of the Andean highlands in Peru, for whom large and out-of-tune ensembles iconically represent and enact an ethics of community participation that overrules narrower, more strictly musical aesthetics; that is, musical performance seems to be simultaneously a symbol and a social practice.

Association refers to the attribution of meaning to a musical form through some kind of co-occurrence. In Peircean semiotics, such a musical sign belongs to the class of signs called "index" – "a sign that is related to its object through co-occurrence in actual experience" (Turino, 1999:227). When an interpreter notices this co-occurrence, I label the interpretive process that results an association. In Bulgaria, the association of folk music with the state was made clear at performances in which symbols of the state were prominent aspects of the stage setting (see Rice, 1994:277–8 for a description of such an event). For example, the Bulgarian and Soviet flags might be flown prominently or the backdrop of an outdoor stage might consist of a drawn portrait of Todor Zhivkov, long-time head of the Bulgarian Communist Party, or sometimes of the entire politburo. In such cases it was impossible to escape the intended meaning accomplished through created associations that well-performed Bulgarian traditional music, properly selected and arranged, was an index of the good things the Party was promising and of the bright, progressive future

it held out for the people. In more traditional, localized instances one person might so often request a given instrumental tune that it effectively became his index, an association that would often be ratified in the naming or renaming of the tune as, say, "Ivan's tune". And when the tune was played the now-referential tune would evoke thoughts and memories of Ivan.

Contrast is, in some sense, the opposite of identity and similarity, but it refers to a more complex semiotic process. Instead of a perceived identity or similarity between two symbolic forms (or signs), they appear to contrast over one or many features. By focusing on contrast in the forms, people associate different, often opposite, meanings to the two forms. The "symbolic logic" here is that if sign A refers to an object B through identity, resemblance or association, then its opposite (sign -A) can refer to objects that are the opposite of object B, that is, -B, even in the absence of identity, resemblance or association between sign -A and object -B. In this case, the signs move into the Peircean sign-class of symbols. Turino (1999) argues that a symbol in the Peircean scheme is a sign "related to its object through the use of language, rather than being fully dependent on iconicity or indexicality" (p. 227). Sign-contrast, in other words, creates signification that flows from the relation between signs rather than from the identity, resemblance or association of a sign with its object.

Musical change and the history of music, it seems to me, have often come about when people rather self-consciously develop new forms of music that contrast with old forms in order to articulate with, comment on, reference or serve new social formations and new cultural understandings. In Bulgaria, as we have seen, the contrast between traditional solo playing and singing and modern choral singing and orchestral playing was created as a way to represent a new meaning for folk music – namely, a modern, communist ideal in contrast to the older style, which represented the feudal, capitalist and Ottoman societies that supported it before the communists came to power. Orchestras and choruses may be iconic of socialist ideas and indexical of (associated with) modernity. They also gain those references from the semiotic contrast between older forms of village music as indexes of the traditional, the backward, the past and the national. The pairing of musical signs, with their contrasts of solo/group, monophonic/harmonic, variable tuning/fixed tuning and so forth, creates the possibility that the new sign can be interpreted as a symbol (in addition to an icon or index) of modernity, the progressive, the future and the cosmopolitan.

In the 1980s Bulgarian music performed at weddings evolved into a performance style that contrasted in almost every respect with the state-supported version of the music (Buchanan, 1991, 1996a; Rice, 1994, 1996; Silverman, 1989). Although in many respects the melodies, song lyrics, meters and rhythms were the same in the two types of music, wedding music evolved into a highly improvised, chromatic form with amplified Western instruments performed by small ensembles featuring minority Rom musicians. This style contrasted with the emphasis in the state's arranged folklore on composition, acoustic traditional instruments, diatonicism and ethnic purity. This contrast in the form of

the sign suggested to some Bulgarian listeners that wedding music could stand for the opposite of what the state's music referenced through association. As the communist system declined in the 1980s and the state was viewed in more negative terms, this contrast in musical style seemed to reference symbolically a contrast between a present, outmoded, totalitarian, oppressive political system and a hoped-for vibrant, democratic and free political system. There are, of course, some iconic elements in wedding music as a sign. Improvisation, virtuosity and loudness could be interpreted as icons of freedom, individuality and lack of control, respectively. But these icons become more convincing as interpretations within the symbolic frame created by the contrast between the forms of musical signs.

The third question – why can music bear so many meanings simultaneously? – has at least five answers.

First, music itself is made up of many elements that occur simultaneously: melody, rhythm, timbre, loudness and textural interplay between simultaneous voices to name but a few. Each of these elements can have different meanings associated with them simultaneously. As Turino (1999:237) asserts, “The multi-componential aspect of music can not be overemphasized as a basis for music's affective and semiotic potential”. For example, traditional Bulgarian melodies and meters can reference a nation and its supposed ancient history, while the harmonies that accompany it can simultaneously reference the modern world beyond the nation and aspirations for progress from a dim, impoverished past to a bright, prosperous future. Thus the complexity of the musical sign itself opens up the possibility of multiple meanings.

Second, since musical meaning may arise from at least four processes (identity, iconicity, association and contrast), each of these processes may contribute its own meaning to the musical sign.

Third, the passage of time means that each new performance of music has new potential for meanings to be assigned to it, whether in relation to previous performances or in association with the new events in which it occurs. For example, traditional unaccompanied Bulgarian singing performed in a village before World War II may have been interpreted as a symbol of appropriate social behaviour; the same singing after the war became a symbol of the nation and, specifically, of its imagined past rather than its gritty present or glorious future.

Fourth, the sign's form can change over time, opening up the possibility of new meanings. When Bulgarian instrumental music based on traditional diatonic melodies with a range of a sixth absorbed chromaticisms and arpeggiations over an octave range in the second half of the twentieth century, the new forms signified a striving for modernity of a rather different kind from that envisioned by communist-inspired aesthetics (Buchanan, 1996a; Rice, 1996).

Fifth, as music is performed in many different contexts, with different people interpreting it, so it can take on new meanings. Bulgarian music performed by a family at home may be interpreted as evidence of a desire to realize a family's potential to create good feelings among its members; performed at a state-sanctioned holiday, it may be interpreted as evidence of the family's support of the state's policies in areas beyond the musical domain.

So the answer to the question of whether music has referential meaning is not no, as my former young colleague claimed, apparently frustrated by its malleability compared to what he supposed, probably incorrectly, are the more permanent and shared significations of language utterances. Rather, the answer is a resounding yes. And music can have a wonderful surfeit of meanings at that. Part of the power of music surely lies in its capacity to absorb and refract multiple meanings, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes serially.

The control of meaning

Since interpreters assign signification to music, we need to ask: in particular situations, who gets to assign meaning to music? Are such assignments of meaning policed and controlled, and if so how and why? If different people or groups assign different meanings to music, then to what extent does this give rise to discord or contestation? These questions are inspired to some extent by Foucault's (1980) equation of knowledge and power and his critique of discourse as a domain where power in the guise of knowledge is exercised.

The obvious answer to the first question is that everyone who comes in contact with a given piece or performance gets to assign a meaning or meanings to it. When music functions as a text or symbol, the author, composer or performer of that text is only its first reader, its first interpreter. Though listeners and subsequent performers of it may want, as a matter of curiosity, to divine its meaning in relation to its author's intentions, they are under no obligation to do so. They may prefer to assign their own meanings to it, in the process making the music a significant, signifying aspect of their own lives. It is in the nature of music as text or symbol that composers and performers cannot control its interpretation and the meanings that subsequently accrue to it. When dissatisfaction with the communist government reached its peak in the 1980s, the positive valence the state applied to its arranged versions of traditional music took on a negative valence for the growing number of people unhappy with their lot and no longer optimistic about their future under communism.

If music can attract to itself an efflorescence of interpretation and signification, how and when are they contested? Within local communities, it seems to me that very often it is the community and its values, acted out in countless unremarkable, quotidian activities, that tend to dominate individual interpretations in the space where meaning is assigned to particular performances of music. At the national level, governments and their representative institutions – ministries of culture and education, for example – actually have some power to strongly influence, even if they can't quite control, music's interpretation and meaning. Totalitarian states in the twentieth century have been especially interested in controlling music production and meaning, perhaps understanding, better than even some scholars do, music's affective power and therefore the emotion that goes along with its interpretation.¹³ In the Bulgarian case the

¹³ One of the major points of Turino's (1999) article on Peircean semiotics is that it may provide the foundation for an understanding of musical affect, emotion and sentiment.

government had at its command all the symbolic techniques I listed above, coupled with its control of the organizations of power and propaganda, including the ministries of culture and education and state-run radio, television and the recording industry. They appropriated folk music as a symbol because of its identity with the music of the past experience of a majority of Bulgarians, who had grown up in rural environments and for whom this music represented the comforts of home and childhood. Through their control of educational and cultural institutions they altered its form to bring it into line with more modern forms of music, setting up the possibility that it could reference (through identity, resemblance, association and contrast) both the rural past and a hoped-for progressive future. They controlled the means of dissemination of this new form, ensuring its ubiquitous presentation and reception, to the exclusion of other, competing signs of modernity borrowed, for example, from jazz and popular music. The beauty, sophistication and polish of arranged folklore thus became an icon of the good life promised by the communists in the future. Finally, they controlled the meanings that accrued to arranged music by its association with signs of the state on national holidays, public ceremonies and state-controlled media. In sum, these political meanings were inescapable, though not unassailable.

Even though the state created the musical signs and controlled many of the events at which meanings were made evident through association, the meaning of music is too elusive for even totalitarian states to control. Kostadin, for example, who became a professional bagpiper in a state-sponsored orchestra of folk instruments, tried to ignore the other instruments that, as he put it, “howled” around him so that even arranged music could continue to be associated with (that is, be an index of) his past life in the village. In a similar vein, Buchanan (1995) provides a nuanced account of the complex interactions of “webs of symbolic discourses” (p. 382) during the communist period, which included a negotiation between musicians’ “individual and localized worldviews” and the “reality constructed by their government” (p. 384).

The state also could not control the valence of the meanings it tried to assign to music. When in the early years of the communist period people’s attitudes to the state were largely positive, the valence of this music seems to have been largely positive (Buchanan, 1995:396; Rice, 1994:183). But in the 1980s, when negative attitudes to the party and state were ascendant, the valence of this music became rather negative. And the state couldn’t control people’s attention to their music in order to receive its intended meanings. People disenchanted with the state and its music turned their attention to other forms of music, including foreign music from Serbia and other neighbouring countries, wedding music, which was evolving outside state control, and rock music and jazz. (The state’s somewhat futile attempts to control wedding music as one response to its extraordinary popularity are documented in Buchanan, 1991, 1996a; Rice, 1994:250–5; and Silverman, 1989).

In particular, he claims that music operates at the level of icon and index in ways that are pre-linguistic and that even block conscious symbolic analysis of meaning.

These kinds of music, in my view, became signs of freedom from totalitarian control, and the state was powerless to control them and their meanings (cf. Buchanan, 1996a:225; Rice, 1996). Technology, especially radio from foreign countries and a burgeoning new technology – amateur recordings on audio-cassette – effectively operated outside state control (Silverman, 1983). The state tried to control these new musics and meanings through state-sponsored festivals of wedding music and even the arrest of the most prominent musician in this genre, Ivo Papazov (Buchanan, 1996a). But these efforts proved feckless, and wedding music and its meanings became one of the early-warning signs of the demise of the totalitarian state.

Music, with its possibilities for multiple meanings and its ability to generate affect, is an emotion-laden form rich with possibilities for ideological modelling and control and yet able, in many instances, to wiggle free of that control, either because of the uncontrollability of the electronic technologies in which it is disseminated, the multiplicity of references inherent in music as a semiotic form, or the claim by its makers and listeners that it is, after all, not a sign that signifies at all but an art.

Conclusion

I have tried to outline three important dimensions of music and meaning in this article and illustrate them with references to Bulgarian music. First, one way to approach musical meaning in its broad sense (that is, its significance for human life) is to focus on the claims to truth about music made through metaphorical predication: music is art, social behaviour, commodity, symbol, text, and many more. Second, music operates as a symbol or text in at least four basic ways: when interpreters recognize (1) identity or similarity with previous pieces or performances; (2) iconicity with something beyond music, such as an ideational or social system; (3) an association with individuals, events, ideas or institutions; and (4) formal musical contrasts that imply different referential meaning. Third, music always means something to someone, and therefore its meanings are inevitably multiple and contestable and, in some instances, controllable. Music and meaning appears to be an especially rich area of research, partly because of the multiple stories people and institutions operating from vastly different social, historical and geographical positions tell about it and partly because its essence escapes every attempt to corral and control either its significance or its signification.

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