

On the Relationship Between Musical Onomatopoesie and Abstract Form

This semester I have been working a great deal at translating certain conceptual expressions of Herbert Brun's into the terms of my own aesthetic language. It is necessary for me to create this commentary because in spite of the fact that, as far as I can tell, we are in agreement on all the important issues and most of the minor ones, there are surface features of the language in which our ideas are expressed which indicate distinctions that may be seen as disagreement. In fact, I often wonder, in spite of all good intentions, if I am not Brun's worst enemy disguised in sheep's clothing; it may be that I have misunderstood his work completely and am merely working to dilute and distort it. It is necessary to find this out. I have been working on an article since August, already over fifty pages long, which I will make available to you when it is finished. The present short paper discusses a single point of that larger conceptual complex, but it is probably the central point for me: i.e. the question of the collectively understood language by whose common usage has transformed it from a meaningful signal of understanding into a meaningless expression which invites confusion and misunderstanding.

Brun concisely outlines this dilemma, and prescribes a remedy in the following quotation from his liner notes attached to the phonograph album, "Herbert Brun: Compositions."

If played and heard enough, every musical gesture is prone to be interpreted, by musicians and listeners, as a gesture of musical speech.

As the gesture becomes familiar, and thus recognized by society, the composed structure, in which the context generates the meaning of its components, will be misunderstood, instead, as one in which the components give meaning to their context.

In order to retard this development, this visitation of communicative familiarity, for as long as possible, I have attempted, in several of my compositions, to anticipate the gesture-forming tendencies within the composed structure and to reduce each of them ad absurdum by way of a non sequitur. I wanted, thereby, to rob trivial perception and partial recognition of the paralyzing effect that all too commonly is mistaken for the understanding of music.

In my first paper, I made a case for the proposition that the most legitimate or truthful manifestation of the "Eternal Now" must be brought into the world through creative work that is as contemporary for the author

as for his audience. The key problem in bringing forth a "new song" that is satisfying to the composer yet compatible with a chosen audience, is the difficulty of anticipating what kind of impact one's work will have on people who crave familiarity. Most audiences bring to the first hearing of a work a set of preconceived attitudes and expectations; an effect which Brun calls "context." Some audiences ("New Music" audiences) are more used to the more specialized fare one receives at "New Music Concerts, but they are still just people, and when people (any people) experience a musical event they tend to project their previously learned understanding of musical language onto the stage, rather than consciously opening themselves to the ever-newly-born possibilities of life.

Audiences do not willingly come to a concert to learn and be transformed by the power of music to reveal what is hidden and to exalt what is insensitively ignored. If they did, people like Brun would not feel it necessary to campaign so aggressively against "trivial perception". If audiences worked as hard at auditing as composers do at composing, there might be a happy middle ground where the composer and the audience might cooperate in the communal creation of a "new song". Alas, this is not so, and trivial perception characteristically robs the composer of his ability to communicate anything new about himself or his time. He may have created his piece with the best of intentions, and fulfilled himself in his private world most successfully, but until he gets across the gulf between himself and his audience his expression is not communication.

The composer is responsible for creating "context"; the audience must not be allowed this privilege. Audiences come to concerts supposedly wanting a composer to give them a new piece; and yet, at concert after concert, they come and listen to their own piece in their heads without ever opening their ears to what the composer has brought them. If the audience hears in a piece only what they have already heard, or if the piece passively allows them to hear whatever they want to hear, learned definitions of musical gesture degenerate into approximations of meaning; the categorizing function of memory vitiates the potency of the present moment. Instead of the uniqueness of now, the audience experiences a worn rerun of yesterday, a yesterday which looks forward to no bright tomorrow. You say potato and I say potato, and although they look the same, one comes from Idaho and one comes from Fifth Avenue in New York; therefore if I write p-o-t-a-t-o, there is confusion. This confusion is not artistic paradox, it is not the "unanswered question" echoing among the stars, it is not the universal resonance of the human soul seeking its place in the cosmic scheme, it is sloppy penmanship.

Brun's solution to this problem is to deny the audience the possibility of projecting its learned responses onto his musical gestures, by creating gestures which have no pedigree whatsoever. This is not accomplished by

generating completely new gestures like nobody has ever heard before (which is impossible), but by juxtaposing pre-existing musical gestures in such a way that the audience's learned sequential expectation is unremittingly frustrated. It is well understood that every linguistic structure carries with it predefined associations and expectations. Thus, "If I go out in the rain I will get:

A. Wet"

B. Drenched."

C. Albatross."

If your compositional response to this rainy musical question is A or B, the audience is happy to be with you, comfortable in a shared armchair of "trivial perception," but they are not encouraged to be alive, to respond to change, to revel in the nowness of life and the youthfulness of you. Clearly, if you go out into the rain and get "albatross" people will instantly begin to wonder what the hell you mean. It is a good thing that they should wonder, because this creates interest and invites the audience to listen to you and not their favorite piece of Bartok your piece reminds them of.

Now, the term "onomatopoesie," in the title of this paper refers to music's ability to "represent" or sound like something in nature; a tympano roll followed by a cymbal crash sounds like thunder and lightning. There are many such representational clichés in the vocabulary of music, some more some less imitative of nature. Now, a cymbal roll followed by chopsticks followed by two bars of Don Giovanni followed by a fart does not sound like anything; certainly not in nature. In the presence of this sequence of nonsequiturs the audience is forced to search for their own meaning. Most of the work of John Cage is based on the idea that there is meaning to be found in the face of an onslaught of chance events whose character and sequence are designed to have as little to do with the inherited musical language, or with the familiar concert-going experience as possible. Likewise, a crucial article in the 12-tone catechism is, regardless of the actual seriality of the material, "avoid tonal implications." Hence, the use of non sequitur is guaranteed to raise the audiences' perception above the trivial level by demanding that they bring their now selves (not their memories) to the piece. The question is then, how to make a sequence of nonsequiturs into a self-generating language whose discernible aim is to express the significance of the now-you-us. If the point is to raise the musical experience above the trivial, how do we make a sequence of non sequiturs sound more significant than "hey nonny nonny no"?

The representational aspect of artistic onomatopoesie is traditionally contrasted with the non-representational or abstract aspect of art. Abstract is a word that is best understood in its negative connotation as "non-representational." The case is often made that music is the most abstract of

all the arts, because the basic materials of music, the sounds, are not symbols for any specific thing in nature; it is said that sounds are not like words, which are nearly always symbols for the material things they represent. I find, on the contrary, that the very fact of sound, its identifiable presence in the material plane makes it representational. The ability to identify a language component with any specific material reality makes it representational, hence, any sound that is heard with the ear represents, at the very least, itself, and refers, at the very least to its point of origin in nature. The sound source represented may be more or less indigenous, as, for instance, the mental picture derived from the sound of a creaky door is more vivid than the sound of a sine wave filter sweep on a synthesizer; but the materiality of vibration in air brings sound into the mundane realm, thus depriving it of any ideal character or abstract significance.

Sounds heard in the imagination also count as representational, because the mind duplicates the memory of aural experience; in fact anything that can be remembered is representational, because it is essentially material--it is the remembering that makes it material. Since there is no sound, which does not exist at some atomic level, in nature, and since we cannot hear a sound without identifying its source, we are compelled to perceive the basic building blocks of musical art as representational in the same sense that line and color are representational in graphic art.

In the case of so-called abstract painting, the artist may put together a medley of shapes and colors that are in a totally new combination, but there is no component color or shape that has not already existed elsewhere in nature, so those component colors and shapes must be thought of as referential; maybe they do not refer to a river, or a barn, but they certainly duplicate the physical reality of this angle or that shading, all of which has been seen before; thus, the memory of that seeing refers, at the very least to itself. Likewise, every sound it is possible to make onstage, is a sound that has been heard somewhere before; it is not possible to create a new or unique physical experience, confined as we are to the five senses of material reality. Indeed, the truly abstract or non-representational experience comes from the "inner experience," the mental activity that is capable of organizing representational referents into truly original, anomalous patterns whose meaning transcends their mundane points of origin.

An expression is a meaning derived from the interplay of linguistic elements, while an onomatopoeic effect stands alone as a discrete and commonly understood language byte which would tend to represent its natural referent in or out of context. Thus an expression will always be comprised of:

- 1,) elements which amount to more than what they are, and
- 2,) a meta-meaning which is more than what it is.

An artwork is greater than the sum of its parts, because the mind is compelled to redefine the relationship of the parts in the presence of each other.

I call the creation of an abstraction "establishing a formal relationship." An abstraction, though non-representational, is not devoid of meaning. It is a special case wherein the meaning comes not from the gesture's reference to the natural world, as with thunder and lightning, but from the internally generated relationship of the parts. The process of finding, within the self, meanings which are not explicitly represented by the work, I call the experience of form; although this experience is similar in many aspects to the way we come to appreciate a literal meaning, such as the ability to remember it, and the ability to derive a literal transliteration of it, it is not socially specific, and will result in a different subjective experience for every member of the audience. The juxtaposition of images contained in the sentence, "If I go out in the rain, I will get albatross," forces the imagination to accept an unusual situation as usual, and to seek relationships between rain and albatross which are, though difficult, not impossible to find. In fact, the gloomy, messy associations we have with rain, juxtaposed with the sunny, oceanic, mythical resonance of albatross invites many interesting possibilities although the precise character of these possibilities will be different from person to person.

The creation of formal meaning then is in the juxtaposition of nonsequiturs. But just how absurd are they?

Mr. Brun's meticulous attention to detail in the use of words may well be unparalleled in the history of the world, but I must quibble a bit over his use of the words "ad absurdum." I find that his use of non sequitur is not absurd at all, and that any work that claims to be absurd would most likely not be worth listening to. We are engaged in the high calling of preserving culture for the future and intensifying culture for the present; self-conscious dabbling in absurdities would be a trivial pursuit indeed. Of course the word "absurd," like the word "experimental," has two meanings, the meaning it once had and the meaning it has come to have, so Brun may possibly be forgiven for the somewhat self-deprecating use of anti-art jargon.

Nevertheless, I find that the use of non sequitur is a powerful tool for the revelation of the changing significance of inherited language bytes, and although all of what I know of Brun's work tends toward the humorous, it is not the humor of the cynic or sophist, but of the truly good-natured, well-meaning, objective commentator. Indeed it is the objectivity of abstract art that is its main attraction.

To be abstract but not self-conscious is the real trick. So much late 20th century music wallows in shallow, inconsequential self-indulgence, that many composers have abandoned the spirit of adventure, that drove the

creation of art music in the 60's, and retreated into a derivative world of maudlin post-romanticism; the new concert music of the 21st century is beginning to sound like recycled 19th century music, and not particularly good 19th century music. How do we discriminate between the pointless, thoughtless efforts of the experimental bandwagon devotee, and those of a real composer who has contributed to the longevity of musical expression by enlivening his language with the magic of spiritual transformation using means which may not show on the surface? Where does originality come from, the heart or the head? Is it art for art's sake, or originality for originality's sake? Do we find the newness of now in the contrived invention, the outer workings of a fantastic machine, or is the inner anomaly the true measure of the eternal moment?

It is a difficult but absolutely fundamental question, which is all too often consigned to the realm of opinion or belief. It may be there is no answer, but, not being one to throw in the towel at the brink, I must say that, in searching for verbal justifications, I find the word integrity springing to mind. I use the word integrity not only in the sense of intention, but also in the sense of integralness. Since the process of redefining language depends not so much on surface features, common usage, etc., but the creation of an internal dynamic which compresses the passive representational referents into an active interdependence, it may be said that formal meaning comes from the once-removed resonance of the underlying structure.

If we liken an abstract artwork to a Christmas tree, with balls and lights and glitter hanging on it, we might say the underlying structure, the tree, is unchanged no matter what order the ornaments are arranged in. Of course the structure of the tree may make certain demands of necessity on where the heavy and lighter ornaments go relative to each other, nevertheless, the referential character of the ornaments is less important than the proportional relationship necessitated by the structure of the tree. The trivial perception will only notice the ornaments, but the aggressive passionate audience will crave a consequence of the ordering of the ornamental elements. Referential elements, disparate or not, must call to each other for a reason and not merely by chance, or worse, not merely because they have already called to each other in the same way elsewhere. A composition without integral dynamics may be cute, or hip, but it will never serve the highest purpose of art which is to convey the articulated identity of the world to itself.

From elsewhere in Brun's liner notes we read:

If the organization of a system in disorder is attempted with the aim of mobilizing the means for the communication of thoughts which

transcend the definition of the system, then it may be considered a "creative" project. Here the system offers the means but not the contents of communication.

When the system offers the means but not the contents of communication, the actual content becomes a transcendent reality, alive, but superhuman. When a work depends not on the underlying system but on the external referents we have incoherence, a sad comedy at best, and an antisocial well-spring of negativity at worst.

Stanislaw Lem describes the efforts of an intelligent but unhuman planet to communicate with man thus:

I could see its face, and it was a very young child. Besides, its proportions corresponded exactly to the proportions of a child's body. . . . It rose and fell with the waves; but apart from its general motion, it was making other movement, and it was horrible! . . . It was more like a doll in a museum, only a living doll. It opened and closed its mouth, it made various gestures, horrible gestures. . . . Its eyes sparkled and you really would have thought it was a living child, if it hadn't been for the movements, the gestures, as though someone was trying . . . It was as though someone else was responsible for the gestures. I'm talking of an impression, more of an intuition. I didn't analyze it, but I knew those gestures weren't natural. . . . these movements had no meaning. Each of our movements mean something, more or less, serve some purpose. . . . The movements I saw were . . . er . . . yes, that's it, they were methodical movements. They were performed one after another, like a series of exercises; as though someone had wanted to make a study of what this child was capable of doing with its hands, its torso, its mouth. The face was more horrifying than the rest, Because the human face has an expression and this face . . . I don't know how to describe it. It was alive, yes, but it wasn't human. Or rather, the features as a whole, the eyes, the complexion, were, but the expression, the movements of the face, were certainly not. . . . I've watched an epileptic fit. . . . it was something quite different. Epilepsy provokes spasms, convulsions. The movement I'm talking about were fluid, continuous, graceful . . . melodious, if one could say that of a movement. It's the nearest definition I can think of. But this face . . . a face can't divide itself into two--one half gay, the other sad, one half scowling, and the other half amiable, one half frightened and the other triumphant. But that's how it was with this child's face. In addition to that, all these movements and changes of expression succeeded one another with unbelievable rapidity.

The planet's grotesque failure to communicate is accomplished not through lack of vocabulary, but through lack of a point of reference. The planet has no humanity, so it cannot make the language bytes make sense. Likewise, if a composer has a point of reference that comes from within himself, from an experience of himself as human, then his ordering of referential elements will always be coherent. If there is no foundation for the underlying structure to spring up from, then there is no possibility of a living artwork. Even in the work of John Cage, where the ornaments on the tree change every time, there is always an underlying attitude which demands that enough choices be made to ensure that the ornaments relate to each other exactly the same way every time. Thus Cage's professed intention to extract completely his personality from his composition, results in a body of work that elegantly and precisely conveys an image of a man and a time.

In all the work I have turned in this semester, I am moving toward a description of how I use blatantly referential material to liberate abstract spiritual energy into the world. It is my contention that if an underlying structure is operating on the components of a composition all the time, constantly redefining the inherited components, then it does not matter where the components come from; they will be enlivened by the superphysical energy of the underlying formal relationships. The conclusion of this paper is simply to point to the next step, namely that somehow music can represent physical realities on one level while revealing superphysical realities on higher levels; that it can do both and more at the same time, and that an audience sensitive to representation on one level may be completely insensitive to energies on higher levels; that this is a good thing.

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