

Abstract

This study concerns music in the ‘classical style’, that is, music of the later 18th and early 19th centuries, in particular the works of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. I propose that the analogy between this music and language, a familiar topos of two-and-a-half centuries, is substantial rather than metaphorical. For a better understanding of this analogy, it is necessary to combine insights provided by musicology and aesthetics with linguistics and the philosophy of language.

It has been argued that the language-likeness (*Sprachähnlichkeit*) of music “must above all be understood as a historical phenomenon – as the result of a development, in which music had first been conjoined with language, and subsequently took on its appearance” (Dahlhaus 1988: 322). The ‘emancipation’ of instrumental music is therefore not a process in which music has become more abstract (or ‘absolute’). Instead, it has attained a particular complexity through the adoption of linguistic features.

The most obvious of those features is *prosody*. Linguistic prosody articulates syntactic structure in somewhat freely adaptable sonic shapes. Music does not *have* prosody, because sonic shape is its substance. The harmonic-metric principles of cohesion sustaining this shape can however be considered a specifically musical *syntax*, comparable to linguistic syntax in view of its function in relation to musical sentence structure.

Two other features, closely interrelated, are *phraseology* and *quotation*. By analogy with linguistic phraseology, which identifies more or less fixed lexical-syntactic patterns such as idioms, musical phraseology may study fixed harmonic-melodic formulas or schemas. The use of such schemas is a form of ‘borrowing’, in this case, from the common domain within the style. Borrowed elements may also be distinctive, identifiable as taken from some external source, or highlighted by some musical device functionally analogous to quotation marks. In such cases we speak of quotation. A distinction common in the philosophy of language, between the ‘use’ and ‘mention’ of an expression, is valuable in musical analysis, in particular if we interpret this distinction as a graded one. In this way, quotation contributes to the *semantic* dimension of music.

Pragmatically, the various aspects which contribute to the language-likeness of music cohere in the interpretation of musical form as *discourse*. What holds these features together *structurally* is the complex hierarchic organisation of music. Some of the hierarchic aspects of music and language may, at a certain level of abstraction, be described as *recursive*. This may have the advantage of reducing complexity to a basic uniformity. It may also tempt the theorist to false abstraction, resulting in theoretical constructs of dubious explanatory value. This is observed in the works of Hugo Riemann, Heinrich Schenker, and in the ‘generative theory’ of Lerdahl and Jackendoff, as well as in linguistic Minimalism.

The language-likeness of classical music has no direct implications for a supposed ‘essence’ of music, only for its potentialities. It is argued, on the contrary, that music and language are fundamentally incommensurable. This does not preclude the possibility of various kinds of overlap in cultural practice, which may have a basis in shared cognitive resources. By helping to define this overlap this study contributes to the science of music and language cognition.