

The Symbolic Characteristics of Non-Musical Factors in Western Music

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Abstract: in Music, the Non-Musical Factor Refers to the Characterization of Nature and Human Life Which is Reflected through Music Notation and Music Sound. Non-Musical Factors Are Embodied in the Temporal Structure of Music, and Are Expressed through the “Movement” Phenomenon, the Form of Music, as Well as the Sound Imitation and Affective Qualities. Non-Musical Factors Are the Indispensable Meaning and Essence of Music. without the Characterization of Life and the Historic Significance, Music Could Not Be Expressed, Explained or Understood; Its Aesthetic Value Could Not Be Realized.

1. Introduction

If the interpretation of music is “decoding”, the symbolization of non-musical factors should be “encoding”. Music is meaningful and logical. The musical notation system can record human consciousness, human intentions and specific human experience; it is the link between human and reality. Non-musical factors represent the impulse of life through symbolization.

The research on symbolic non-musical factors has a long history. In the late 1950s, a British composer and music theorist Deryck Cooke published the book, *The Language of Music*, which deals with the symbolic features of non-musical factors. But the music system is different from the language system; linguistics methods cannot effectively explain music phenomena. On the basis of Formalism in Eastern Europe and Structuralism in Western Europe, western scholars, especially American academics set up the Narrative Study in the 1980s and 1990s. Narrative researchers believed that the opposition among musical narrative elements generated an unbalanced state, which then became a dynamic source of narration. The view exactly coincides with the conventional arrangement of musical events, and overturns researchers’ understanding on the relationship between the content and form of music.

2. Organization of the Article

In writing this paper, the author is influenced by two kinds of academic thoughts.

First, from 1980s to 1990s, a group of foreign scholars wrote books, articles and entries for music dictionaries around the topic of music Narratology. With the help of social science theories such as Paul Ricoeur’s “philosophy of time”, “hermeneutics”, as well as research methods in cultural and linguistic studies, they studied the narrative ability, narrative structure and significance of music. Their academic debates were sharp and enlightening.

Second, in the early 20th century, Semiotics was conceived on the basis of Western analytical philosophy, linguistics and the logic theory. With the development of globalization and multi-cultural interaction, cross-cultural exploration appeared in the field of Semiotics. Because of its universality, effectiveness and wide applicability, Semiotics became the key to the treasure of human culture. Music is only “the symbolization of emotion”. The answer to this question still involves the issue of the symbolization of non-musical factors.

3. Main Paths of Non-Musical Factor Symbolization

3.1 Symbolization and Abstraction

Both the language of daily life and the language of literature have certain meanings. But music

“language” has no definite meaning. In fact, music is not a kind of language. Meanwhile, music is different from painting. Although music can imitate the sound of birds, and storms (this topic will be discussed in later chapters), most music is not created based on the imitation of sounds in nature or society. The non-musical factors in music become the notes through abstraction, which shortens the process of our cognition and understanding. Abstract is a general concept relative to concrete. It does not only refer to the abstract of art form, but also refer to the abstract of the content, namely super material, super reality, super space and time. Through abstraction, music provides a way for non-music factors to enter the art space, but at the same time, it makes non-music factors hard to understand, which produces the multiplicity of solution. Obviously, music is more abstract than painting, sculpture, and dance. Susan Langer said, “music is a kind of illusion created.” Without the background materials, people can’t find out the social reasons of the emotion behind the works through appreciating the sound. The slow speed, weak volume and progressive melody of the first movement of Hector Louis Berlioz’s *Fantasia Symphony* make the composition euphemistic and lingering, which is quite like the taste of love: “you cannot cut off the tangled feelings”. However, if we don’t read the text of the program, we cannot know why the beautiful love story contains sorrow feelings. Hegel wrote in *Philosophy of Fine Arts*, “sound, as an objective phenomenon, is different from the media used in plastic arts; it is completely abstract. Therefore, music is suitable to express the inner feeling without definite objects (invisible), namely the purely abstract subjectivity.”

The issue of music abstraction should not be studied as an isolated topic. Some people say that music is “the language without language”, which shows the abstract aesthetic feature of music. Music is not a language, but it is a meaning system like language. Music is autonomous in nature, but it is related to the world in essence. Music should not be isolated from the world because of the abstract nature of the musical symbol system, like the “God’s language” has nothing to do with the complex day-to-day states of human things.

The abstract nature of music has historical characteristics. Levi Strauss pointed out that, one difference between modern art and primitive art is that modern art is “more and more visualized and representational”. Anthropology has noticed “a loss or weakening of the signifying function of works” in modern art. Modern music inherits Wilhelm Richard Wagner’s “semitone harmony” as well as Achille-Claude Debussy’s “chord for colour” and “artificial mode (diatonic scale)”; it abandons the functional harmony and adopts the “new tonality”, or even abandons the tonality to create atonal music. The melody gives way to “pure sound”; the rhythm outline is abandoned or even replaced by “timbre melody”. The melody is deconstructed in the “random sequence”. Cage’s *4’ 33”* is an extreme example, since “the great sound is soundless”. Musicians do everything to abstract the music. They even no longer use the word of “symbolization”. The non-musical factors in specific music are directly revealed and become the protagonists of “music”.

3.2 Symbolization and Hint

Because of the abstraction of music meaning system, we need a connection mechanism which links the music abstraction and the experience in reality. That is the “hint” system of music. Some scholars make a distinction between symbols and hints, and express that “symbols provide people the direction of imagination. Hints refuse to specify under any circumstances; the receiver needs to understand hints by himself”. The author believes that in a broad sense, a hint is also a symbol. Although “suggestive” music overlaps with nature and reality, it can’t directly present the image or directly lay out the plot. Sound is the perceptual material of music, but the sound in music is different from the sound in reality. Music can “suggest”, indicating that music has its own meaning system. Besides the sound phenomenon, there are also performance factors. There is a certain connection between the sound movement in music and real movement. “Hint” is closely related to the music form, rather than boundless imagination. In the second act of Wilhelm Richard Wagner’s *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, before the scene of Hans Sachs’ workshop, the night falls. When the actor sings, “the gentle, plump and strong lilac sends out fragrance”, under the background of the sound of string instruments, the extremely weak sound of the horn gradually rises, conjuring up people’s sense of smell, as if they really smelled the fragrance of midsummer night! The timbre can

make the association; the strength can also cause “hints”.

The hints of music can be divided into two categories: the first is the implicit expression of space, images, concepts and emotions through symbols, which is a kind of image construction and the reflection of reality. Music reflects reality indirectly; “music works can only make listeners form a specific emotional attitude towards specific ideological content or specific phenomena of reality, and only reflect some surface factors subordinate to the content as a whole.” Music can also reflect specific objects, which is the basis of descriptive music. Examples include the storm in Gioacchino Rossini’s *Prelude to Guillaume Tell*, as well as the birdsong in Olivier Messiaen’s *Chronochromie*, *Exotic Birds* and other works. The “concrete music” in the 20th century directly introduces the sound in real life into music works, blurring the boundary between art and life.

The second category is, to use musical symbols as the intermediary or representation and imply the universal meaning through specific individual things, or even represent another “beautiful” world beyond the real world. This is a kind of symbolic thinking, which concerns about human beings, questions the origin of the world, and insights into the common relationship between people and the world. The “archetypes” of music art radiate to all the contents of human existence, opening up another living space which is different from the real world, and to a certain extent, it involves the essence of music and art. (Examples include Beethoven’s and Liszt’s questioning motivation, Schumann’s personal name and place name motivation, Johannes Brahms’ Theme by Clara and maxim motivation, as well as Shostakovich’s surname signature.) Alban Berg’s String Quartet *Lyric Suite* (later, Berger adapted three of the six movements into a string ensemble) seems to be a pure musical work dedicated to composer Zemlinsky, but in fact, it is an autobiographical work full of symbols, and a metaphor of the romantic story of Berger. In this work, the house number of Prague Hanna, the initials of the two people and the excerpts with clear meanings show the composer’s “love for symbols” (in Kaspar’s words). The external symbols reveal the internal love, life and anxiety, which are related to the universality of human existence. Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, a philosopher and the student of Berger, called this masterpiece of lyricism “a hidden opera”.

It is not by chance that “hints” and symbols appear in music. In fact, to “hint” and symbolize is the underlying logic of human’s cultural practice. “Hints” and symbols are a kind of extensive, heterogeneous, yet interrelated social and cultural practice.

3.3 The Expressiveness of Music

The debate about the expressive power of music is not focused on the contribution made by music in this artistic form, but on its ability to depict in the form of “pure” music. Usually, the theme described is not clearly expressed as sound. The sound in music is produced by the type determined by the sound maker. When people listen to Achille-Claude Debussy’s *La Mer*, there is no reason to associate with the description of the sea. People can associate with the description of the sea based on Debussy’s music, but the descriptions they may provide are not definite.

Generally speaking, in order to express the intention of creation and achieve their creative purpose, in creation, composers are willing to choose the musical language which is suitable for interpretation and acceptance. The intention expressed by the composer is represented by the reality of sound, which provides composers the possibility of “free thought”. The images expressed by the sound are not transcendental, because non-musical factors permeate in the music, in which the composer’s spiritual world is embodied. German philosopher Hegel said: “music can express all kinds of special emotions in the soul. Music can express all different levels of joys, enjoyment, humour, frivolities, wilfulness and exuberance, all different levels of anxieties, troubles, sorrows, pains and depression, as well as emotions like awe, worship and love.” Indeed, the emotions expressed by music should be impersonal and universal human emotions; music should convey the essential characteristics, rather than the phenomenon of human emotions. Friedrich von Hausegger pointed out, “the essence of music is expression, namely the expression of purified effects which are sublimated to the noblest level.” In his view, music is the manifestation of human’s inner life. The beauty of music form is only a phenomenon; expression is the essence of music.

The performance of music has been a topic of discussion. People think that the expressiveness of

music is unspeakable, and that the written language cannot fully describe the expressiveness of music. The perceptual experience is much richer than the language description; the expressiveness of music is an important question. Through our experience, music works show the truth of vitality. There should be something which must be expressed but cannot be described by language. According to Susan Langer's theory, what the works of art express are not emotions, but the concepts of emotions. But her theory destroys the basis of people's emotional response to music works and mystifies the power of art to arouse responses. Carol C. Pratt thinks that music takes on the form of feeling, because it is very similar to the form of emotion. Therefore, there are concepts like the sadness of music and the happiness of music. This theory draws on the idea of Gestalt psychology, but he fails to answer the question: "how is the expressiveness of music possible?" After questioning Carol C. Pratt, Stephen Davis did not provide the answer; he chose to further study the topic. Nelson Goodman considers the performance as a metaphorical paradigm, which is similar to Donald Ferguson and Daniel Patterman. But Stephen Davies holds that their conclusions bring more questions than they solve. Instead of explaining how music performs, they make the question more confused. In above discussions, the expressive characteristic of music is a consensus.

4. Conclusion

Music is meaningful and logical. The musical notation system can record human consciousness, human intentions and specific human experience; it is the link between human and reality. If the interpretation of music is "decoding", the symbolization of music should be "encoding". The mutual connection and unity of music form and non-musical factors beyond music form constitute the contents of music works; they are the indispensable conditions for people to appreciate and understand the art of music. Non-musical factors represent the impulse of life through symbolization. The acceptor who is familiar with the characteristics of musical form and pays attention to the law of the symbolization of non-musical factors can analyze the work in detail and understand musical images more clearly.

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