

# Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

*A refereed journal of the*



Action for Change in Music Education

Volume 12, No. 3  
December 2013

David J. Elliott  
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Electronic Article

## **Frozen Metaphors, Ideology, and the Language of Music Instruction**

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ISSN 1545-4517

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## Frozen Metaphors, Ideology, and the Language of Music Instruction



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There are some striking parallels between the critical theory concept of second nature as the product of reified ideas and some of the more radical work done in the area of metaphor theory. This discussion is an attempt to synthesize some of the ideas from these two fields of study and to explore their implications for music education. After a brief theoretical discussion, I examine a number of commonplace terms and phrases of classroom music instruction as frozen metaphors that have the potential to instill in students predetermined musical values and ontological beliefs – values and beliefs that are consequently assumed to be foundational and that may therefore become immune to scrutiny.

### Metaphor as Ideology

Much has been written about the tendency (or perhaps need) to conceptualize music in terms of metaphor. Examples include: Ruth Solie's (1980, 1982) work on the roots of organicism (music as a living organism); Scott Burnham's (1995) exploration of the heroic ideals that listeners and theorists constructed out of Beethoven's themes under the influence of German nineteenth-century idealism (music as the struggle of the individual to overcome); and Michael Spitzer's (2004) theory that musical understanding during the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic eras was underpinned by metaphors of representation (music as painting), communication (music as language), and embodiment (music as life form) respectively. These metaphors are said to have grown out of the predominant (Western European) cultural values of the time periods in question, and musical creation and reception were not only influenced by them, but also reinforced them through the somewhat circular relationships that ensued. For example, Burnham (1995) demonstrates that our apparent need to perceive music teleologically, to which Beethoven's constantly developing thematic treatments are particularly well suited, is not only rooted in the German idealism that flourished during Beethoven's active life as a composer but was strongly reinforced by systems of musical

analysis that were being developed concurrently by theorists under the influence of said idealism. Since these theorists were able to “find” in Beethoven’s music evidence to support their burgeoning theories, the MUSIC IS A LIVING ORGANISM metaphor became further reinforced (112, 120).

This tendency to conceptualize music in metaphorical terms is not surprising. Music (as opposed to sound) is an abstract social construction and we resort to metaphor in order to ground abstract concepts in the familiar world of the concrete. But the familiar is often taken for granted, and the metaphorical nature of much of our musical discourse is no exception. I argue here that critically-minded music educators should be conscious of the metaphorical origins of many musical concepts because frozen musical metaphors can easily disadvantage those musical cultures that lie outside the Western European mainstream. Such collective forgetting has been noted, to a greater or lesser degree, by those music scholars who have examined the relationship between music and metaphor. Burnham (1995), speaking of the aforementioned qualities of economy, organicism, and thematic development associated with the metaphor of music as a living being, states that they have a “controlling role as the unquestioned a priori conditions of the way we tend to construct the musical experience” (152). The present discussion is concerned with the idea that we fail to question the ways in which metaphors structure our understanding of music. Presently, I will focus specifically on how instructional language in the classroom is implicated in this. But it is first necessary to examine how metaphors can function ideologically. A brief exploration of metaphor theory’s intersection with critical theory and critical pedagogy is therefore in order.

### **Metaphors and the Myth of Literal Language**

Scholars of metaphor theory have made the argument that metaphorical aspects of language, supposedly purged from clear, literal, or scientific discourse, actually inhabit that discourse masquerading in objective form. This is simply a version of the argument that reified ideas masquerade as common sense or unassailable truths, only in this case the argument functions on a linguistic level. In other words, frozen metaphors have the potential to function ideologically. The term ideology here is employed in the neo-Marxist tradition to mean a false or illusory way of thinking that is brought about by presenting a socially generated view of the world or parts of it as naturally occurring or given (Macey 2000). The freezing of a

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metaphor can thus be likened to the process of reification, whereby an abstract idea is assumed concrete or material.<sup>1</sup> Jon Erickson (1995) gives a particularly lucid definition of reification as a process through which something becomes “habitual in perception and therefore takes on the semblance of something that has always been true” (21–22). When we forget the subjective, socially constructed origins of abstract ideas or systems, the results are conventions: sets of meanings that over time congeal into apparently objective forms that critical theorists call “second nature.” Examples of such reified forms in music education may include (but are certainly not limited to) linguistic and semiotic frameworks, (manifested in discourses of music instruction) systematic and prescriptive teaching methods, theoretical models, pitch systems, modes of analysis, common performance practices, and ways of understanding music history.

Since it mediates virtually every educational endeavor, language can be viewed as a meta-framework that houses the more specific frameworks that structure music comprehension. Thus ideology critique in music education should probably begin with language. When discussing instructional language, however, the reason for examining metaphor in relation to ideology will only become clear if one abandons the traditional view of metaphor, which maintains that metaphorical terms can simply be substituted for “literal” terms. Christopher Tilley (1999) cites a standard example in which “John is a fox” is translated into its “literal” equivalent, “John is crafty.” According to this view (and its related offshoots) metaphor is “a condensed or convoluted form of simile” and as such is an unnecessary embellishment of direct communication (11–12). This position is problematic for several reasons. First, as Tilley points out, “translation” of a metaphor into a “literal” statement is only possible in a narrow range of simple cases, such as the one just mentioned. It is simply not possible to find an appropriate “literal translation” for certain metaphors (12). For example, consider the expression “red roofs dissolve under the tongue,” found in Paul Eluard’s surrealist poem, “Head Against the Walls.” How could one conceive of a “literal translation” for such a phrase?

Second, even in cases where an appropriate substitute can be found, the “conversion” process results in at least some meaning being lost. Max Black (1993) states that “the literal comparison lacks the ambience and suggestiveness, and the imposed ‘view’ of the primary subject, upon which a metaphor’s power to illuminate depends” (31). The traditional

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substitution view of metaphor is incorrect because metaphor is *not* “a précis of a literal point-by-point comparison. A metaphor, such as Pascal’s view of man as a “thinking reed,” superimposes *select* qualities from the secondary subject to the primary – in this case, human frailty and weakness – in a particularly striking manner that “converting” the statement into a literal comparison would fail to do (31). Further, the traditional view of metaphor as a decorative substitution for literal discourse is inadequate because it cannot necessarily account for the creation of novel metaphors (Tilley 1999, 12).

### **Metaphors Can Structure our Thinking**

An alternative view has been expressed by a number of scholars and is best articulated by the linguist George Lakoff and the philosopher Mark Johnson. They argue that metaphor is not simply a literary or rhetorical device, but that it forms the basis of our conceptual system. For example, they show how the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR is not simply a phrase used to describe a similarity between arguing and war.<sup>2</sup> The metaphor actually structures, to some degree, the way we commonly understand and carry out arguments (1980, 3). The fact that we generally do *not* believe we are speaking metaphorically when we talk of defending claims, attacking weak points, employing strategies, and shooting down and demolishing arguments indicates that “our conventional ways of talking about arguments presupposes a metaphor we are hardly ever conscious of. [Thus] the metaphor is not merely in the words – it is in our very concept of argument” (5).

Tilley notes that although we generally assume literal language to be the ground against which linguistic tropes are defined, this ground is far more metaphorical than we realize.<sup>3</sup> One study, for example, revealed that 1.8 novel (recognized) and 4.08 frozen (generally unrecognized) metaphors per minute were spoken during televised presidential debates. Citing Raymond Gibbs, Tilley (1999) also reports the results of a study on televised debates in which one novel metaphor was found for every twenty five words spoken. Another study found that United States senators employed an average of one unconventional metaphor every two to three minutes of speech (13). The ubiquity of metaphor in everyday speech indicates that it is a primary and not secondary part of language. All appearances to the contrary are simply proof that many “literal” expressions are “metaphor[s] whose figurality has been forgotten” (20).

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The implications of this alternative view are far-reaching. If metaphor is not simply a literary device but assists in structuring consciousness, then there is no literality in the commonly understood sense. Lakoff and Johnson's theory in fact challenges the idea that words can ever refer precisely to objective reality. Nietzsche describes the relation between metaphors and what we understand as truth:

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors ... a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins. ("On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," quoted in Erickson 1995, 23)

Nietzsche appears to have hit upon the idea more than a century ago that frozen or dead metaphors structure consciousness by masquerading as truth. Lakoff and Johnson provide detailed evidence for this thesis, demonstrating that so-called literal statements are simply metaphors that have become so conventionalized as to be unrecognizable. The distinction between such "frozen" metaphors and less conventionalized metaphors that are employed rhetorically is thus historically and culturally contingent.

Of course, not all speech is metaphorical in the sense of mapping from one conceptual domain onto another. A dog's tail may be thought of as a flag or merely as a natural appendage (Tilley 1999, 20). Nevertheless, it would be misleading to attempt to make a clear distinction between statements and concepts that are metaphorical and those that are not "because metaphoricity is bound up with aspects of conceptual structure and the polysemy of words" (20). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) refer to the attempt to establish such an unambiguous distinction as "the myth of objectivism" (186–88). This position – which holds that metaphor is only a matter of language and can therefore at best describe, but never create, our lived reality – is itself, ironically, the product of a well-entrenched metaphor: the conduit metaphor. The idea that truthful information about the world is not constructed or mediated but rather transferred from one point to another, as in along a conduit, is a powerful underlying force in the English language. Reddy's (1993) research reveals that at least seventy percent of our language use is permeated by such phrases as, "The passage *conveys* a feeling of excitement," "That concept has been *floating around* for centuries," and "Your words are *hollow*" (177). Such (unexamined) modes of speaking "naturally" favor an objectivist stance whereby language is assumed to transport disembodied thoughts and

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meanings from one person to another. Within this paradigm one can make statements that are unconditionally true or false about the world with all discrepancies attributed to human subjectivity. The problem is that truth cannot be isolated from human understanding, which “is relative to context and to one’s own conceptual system” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 182).

To claim that we do not have access to absolute, unconditional truths about the world is *not* to claim that there is no objective reality.<sup>4</sup> We can all agree on simple statements, such as “there are four clarinet players in this room.” The concepts that come to mind upon hearing the words, however, cannot fully grasp the objects (clarinet, player, room) that those words signify. Thus concepts are always somewhat underdetermined and remain in what Northrop Frye (1988) calls the “transparent envelope” that exists between ourselves and nature (145).

### **Frozen Metaphors and the Music Classroom**

Having established a relation between ideology and metaphor, I will now discuss the importance of metaphors to the discourse of music instruction. Of particular interest are structural metaphors, which comprise one of two major categories in Lakoff and Johnson’s hierarchy, the other being orientational-ontological metaphors. These latter are designated as basic level metaphors in that they help to organize understanding in terms of spatial orientation or physical objects and substances. For example, the statements “I’m feeling down” or “My spirits rose” are manifestations of the orientational metaphor HAPPY IS UP, SAD IS DOWN. By contrast, structural metaphors are much richer and more detailed in that they allow for one specific concept to be structured in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 14). Such metaphors are of particular pedagogical interest because they necessarily highlight certain aspects of a concept while masking others. For example, LABOR IS A RESOURCE and TIME IS A RESOURCE are culturally contingent structural metaphors that highlight the value industrialized societies place on quantifying both of these concepts, while simultaneously hiding alternative (qualitative) views of labor and time shared by other cultures and some subcultures of Western society (67).

#### *The Conduit Metaphor*

One structural metaphor that pervades the language of the music classroom is the conduit metaphor, mentioned above. Reddy (1993) maintains that the conduit metaphor is actually a complex of three metaphors:

IDEAS (OR MEANINGS) ARE OBJECTS  
LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS ARE CONTAINERS  
COMMUNICATION IS SENDING

This complex, ubiquitous metaphor has its own musical equivalent, which can be revealed through a simple thought experiment in which we test for semantic pathology. Semantic pathology refers to the existence of two or more incompatible senses of a word or phrase that can be used meaningfully in the same context, such as the expression “I’m sorry,” which can easily be mistaken as an admission of fault when meant as a declaration of empathy and vice-versa.

Reddy’s (1993) test for semantic pathology involves the word “poem,” which can denote either a text (the physical arrangement of words on a page) or an assemblage of concepts and emotions that one constructs when reading a text (178). Semantic pathologies do not normally arise when we use the term poem because of our tacit agreement on the conduit metaphor, which presumes that poem<sub>1</sub> (the physical text) contains within it poem<sub>2</sub> (the concepts and emotions pertinent to the text). So long as the conduit metaphor functions, there can be only one possible poem<sub>2</sub> for any given poem<sub>1</sub> and ambiguities arising from the two different senses are irrelevant. But consider a constructivist model of communication in which the assemblage of what Reddy calls “mental and emotional materials” varies from situation to situation depending on the cultural and historical milieu and the unique repertoires that allow individual readers to “decode” a given set of instructions. In this alternative model communication is not sending but reconstructing knowledge based on signals functioning as blueprints that we exchange with one another. These blueprints are read and interpreted in different physical, cultural, and thus mental environments, so the natural state of affairs does not favor perfect reconstructions. Semantic pathology thus arises once we embrace this alternative model because it becomes crucial to distinguish between a poem<sub>1</sub> and the various poem<sub>2</sub>’s that are generated from it. Yet our normal discourse does not accommodate such distinctions through pluralization or any other means. Similar examples

can be found for “the entire class of words in English that denote signals, such as ‘word,’ ‘phrase,’ ‘essay,’ or ‘text.’” (179).

When the standard musical terminology is substituted for the literary examples, it soon becomes apparent that words denoting musical signals, such as “piece,” “work,” or “composition,” are prone to precisely the same problem. If one tests the ordinary language of music instruction for semantic pathology, it will quickly be apparent that such discourse is underpinned by a similar metaphor, which functions to reinforce the idea that musical works are self-contained entities and that musical knowledge, systems, and structures can be transferred across time and space. Just as there is no common way to discuss the poem<sub>2</sub>'s generated by a group of readers in an English classroom, there is no common way to express the idea that there are many musical work<sub>2</sub>'s, piece<sub>2</sub>'s, tune<sub>2</sub>'s, or song<sub>2</sub>'s generated by students for every work<sub>1</sub>, piece<sub>1</sub>, tune<sub>1</sub>, or song<sub>1</sub> on staff paper that they encounter. Further, (as Reddy argues with reference to the word “poem”) using an expression such as “versions of the song” merely exacerbates the problem because it implies either textual variations or the notion that there is one ideal, “correct” song that is knowable and becomes altered slightly in performance by choice or necessity. It seems that our normal way of speaking about music is likely to reinforce a Platonic notion of musical elements and systems as immutable and eternal, precisely the ahistorical perspective that critical educators should resist.

To fathom the extent to which musical language is permeated by this metaphor, consider an argument by the philosopher Peter Kivy who, in defending a Platonic account of music, falls prey to the assumption that musical elements are static—an assumption that seems deeply embedded in the language commonly available to describe music. Kivy's argument holds that “logical space,” or the ideal realm, can accommodate an indescribably large number of possible sonic elements from which composers might choose. If this is the case, and musical choices pre-exist composers' knowledge of them, then “all possible combinations of those elements will also pre-exist perception of them” (Kivy 1983, quoted in Cox 1985, 370). As René Cox notes, the problem with Kivy's argument is that it does not account for “the dynamic nature of musical elements, relationships, and systems, all of which take on new meaning in different historical and cultural contexts” (370).

Indeed, Kivy's language elsewhere indicates that he assumes musical structures *contain* musical content. A self-described musical cognitivist, Kivy (1994) is committed to

the position that happiness and sadness are “expressive propert[ies] of the music which the listener recognizes *in it*” (149; emphasis added). In trying to dissociate the notions of emotional arousal and the emotional qualities of music *itself*, he states, “There is a great deal of music that *possesses* all sorts of expressive properties, but is not moving at all” (159; emphasis added). These statements are examples of the conduit metaphor functioning in musical discourse. Much like the word “poem” is thought of as a container of thoughts and ideas, in our derivative metaphor the word “music” connotes a container of sonic content, which travels along a conduit of sound waves from person to person. Absent from this metaphor is the idea that we each generate our own musical meaning, in effect a different music<sub>2</sub> for every listening or exposure—in the case of score reading—to music<sub>1</sub> (the differences generated would of course not be so great as to overshadow the core set of attributes that would account for sameness, particularly within a given time period or culture). The ‘music as conduit’ metaphor silently reinforces a static and reproductive view of music at the expense of a dynamic, albeit less stable, view. Given that this metaphor influences such scholarly discourse as Kivy’s, it is likely pervasive in the discourse of the average music educator, particularly since there seems to be no easy way around the pluralization problem just mentioned.

The most obvious manifestation of the view that music travels along a conduit is a common tendency to focus on performance as the conveyance of a work’s meaning rather than to consider the context of its creation or reception as sites for constructing new meanings. If we assume that musical meaning is essentially embodied in its transmission, then a performer either conveys that meaning faithfully or, through choice or necessity, fails to do so. This assumption appears to be the basis for modern musical authenticity movements, which strive to reconstruct “authentic” performances of earlier music.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as musicologist Gary Tomlinson (1988) observes, “the most profound and authentic meanings of music will be found not in musical works themselves ...” (135). Authentic historical meanings, in this view, are multiple meanings derived from a concerted effort at interpreting a complex web of cultural values that would have been meaningful to the original creators and/or audience of the musical work in question. Notably, Tomlinson emphasizes his use of the plural “meanings” because he refutes the music as conduit metaphor in favor of “a

constructive act of historical cultural interpretation,” which is incongruent with the assumption that there is a single authentic meaning for a work (125).

The belief in one authentic meaning that can somehow be transferred from composer to modern audience by way of a “correct” or definitive performance necessarily promotes a philosophy of reproductive music making. But beyond that, it fails to emphasize the importance of understanding the ideological context in which a musical work is created. Implied is a separation of “purely musical” issues from matters relating to broader contextual understanding and this, one can reasonably assume, promotes a less integrated pedagogy. More importantly, the conduit assumption adversely affects our view of music history. To treat musical meaning as disembodied is to obscure any understanding of the dialectical relation between music’s formal properties and its reception contexts. Music history is the history of style development that arises from ongoing tension between the old and the new. Once subjective content (a novel musical idea) becomes formalized through repetition, over time it begins to function as a device. Hence it takes on an objective character through our collective understanding of it as a formal property and thereby loses its individuality. The foreground becomes part of the background, so to speak, as particular, subjective musical statements eventually become crystallized and transformed into the objective parameters of new and ever-shifting style categories – a process Adorno referred to as sedimentation (2006, 37). The most cursory examination of musical sounds considered harsh or dissonant during the classical period reveals that by the Romantic era they had become common if not overused devices. This demonstrates the importance of socio-historical reception to the meaning instilled upon various musical structures. Indeed, the fluid, culturally contingent concept of dissonance is itself sufficient to demonstrate that musical meaning cannot exist in isolation from its reception context. Yet the idea of sedimentation, of a cyclical relation between the new and the traditional, is lost in the conduit metaphor, since formal musical elements must be conceived as “given” if they are presumed to be contained within musical works.

### *The Visual Metaphor: SEEING IS KNOWING*

Even if one disagrees with the aforementioned explanation of musical meaning, the problem with frozen metaphors is that they do not allow alternative views to get out of the starting

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gate, so to speak. And because frozen metaphors require time to take hold in our collective consciousness it stands to reason that their use and dissemination reinforces long-standing, or conservative conceptualizations over newer or less orthodox views. An excellent example of this is found in the commonplace structural metaphor SEEING IS KNOWING. Although Lakoff and Johnson devote a great deal of discussion to this particular metaphor, the Jesuit scholar Walter Ong (1977) had previously written about the extent to which it had permeated the collective mindset of modern society. Like Reddy, Ong has assembled a list of terms that reflects the influence of this metaphor on our thought processes since the advent of writing and the consequent shift from a primarily auditory to a primarily visual culture (134).<sup>6</sup> Ong's list includes: insight, speculation, intellectual vision, glimmering of, cast light on, elucidate, view, show, clear/clarity, make out, observe, exposition, discern, chart, plan, table, list, and field of knowledge. He also points out that many more words associated with the intellect, such as "idea" and "evident," have hidden origins in the verb "to see" (*eidōs* and *videre* from the Greek and Latin, respectively) (1977, 133). As western civilization shifted to a visual culture, there came a simultaneous increase in abstract thinking, and modern technological civilization consequently developed the view that knowing was analogous to seeing.

The need to formalize serves both positive and negative ends, but the metaphor SEEING IS KNOWING emphasizes only the positive aspect of formalizing, the importance of abstraction to knowledge, while downplaying what critical theorists would consider its dangerous, or reifying, tendencies. The crucial factor associating vision with objectivity is distance, a quality associated with sight much more so than with hearing. Ong (1977) notes that the senses can be arranged from left to right as shown:

Touch — taste — smell — hearing — sight

As one moves to the right, there is greater physical distance from objects, and increasing abstraction and formalization. To the left, the sense organs become closer to the source of stimulus and there is a tendency toward concreteness (136). Because vision functions optimally when light reflects off surfaces, it is a sense associated with exteriority. Consequently, the metaphor SEEING IS KNOWING deprives knowledge of its sense of interiority, a quality associated with subjectivity, which therefore becomes excluded.

The SEEING IS KNOWING metaphor has obvious implications for the music classroom (i.e., SEEING [MUSIC] IS KNOWING [MUSIC]). It affects the formation of

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attitudes and values, as evidenced by the supremacy of notation in music education. As Christopher Small (1996) remarks, our use of the notation system indicates that it has shifted far away from its original purpose, that of a mnemonic device. Unlike other cultures also possessing notation systems, westerners often think of the written score as being *the* music, as it tends to guide every aspect of our attempts to conjure the “correct” sounds to reproduce it. Small writes, “Only in western music has the written score become the medium through which the act of composition takes place, and this long *before* the actual sounds are heard” (30). The ubiquity of printed music in the classroom at the expense of music that is improvised or known only aurally is so well acknowledged as to require no further documentation. The more interesting question is: how many educators are aware of or take the time to explain the mnemonic origins of sheet music? How often is music literacy framed as an important memory aid for the performance of complex music and not just an end unto itself? Even such commonplace directives as “Look at the music!” have the potential to instill the notion that the written score is more real than the music it is intended to assist in recollecting and/or (re)creating.

Small (1996) points out that the highly developed nature of our notation system has made it possible to preserve a canon of works, perpetuating the ‘composer as genius’ notion and allowing us to view many past compositions as “apparently permanent features of the musical landscape” (31). Beyond this, the reification of notation not only renders a false sense of permanence to works but promotes a false sense of reality as well. This is because it is incapable of capturing all the subtle nuances of the music it represents in abstract form, such as the microtonal pitch manipulations of a blues artist, or the standard performance customs of common practice music that composers were well aware of, and thus did not generally indicate on a score. Ample evidence of the latter is supplied by Clive Brown’s study of performance practices from 1750-1900. Brown (1999) shows that composers as late as the nineteenth century often failed to include on the printed page expressive or technical markings, such as bowings, articulation markings, or even the specific rhythms that were intended for a given style. Perhaps even more surprising by today’s standards is the fact that composers would not have expected such markings to be followed explicitly when they were included (182).<sup>7</sup> Instead, performers were expected to use contextual cues in addition to the score for guidance in execution, as well as to “see beyond the literal meaning of the

composer's text" (416). Unfortunately, the "seeing is believing" myth that is generated from the visual metaphor works against this view of music by glossing over some crucial (non-visually represented) details of music while enshrining what is seen by implying a sense of immutability.

To reiterate, as in the case of the conduit metaphor I am not arguing here that the case against the *idea* of equating visual musical symbols with musical knowledge is necessarily "airtight" or that there are no musical contexts in which one might argue for its appropriateness. My point, rather, is that the *Seeing is knowing* metaphor, because it is so widespread and so tacitly accepted as a normal part of instructional language, has the potential to shape students' concepts of music in such a way that there may be no reason to consider competing views. Structural metaphors are derived from widely accepted associations and long-held beliefs, therefore they have the potential to portray generally accepted yet socially construed meanings as *a priori* knowledge.

#### *The Organicist Metaphor: MUSIC IS A LIVING ORGANISM*

No discussion of the effects of metaphor on musical thinking and teaching would be complete without addressing a common powerful metaphor that we use to structure the concept of music itself: the organicist metaphor, MUSIC IS A LIVING ORGANISM [THAT EVOLVES]. As mentioned already, Burnham argues that this metaphor, specific to the appreciation and study of music, has become effectively frozen in our collective consciousness owing largely to the influence of nineteenth-century theorists whose analytical tools prevailed throughout the twentieth century. In 1980, fifteen years before the publication of Burnham's book, Ruth Solie undertook a study of the roots of organicism in music analysis, focusing on the theorists Schenker and Reti. Speaking of Schenker, she writes that his major contribution to this movement was to craft a means of understanding a musical composition as a whole which was, as in Gestalt psychology, considered greater than the sum of its parts. Solie (1980) notes that

unlike the Gestaltists, however, Schenker predicated his notion of totality not upon perceptual mechanisms in the observer, but upon the work of art itself. Wholeness stems from a central generative force to which everything else is subordinate. It is at this juncture that the reliance of Schenker's holistic aesthetic upon traditional concepts of organicism is most clear: the generative force which brings forth the composition ... is music's origin in nature, in the major triad ...

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as found in the overtone series. (151)

The idea of the Western tonal system having a natural basis was accepted and/or promoted by many notable theorists and composers; for example, it was a cornerstone of Paul Hindemith's theory of music. The major difference between conceiving of music as simply natural and conceiving of it as a living organism, however, is that living organisms evolve. Thus along with the organicist metaphor, the idea of a developmental history of music took root in the nineteenth century, fuelled by the writings of theorists such as Herbert Spencer, who applied Darwin's concept of biological progression to the social world (Solie 1982, 298). Solie notes that in 1878 Spencer even included an essay on music in his work entitled, *Illustrations of Universal Progress* (298).

Ironically, Solie (1982) notes that evolutionary theory as popularly understood in the nineteenth century was "in some ways better suited to the metaphoric uses of cultural history than to biology itself" (300). That an autonomous life force subject to a set of internal laws that oversee its growth is somehow present in a composition is a notion particularly associated with the nineteenth century. Rose Subotnik (1987) has claimed that such thinking was symptomatic of society's need to view the musical work as a "self-evident" structure, the result of art's movement away from functionality (largely owing to Kant's idea of a disinterested aesthetic) as well as "disintegrating artistic and moral consensus" (364). Even today, the nineteenth century repertory is often considered as a large musical ecosystem in which the "survival of the fittest" applies insofar as "the absence of a work from that repertory is [interpreted] as a sign of compositional weakness" (372).

The shift from the idea of *a* musical work as evolving to MUSIC as evolving was quite a natural one, given the popularity of Darwinian ideas. One of the consequences of applying the evolutionary metaphor to music as a whole was the privileging of polyphony over monophony, or the idea that melody is inferior to harmony because it is incapable of "evolving" to a similarly complex state. Solie (1982) notes that, in the world of music analysis, "because melody appears chronologically at the 'undeveloped' end of this continuum, it is sometimes prejudiced from the start" (297). Further, the privileging of complex harmony over monody that results from basing musical understanding on an evolutionary metaphor has the built-in advantage of ensuring that Western art music can be shown to have evolved the most in any comparative study (307).

Although musical Eurocentrism is by now a widely recognized issue, this last point is particularly relevant to music education practice because of the impact that a student's well-formed mental construct of an organic-evolutionary model might have on her reception of multicultural or popular music. Even multicultural music pedagogy that avoids comparative approaches in favor of conveying the message that all musical values are equally valid in their own contexts will not be immune from inferences about the relative value of musics of varying complexity unless the frameworks through which such music is initially understood are interrogated and problematized.

This problem is highlighted in Lucy Green's (2003) research on the relatively recent implementation of popular music into the British national curriculum. Green critiques the ideological way in which such music has been presented, noting that the reified frameworks through which popular music is received guarantee that it will be evaluated according to the tacitly accepted criteria of Western European art music, including complexity and development, which derive from an organicist view (13). The argument here is that frozen metaphors likely play a key role in the tacit acceptance of such criteria. Granted, steps have been taken to redress the traditional evolutionary view of music history and tonal development by amending recent editions of many college textbooks. Nevertheless, simple discussions of musical development or thematic unity at the secondary level may serve to freeze the organic-evolutionary metaphor in place early on in one's formal music education.

To demonstrate how the organicist metaphor functions tacitly, I offer the simple example of instructional discourse on the subject of improvisation. Generally conceived as spontaneous composition, much improvisation pedagogy has the potential to implant or strengthen the idea that teleological ways of understanding music are natural or correct. This tendency often manifests itself through criteria that are applied to determine "good," "logical," "coherent," "unified," or "meaningful" improvisations. For example, Tomassetti (2003) advises teaching beginning blues improvisation by emphasizing, among other things, the ability to "end each solo with a logical musical statement that comes to rest on the tonic note." Student solos should eventually acquire "definite dramatic shapes with cohesive musical endings," a sign of "a natural and mature flow of musical energy." Thematic development is characterized as the key attribute of improvisation (19–20). Similarly, Azzara (1999) lists motivic development as one of the major criteria for evaluating student

improvisations (23), and Hinz (1995) explains that improvisation involves “the compositional elements, such as rhythm and thematic development, that unify a piece” (36).

Aside from the organicist metaphor, which makes its presence known whenever a musical discussion turns to development (read: if well constructed, the solo should appear to the listener as having self-directed development) or unity, these authors’ suggestions for improvisation pedagogy highlight the presence of another important musical metaphor: MUSIC IS LANGUAGE. Instructions for students to form “question phrases” and “answer phrases” (Tomassesti 2003, 20) or to work toward “logical musical statements” are examples of this alternative metaphor, the origins of which Spitzer locates in the classical period (see above). Note that none of these authors’ implications or comments is incorrect or misleading when functioning strictly within the set of aesthetic values that have come to be associated with western European art music and, by extension, with jazz and many other improvisational genres. Such attributes as motivic development, and “logical” phrase endings have become core attributes of most music we listen to precisely because we have come to presume that those ways of hearing music are appropriate and valuable. Pedagogical methods for teaching fluency in particular styles of performance do not generally deal with the larger question of why we value specific attributes associated with those styles and what other possibilities we may be overlooking in the process of naturalizing those attributes through our discourse. However, if we want to break the hold of western aesthetic criteria on the collective consciousness of our students and dissuade them from applying such criteria to all music, then we need to think of possible starting points for just such an examination.

### **Metonym and Synecdoche**

Although up to this point the term metaphor has been used loosely to refer to figurative linguistic devices in general, it should be properly distinguished from two closely related terms, metonym and synecdoche. A metonym is a figure of speech in which the word that denotes an attribute or feature of some entity is used in place of the word that denotes the entity itself, such as the expression “a hired gun,” which refers to the user of the gun. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe the normal function of metonym as referential, which distinguishes it from metaphor, whose primary function is understanding (36). Yet metonyms do more than simply reference. This is because, as in the case of structural metaphors, the

word substitution highlights specific aspects of someone or something while downplaying other aspects, and this largely goes unnoticed (37). Thus metonymy like metaphor, structures our thoughts and attitudes and not simply our language. For example, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain how the PRODUCER FOR PRODUCT metonym often shapes our concept of art:

When we think of a Picasso, we are not just thinking of a work of art alone, in and of itself. We think of it in terms of its relation to the artist, that is, his conception of art, his technique, his role in art history, etc. We act with reverence toward a Picasso, even a sketch he made as a teen-ager, because of its relation to the artist. (39)

Of course, the same can be said of music. We often approach with reverence *any* Mozart or Beethoven composition because of what we know about the composer's entire oeuvre, as well as his role in the development of music history. And this may influence our attitude toward everything from analyzing said music to programming it in a school concert.

Finally, the table below illustrates some common examples of synecdoche that are prevalent in educational texts and speech. Considered a special case of metonymy, synecdoche uses a part of something or someone to substitute for the whole, such as the expression "We don't hire longhairs." Often when music educators use general phrases with simple, positive adjectives to describe ideal skills or performance values, they are in actuality referring to a context-specific set of musical ideals – usually those associated with Western art music – that are merely a sub-group of a much larger pool of possible musical ideals. When they fail to identify Western art music values as such, educators effectively universalize them by allowing them to stand for all musical ideals, thus many commonplace terms and phrases are in fact examples of frozen synecdoche that may function ideologically.

*Part for Whole Substitutions with Ideological Implications*

General written or spoken phrase	↔	Specific unwritten or unspoken ideal being substituted for a universal ideal
“good or characteristic sound”	↔	sound that is characteristic of Western art music

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“proper technique”	↔	technique that is appropriate to the context of Western art music
“aural skills”	↔	aural skills associated with identifying the formal structures of Western art music, often in isolation from any real musical context and almost invariably sounded on one instrument – the piano.

For example, when music educators refer to “good tone quality” (particularly in the context of traditional band, choir, or orchestra settings) they are almost always referring to the full, resonant sounds of *bel canto* style singing, or the rich, dark, full sound of the orchestral brass section, to name but two examples. These are the sounds most favored in Western art music. There are obviously many situations, however, in which a gravelly vocal tone or a strained, bright, edgy brass sound is preferable, such as in traditional Blues singing or mariachi trumpet playing. And in the realm of traditional Irish music, fiddlers who adopt (or fail to lose) the classical habit of playing with vibrato in order to attain a more polished tone have long been criticized for performing in a style that is alien to the practice (McCullough 1977, 91).<sup>8</sup> Even within the context of Western European art music, the homogeneous sound of international symphony orchestras is a relatively recent occurrence, reflective of the blandness of globalization rather than any transcendent musical values. For example, critic Jaime Weinman (2006) comments favorably that the sound of the Budapest Festival Orchestra, which represents an exception to homogeneity, reminds one of the time when “national and regional characteristics ... used to define the way musicians played.” Weinman’s remarks remind us that the notions of “standard” tone and “acceptable” stylistic interpretation are quite recent, even in the orchestral world, but this can be easily forgotten when the synecdoche “good sound” is tossed around as often as is the case currently. Instead, it should always be explained to students that there is no such universal attribute as “good sound,” but that sound is only good relative to some context-specific purpose.

Although many proponents of classical training may grant that sound quality is relative to context, it is often argued that “proper” technique is not. Classical training enables the most efficient use of the body to achieve technical mastery over the voice or instrument regardless of context, or so the argument goes. Yet in jazz performance, instrumentalists

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“learn alternate fingerings or valve and key combinations that, however unconventional by the norms of classical music performance practice, enable improvisers to execute intricate jazz figures that are otherwise awkward or impossible to perform” (Berliner 1994, 107). Similarly, in traditional folk fiddling, we have known for some time that “unorthodox” holding positions and techniques are particularly well suited to the folk repertoire and playing style. Burman-Hall (1975) was one of the first scholars to comment on this when she noted more than three decades ago that the more “comfortable” positioning of the instrument relative to the body found in southern American folk performance results in the lack of vibrato so characteristic of that style. Additionally, the “shortened” bow grasp, “about a third of the way up from the frog ... facilitates the short, vigorous strokes, more vertical than horizontal” that are also more conducive to folk music. The fact that most fiddle tunes are in the keys of G, D, or A is a direct result of the predominance of first position playing that arises from the “unorthodox” holding position (48). Thus lack of classical technique (which may better facilitate performing in C#, for example) is *not* a limitation when performing folk music repertoire – which has evolved out of folk music techniques – on the same instrument.

### **Practical Implications**

When considering strategies to combat the ideological effects of frozen metaphors in the music classroom, one must bear in mind that a frozen metaphor, as stated earlier, is simply the literary equivalent of a reified concept, and the total nullification or avoidance of reification cannot be a realistic goal of ideology critique in music education (or any field, for that matter). In terms of a figure/ground analogy, the central goal of critical theory is to show that the ground against which we perceive figures is not as stable as we generally assume it to be. But, and this is a crucial point, figures always require some sort of ground against which they can be perceived; thus the objectification process which leads to reification must be accepted as an inevitable function of consciousness (Erickson, 1995, 203).

The inevitability of reification means is that it is insufficient to draw attention to a *particular* idea or system that has been objectified in our consciousness, and then act as though by replacing it we have somehow transcended the problem. The very act of teaching necessarily involves the constant objectification of abstract concepts in order to ground them in the everyday world of the concrete, thus the risk of forgetting the socially constructed

origins of many of these concepts is never far behind (the reification of a replacement system is known in the critical theory literature as “re-mythologizing”). Whenever attempts have been made to dispel illusion or ideology, the result is never unmediated access to the truth but, rather, an emphasis on the medium that filters and shapes our understanding, as Derrida’s and Foucault’s theories demonstrate with regard to the importance of language. What this means in practical terms is that the most reasonable response to the frozen metaphor problem is for the critically minded music educator to maintain a continuous vigilance over his or her speech patterns and, through his or her teaching, to draw the student’s attention to the phenomenon as an ongoing and, to some extent, inevitable process. Rather than search for some mythical neutral language with which to describe music and give classroom directions, music teachers would do well to consider interrogating their language for frozen metaphors and sharing the results of those interrogations with their students.

Analyzing one’s own written and spoken communication for potential ideological influences means engaging in a form of critical discourse analysis. Developed by Fairclough and others, this is a process that focuses on “naturalized” forms of discourse (such as music instruction) in order to reveal ideological representations such as, among others, the metaphorical speech patterns discussed here (Fairclough 1995). One obvious means of accomplishing this is through audio recording or videotaping. Already employed extensively in student teaching and for musical diagnostics, recording could certainly be used by experienced music teachers to reveal the extent of their use of metaphorical speech and to then consider how this may be formulating students’ assumptions about music(s). One possible outcome of this self assessment is the conscious modification of one’s instructional language. For example, the phrases “proper technique” and “good sound,” can easily be followed by the phrase, “in terms of western art music criteria.” Or these phrases can simply be modified by caveats explaining their context-sensitive nature. Taking things further, critically minded music educators can explain to students the extent to which such seemingly harmless terms have the potential to predetermine conceptions about musical values. Music history can and should be taught as a series of stages in which societies have collectively embraced powerful metaphors that have helped to structure their understanding of music relative to their particular times and places. Indeed, we should explain to students that these metaphors are so powerful that to this day they lead to our assumption that there is nothing

unnatural about statements such as, “This *wants* to resolve in that direction,” or “I don’t have *the music* with me today.”

Being aware of one’s own use of frozen metaphors and calling attention to their use in general becomes most crucial when dealing with non-western and popular musics. In terms of the improvisation example mentioned above, if the context is jazz (an ill-defined meta-genre and, as such, arguably at least a partial descendent of the western European musical tradition) then there is not necessarily anything wrong with assuming that criteria shaped by the organicist metaphor should guide instruction. There are situations, however, in which the musical context for improvisation may have non-western roots (or may predate or postdate so-called common practice music). If one is improvising on Chinese instruments or using medieval modes, for example, how can it be appropriate to insist on criteria such as “logical closure” or “development” without any further explanation? We have an obligation to help students to understand that these criteria are part of the western tradition; in the absence of that tradition, they do not “naturally” make musical construction any better or worse.

One strategy for raising awareness is to have discussions with students about the criteria by which we generally judge the quality of composed and improvised music(s). Engaging students in dialogues that interrogate the assumed universality of teleological listening, “logical closure,” “musical syntax” etc. would be one way to reveal the power of common metaphors such as MUSIC IS A LIVING ORGANISM and MUSIC IS LANGUAGE. Another possible strategy is engaging students in an activity that Michael Spitzer (2004) refers to as “hearing as.” This approach involves introducing students to musical sounds and, through verbal direction, inviting them to hear the sounds in various ways. This could involve something as simple as Spitzer’s example of two notes, an F descending to an E, which can be heard in terms of an imaginary F harmony or an imaginary C harmony, depending on one’s mental orientation. Students might be asked to imagine hearing the familiar “Amen” chord progression surrounding the two notes, in one instance, and to imagine the sound of an F Major chord juxtaposed against the beginning of a descending F scale on another listening (7). Of course, there are many other possible ways of hearing the two notes. And the exercise need not focus solely on tiny isolated structures such as two note phrases. The point of employing abstract structures is to demonstrate how easily one can superimpose different socially conditioned listening responses onto them, largely as a

result of metaphors such as MUSIC IS A LIVING ORGANISM, or MUSIC IS A LANGUAGE. The very fact that the musical meaning of an abstract sound is conditioned by context should help to demonstrate that the visual metaphor, SEEING [MUSIC] IS KNOWING [MUSIC], is extremely misleading.

In order to raise awareness of this situation it is not necessary to question constantly the assumptions underlying every word, description, or direction spoken in a music classroom or rehearsal hall, thus embarking on a distracting and potentially endless digression. Nevertheless, students should be made aware of the extent to which frozen metaphors, working through commonplace instructional language in the classroom or the textbook, can predetermine musical values. Additionally, music educators could stand to reflect on their instructional language as well as the assumptions that undergird their preferred instructional materials in order to reveal their own hidden prejudices. In sum, frozen musical metaphors cause musical values that merit open discussion to appear immutable, or at the very least fully agreed-upon, and this is a situation that must be challenged if we are to foster critical thinking and global awareness in today's music students.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 5<sup>th</sup> Ed., defines reify as: “to convert (a concept, etc.) mentally into a thing.”

<sup>2</sup> I have followed Lakoff and Johnson’s custom of capitalizing metaphors because it is an effective way to emphasize their role in structuring our thoughts.

<sup>3</sup> Although trope is defined in general terms as “a figurative or metaphorical use of a word or expression” (*Oxford Concise Dictionary*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed.), theories of rhetoric tend to distinguish between tropes and figures based on the supposed requirement that an intellectual effort is required to appreciate the former. However, this distinction creates a paradox, since it is generally accepted that such expressions “are spontaneously used by those who have no training in the art of persuasion.” Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, s.vv. “rhetoric,” “trope.”

<sup>4</sup> I am speaking here of the form of objective reality that is necessary for normal communication to take place. The philosopher John Searle calls this “external” or “publicly accessible” reality. As Searle demonstrates, external reality is a “purely formal constraint [that] does not say how things are but only that there is a way that they are that is independent of our representations.” In distinguishing between a “brute reality” and our representations of it, Searle argues that the correspondence theory of truth is “trivially true,” but that it does not follow that facts are “complex kinds of material objects” nor that there is any “necessary isomorphism between the syntactical structure of true statements and the structure of facts” (Searle, 1995, pp. 188, 213-214). Using Searle’s terminology, one could say that ideology functions by characterizing particular, constructed representations of brute reality as external reality itself.

<sup>5</sup> I say “earlier” because Robert P. Morgan, writing in 1988, noted that “the authenticity movement [was] in the process of appropriating the music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven,” and had extended into the Romantic period as far as Brahms piano music of the late nineteenth century. The phrase “early music” does not generally denote music of such late time periods (Morgan 1988, 77).

<sup>6</sup> In their later work, Lakoff and Johnson write that “the Knowing is Seeing metaphor is so firmly rooted in the role of vision in human knowing and is so central to our conception of knowledge that we are seldom aware of the way it works powerfully to structure our sense of what it is to know something” (1999, 394).

<sup>7</sup> Specific examples include: the absence of legato or staccato markings did not necessarily mean an intended note length of intermediary value (Brown 1999, 195-199); the fermata could generate a number of different meanings (588); dotted rhythms were not necessarily intended to be performed mathematically accurately when scored against triplet rhythms (614-621); and the amount of sustain added to dotted figures also varied according to musical context and circumstances (621-626).

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, this yearning for authenticity within a practice that constantly evolves has been described by some, such as Harry White (1984, 3) as “narrow purism.” This attitude may or may not be on the decline. But that is ultimately beside the point. Whether the accommodation of local traditional Irish performing ideals to the ideals of classical, Rock, or various other musics is perceived as a threat to cultural values or an inevitable fact of musical evolution and globalization, a pluralism of performance ideals must exist in order for two or more established styles to affect one another in the first place.

### **About the Author**

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