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Reimer on Musical Meaning

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Bennett Reimer's new book contains a chapter on musical meaning, a chapter that attempts to clarify that concept by contrasting musical meanings with linguistic ones. It is my view that Reimer's argument rests on an inadequate conception of language and that, as a result, his efforts to illuminate the nature of musical meanings are not just unsuccessful but misleading.

Reimer starts his discussion of musical meaning by claiming that there is a necessary yet frustrating gap between language meanings and musical meanings (134). This notion of a gap, and of its extent, is based on a particular conception of language and linguistic meaning with which I will take issue in this essay. Language is, according to Reimer, communication where the person communicating selects a particular message to be transmitted. "The message is then encoded into a signal… that transmit[s] the message to someone. The receiver then changes the signal, or 'decodes' the signal back into the message . . ." (136). Accordingly, "the communicator must begin with a clear idea of what is to be transmitted; she must translate the message into signals that exactly represent her message; and the signals must be decoded in just the right way by the receiver" (136). After describing this view Reimer declares that nothing about this applies to the processes of musical creation and response (137). The conclusion may be warranted, but not for the reasons Reimer advances: the fact is, few contemporary thinkers would accept his assertion that processes like the ones he describes apply to language in the first place.

If we consult the Blackwell *Companion to the Philosophy of Language* we find the following: "There is widespread agreement that Wittgenstein advances… considerations that are quite destructive of certain conceptions of meaning, understanding and rule-following into which we may easily slide when we attempt a general philosophical account of them: that meaning something by a certain

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expression is a special act or state of mind, accompanying or lying behind writing or speaking; that understanding an expression consists in supplying or adopting an interpretation for it; that following a rule – a rule for the use of a word, say – is a matter of traveling along rails which are already laid down and determine its application in new cases, and so on" (Hale 1999, 369).

What Hale is referring to here is Wittgenstein's notion of the language-game. The basic principle of this approach is the following: *meaning is use*. To understand the meaning of a linguistic expression is to understand how to use it. To use John Dewey's example: a child understands the meaning of the word 'hat' if it understands that it can get a hat by saying "hat" to somebody. Linguistic expressions get their meaning when they are used in some practical context.

Wittgenstein's is not the only approach to linguistics; but it is sufficiently influential that few contemporary thinkers would be comfortable ignoring it entirely. The account of language Reimer puts forward, on the other hand, is one that almost no one takes seriously today. In fact, I would say that the premises on which it is based are simply false, and that, as Reimer himself asserts in another context, "if the argument is based on a false premise it cannot do anyone any good" (148). An inadequate conception of linguistic meaning is not of much help in trying to explain the nature of musical meanings. The opposition between language and music as construed by Reimer is ill founded from the viewpoint of linguistics. But this is not the only problem.

Reimer also opposes music and language by appealing to the distinction between non-linguistic expression and linguistic articulation (between non-discursive and propositional meaning). Musical meaning is ineffable but it "deserves to be called meaning, for it is what the musical object says" writes Reimer (134) quoting Mikel Dufrenne. Because musical meaning cannot be translated into language it is, from the perspective of language, deeply mysterious. However, this difference between expression and linguistic articulation is not unique to music, nor is it even rare. Louis Armstrong sings in one of his songs: "your eyes are always saying the things you never say…." This can be said to be a mystery if one is in a romantic mood, but on the other hand love is a most natural if not the most natural thing in life. There are lots

of things that cannot be accurately described in language, and it does not really tell us much about musical meaning to characterize it as being one of these things.

What else does Reimer say about this issue? He maintains that musical interaction is a kind of communication, but a communication not restricted to or governed by concepts in the narrow conventional sense. Music is conceptual, but not in the standard sense of consisting strictly of concepts. Instead, Reimer maintains, perceptual structuring is conceptual; and if this can be admitted, then musical experience is conceptual. However, this view of conceptuality is not rare. Actually it is a kind of standard conception of conceptuality in Neo-Kantian philosophical theories, such as Hilary Putnam's internal realism (Putnam 1981).

Reimer writes that the standard definition of a 'concept' – in contrast to his own definition, which is, as a matter of fact, a standard Neo-Kantian one – is the "long-established and persistently influential view [in which] concepts are considered to be those thoughts, ideas, and conceptions that language-systems mediate" (142). This is a view that a layman's introspection tends to support, and even in modern philosophy the doctrine that there are ideas (thoughts and so on) in individual minds became popular after René Descartes. However, John Locke and George Berkeley both advanced powerful criticisms of the notion that ideas travel from head to head by means of words.

Locke maintained that words are sensible marks of ideas, but "words, in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but *the ideas in the mind of him that uses them*" (Locke 1959, 9, italics in the original). That being the case, the word that some individual chooses to use has no direct or necessary connection either to other people's ideas or to real things. The connection was to be explained by his new epistemology.

Berkeley held that in "reading and discoursing" names are "for the most part used as letters are in *algebra*, in which though a particular quantity be marked by each letter, yet to proceed right it is not requisite that in every step each letter suggest to your thoughts, that particular quantity it was appointed to stand for" (Berkeley 1949, 37). One can write a+b and everyone understands that this is addition. Someone may be thinking 1+2 and the other one 3+4, but we do not know exactly what numbers

people think. In other words, when I say "table" I have some kind of mental image in my mind but I do not know exactly what kind of mental images other people connect to the same word. Luckily I do not need to know. Rational conversation does not require that. Reimer's view of linguistic communication as exact coding, transmitting, and decoding is a kind of telegraph-conception of language that is untenable, and does not withstand even the criticisms of Locke and Berkeley.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that Reimer endorses two definitions (143), both drawn from *Philosophy of Education* (Dunkel, 1970): definitions that are unfortunately at odds with each other. One of these equates signs with thoughts or ideas. The other defines concepts as signs which are largely linguistic and conventional: a linguistic sign points to a commonality in events and permits the concept user to make relatively stable responses to those varied events. Then comes the important part of this definition: signs are vehicles for concepts. From this it follows that concepts consist in a triadic relationship involving (1) a vehicle, (2) a common feature, and (3) a stable response. But do ways of responding to varied events in a relatively stable manner travel with words? The answer is no. When I say something, someone may hear the words, but my stable ways of responding and my ideas stay with me. It is possible to define a concept as Reimer above, then, but from this definition it does not follow that ideas or thoughts travel with words (or are coded and decoded).

The problem seems to be that Reimer (142) defines a concept as a thought or idea, and on the next page he quotes a definition which says that a concept is a sign which points to events and permits stable responses: a concept consists in a triadic relation. Tensions like these do not make a very persuasive case for Reimer's view of linguistic communication. In fact, the account he advances seems to be drawn from ordinary language rather than from philosophy. People may often say that they "exchange ideas" when they talk to each other. But surely this is not sufficient for a philosophical account of language.

As I have suggested, at least some of the problems in Reimer's portrayal of concepts can be traced to the sources on which he has drawn. A single book about philosophy of education is probably not enough to discuss so tricky a concept as the

concept of concept. Interestingly, Reimer refers in a footnote (146) to more recent and more philosophical work in the area: DeBellis's (1995) *Music and Conceptualization*, and Alston's (1998) "Perception and Cognition" (*sic*). The title of Alston's paper is not "Perception and Cognition," it is "Perception and Conception." But more importantly, in that paper Alston systematically explores an important view that Reimer's text fails to consider, namely the view that *perceiving is conceiving*. To perceive something as something is to employ the corresponding concept. One cannot see apples as "apples" without the concept of apple. Note that this is not the same view mentioned above, namely the view (referred to by Reimer) that perceptual structuring is already a form of conceptuality. Immanuel Kant maintained that perceptual structuring takes place first (after which there are sensible objects in time and place) and then we apply the concepts and categories of understanding (an object is perceived to be, say, an apple). In Reimer's account, the first phase is often referred to as a kind of conceptuality, but the second phase is not discussed at all, despite the fact it is the basic topic of one of his cited sources. It would be interesting to read more about Reimer's interpretation of these Neo-Kantian themes.

To reiterate a point made earlier in passing, the stand that one needs concepts in order to perceive corresponding objects has been strong and influential at least since Immanuel Kant who maintained that the concepts and categories of pure understanding are employed actively and constructively in perception. One example of this kind of Neo-Kantian conception is, again, Hilary Putnam's internal realism. In psychology the key figure is Jean Piaget (whose use of the word 'schema' is actually taken from Kant's *Critique*, although most psychologists are not aware of the fact). The *Philosopher's Index* (an electronic database) includes numerous and extensive resources on the topic as well. In other words, there is a long tradition maintaining that a concept is not "a mechanism by which one can refer to a noticed phenomenon" (146) but rather a vehicle that makes it possible to notice the phenomenon in the first place.

Reimer writes (142) that the standard definition of a concept entails that concepts are inherently verbal. There are, indeed, views in contemporary philosophy (and cognitive science) maintaining this, but this is not the only or the standard view.

It was typical in the analytical tradition after the so-called linguistic turn, but the revival of pragmatism and the influence of later Wittgenstein have changed that. And even those theories maintaining that concepts are inherently verbal do not necessarily claim that perceptual structuring takes place independently of verbal concepts as Reimer maintains. My point is that linguistic competence changes the whole cognitive structure so that perceptual structuring becomes possible. It is not opposed to, but enables perceptual structuring.

Reimer's argument for the non-linguistic nature of perceptual structuring seems to be encapsulated in the following statements. "No words or any other symbols characterizing the music need be present for you to be immersed in the ongoing experience . . . . Similarly for the examples of the apple, the walk, and the trumpet. No words or any other symbols need be present as you eat the apple or take the walk or hear the trumpet, and so long as no such vehicles are present, the experience is nonconceptual according to the common understanding of the term" (144).

Now, what does Reimer mean with the phrase "to be present for you"? One obvious reading is: "to think consciously of a word." But surely he cannot mean this. Sub-consciousness was invented long ago, and linguistic abilities are always present after they are acquired. The fact that one does not think consciously of a word while immersed in an experience by no means establishes that linguistic abilities are not actually employed. As I have noted, some people hold that linguistic abilities make it possible to structure one's perceptions. Another potentially persuasive account can be found in Jean Piaget's view that sensorimotor activity gives the child the cognitive structures that constitute the basis both of perceptual structuring and of linguistic capacities. A debate between Piaget and Noam Chomsky (and several other scientists and philosophers) about this issue is published in Piattelli-Palmarini (1979).

This is not the place to continue philosophical discussion about conceptuality, but one thing is clear: Reimer's treatment of language and conceptuality is based on an outdated view of language and a very narrow view of concepts. The good side of this fact is that Reimer really does not really build anything on his view of language. He just maintains that this (inadequate) view of linguistic meanings cannot be applied

to music. The question that remains, however, is a crucial one: How effectively does Reimer's book illuminate our understanding of musical meanings? Unfortunately, I submit, not very.

Reimer's stance on the issue is summarized like this: "Music can be described as sounds organized to be inherently meaningful" (152). Unfortunately, we are offered no positive or constructive answer to the question how the sounds get their meaning when they are "organized in some invented fashion" (153). Think about an analogy: words get their meaning when ink is organized on the paper "in some invented fashion." Yes, of course. But this is no explanation of how meaning is created; rather, it is precisely the problem that needs to be answered.

It is not enough to say that meanings are "inherent" in organized sounds. And it is of no further help to say that these meanings are "available in no other way." Reimer gives only negative characterizations, telling what musical meaning is not. This negative way of speaking, based as we have seen on an erroneous view of language, leads to the eventual conclusion that musical meaning is a mystery. And unfortunately, what Reimer writes under the heading, "Finally, What Music Means" goes no further toward solving this mystery. What music means, he eventually concludes, is "everything a person experiences when involved with it" (165). So all we have about musical meaning is either mystery or everything. And the mystery is based on a mystification of a most common and natural thing, a distinction between non-linguistic expression and linguistic articulation.

Other resources and strategies were close at hand, resources and strategies that would have supported more positive and constructive conclusions, and it is unfortunate Reimer did not avail himself of them. Specifically, Reimer refers to the work of John Dewey (although not so much as in earlier editions of his book; on Reimer's interpretation of Dewey see Määttänen 2003). According to Dewey linguistic meaning and other meanings are not opposed to each other. The general principle is the Wittgensteinian (before Wittgenstein, actually): *meaning is use*. Word meaning is the way to use words in certain context, and the meaning of a tool, for example, is the way it is used. This pragmatist idea was developed by Charles Peirce.

From pragmatist perspective, then, to understand a word is to be able to use it correctly in a context. Similarly, it can be said that to understand musical meaning is to be able to act and perceive musically (Määttänen & Westerlund 1999). Meanings are tied to practice, and as such they depend on the relevant context, the general social and cultural context, the context of the particular musical tradition, and so on at all levels. It holds also for musical meanings that they do not travel with the notes (Määttänen & Westerlund 2001). Musical meaning on the ground of John Dewey's ideas is also discussed in Westerlund (2002).

Meaning as use makes it possible to understand communication in music. It is not (not even in linguistic communication) to transmit ideas from head to head but rather to share common practices, norms and habits. This is not so different from linguistic communication. To understand a word is to know how it is used in a certain practical context. Some words do denote perceived objects and perceived features of the environment, but to understand a word is to able to participate in practices within which these objects and features occur. And the fact that some pieces of music do not denote in the same way as some words does not mean that they do not denote at all. They refer to those traditions, practices, norms, contexts and so on within which this particular piece of music (or more generally, the same type of music) has been performed. And as in language, the criterion of understanding is the correct use, making of music that continues the tradition, applies the appropriate norms, and creates the new context for itself. Strictly speaking, history loses its force: it is significant only to the extent former experience enables us to act in the present, guiding our actions in new directions in response to newly present conditions and circumstances.

It is necessary to see the continuity between musical and other meanings in order to avoid that kind of mystification that constitutes, it seems to me, most of what Reimer brings to the subject. It is also necessary to see this continuity of meaning for another purpose: to understand how human beings have evolved in the course of natural and cultural evolution. From this point of view there simply must be continuity between language meanings and other meanings. Language did not just drop from the heaven. Various theories about the role of music in the genesis of *homo*

sapiens have been presented since the days of Darwin (see, e.g., Donald 1991). Evolution may be mysterious, but only in the sense that it presents a problem to be solved. The same attitude should be taken towards the mystery of musical meaning, even if one happens to be in a romantic mood.

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