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**Response to Readings for October 7, 2002**  
**Philosophy in a New Key, Significance in Music**  
**Suzanne Langer**

Ms. Langer has undertaken a search not only for the meaning and significance of music but for music itself, and, *if* it means, then *how* it means. Is it merely a tool for delivering encoded messages for how the listener is to feel, or is it, as she says, the logical expression of feelings? If it is the latter, then whose feelings are being expressed? She says that if music is a language of emotion, then it expresses primarily the composer's knowledge of human feeling, not how or when the feeling was acquired.

Langer advocates a "psychical distance" on the part of the listener in order to properly experience the music. This is reminiscent of Beardsley's "experienced independence of the self" (Aesthetics), which he said is necessary in order for one to have an "aesthetic experience." She calls this distance a separating of the object and its appeal from one's own self, by "putting it out of gear" with practical needs and ends.

She says that the content of music has been symbolized for us, and what it invokes is not emotional response, but insight. She quotes Richard Wagner's words about passion in music and says that the *raison d'être* of Wagner's work is to "put over, give insight into human passionate nature." This brings to mind the *Liebestod* from *Tristan und Isolde*, which is so often likened to the waves of erotic passion.

Langer says the fact that musical structures logically resemble certain dynamic patterns of human experience is a well-known fact. She refers to the work of Kohler, a psychologist, who uses musical dynamics to express psychological phenomena. Presumably this gives music relevance to the listener who experiences *crescendi* and *accelerandi* in his life. She quotes another psychologist (D'Udine) who speaks of the tension and resolution in music as the counterpart to our lives.

Langer speaks disparagingly of programmatic music and programmatic elements in music as being devices for the musically limited. She calls the use of "program" for music a "crutch," which may

be tolerated for the naive listener, but is pernicious where used by teachers to create a subjective underlay to the music in order to have students listen. (This brings to mind Beardsley's use of the word *extrinsic* in describing qualities of a work of art that are about it or its background, rather than being *intrinsic*, or emanating from the object itself.) She says that this is a denial of the true nature of music, which is unconventionalized, un-verbalized freedom of thought.

Langer says that music has all the earmarks of a true symbolism, except that it has no assigned connotation. Therefore music is an *unconsummated symbol*, a significant form without conventional significance. She says that the real power of music is that it can be "true" to the life of feeling in a way that language cannot. Its significant forms have that ambivalence of content which words cannot have. The gift of music, she says, is not communication but insight, a knowledge of "how feelings go."

I have several misgivings about Langer's writings about music and its significance: First of all, the music to which she refers is contained in a small time period (mainly nineteenth century and late eighteenth) and derives from European countries only. Yet she generalizes her comments to *all* music. Her analysis of music as significant form and symbolism simply will not work for music from other periods, mainly our own, and from other cultures. In fact, she says that the flowering of music which exhibits pure form as its essence was from Bach to Beethoven. This is the ideal music for her analysis. What about all of the rest of it?

Second, I simply do not subscribe to the theory that when a composer writes music he does so from a knowledge of feelings, or to create symbols by which to move the listeners in stylized ways. A composer writes with a knowledge of music. Feelings are up to the listener.

Third, in reading and re-reading Ms. Langer on *Significance in Music*, I am left feeling that I have been "doing it all wrong" all these years. I feel as if she is describing some experience other than the one I know as listening to music.