

**LINDA LANIER-KEOSAIAN**  
**[Lanier-Keosaiian@juno.com](mailto:Lanier-Keosaiian@juno.com)**

### **How Does Music *Mean*?**

Why is it that music can affect us so deeply, even more deeply than a work of visual art, or of literature? Is it true for everyone that Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, particularly the last movement, is overwhelmingly powerful and a testament to the inner spirit of humanity? Why do some works evoke a buoyant sense of joy and others a deep sadness? Where there is text, how does a composer manage to convey the meaning or even to describe the text in the music itself? Does the composer set out to write encoded messages about the emotions she feels through the music? Or are the feelings supplied by the listener? These are some of the questions I plan to work through, using the writings of philosophers Suzanne Langer, Malcolm Boyd, Harold Beardsley, and David Elliott. None of them, alone, manages to answer the questions to my satisfaction, but each, with intense inquiry into how music affects the listener, contributes to an understanding of the process.

Ms. Langer, in her search for the meaning and significance of music, says that music is the logical expression of feelings.<sup>1</sup> She says that as a language of emotion, music expresses primarily the composer's knowledge of human feeling, though not how or when the feeling was acquired. This theory maintains that the creator of a work of art or music undergoes an experience which he wishes to communicate to others in the sense that he wishes others also to undergo the experience. In order to have this occur, the composer creates a complex of musical sounds which, if experienced properly, will cause the listener to have the same emotions as the composer. Malcolm Boyd describes it this way:

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<sup>1</sup> Langer, Suzanne K., **Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art**. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1942, p. 218.

[The artist's] experience is inside him; in order to make it available to others, he must externalize it; and by expressing it he hopes to pass it on to others. To the extent that the artist is successful in his enterprise, and in so far as the experience he communicates is worth experiencing, the work of art he creates is valuable.<sup>2</sup>

The Expression Transmission theory means that the composer is conceived as transforming his emotions into musical sounds which are transformed into patterns in the score, which, in turn, are transformed back into musical sounds, which, finally, are transformed back into emotions that the sympathetic listener experiences as he hears the music. Malcolm Budd says that the fundamental error with this theory is its separation of what gives music its value from the music itself. It represents music as being related to an experience which can be fully characterized without the music itself. It therefore regards music as a tool.<sup>3</sup> He goes on to say that when we want to listen to a piece of music, it is not because it is the sole means available to us for having an experience which does not involve hearing the music: *it is because we value the experience of the music itself.*

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" which he said is necessary in order for one to have an aesthetic experience.<sup>4</sup> 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. From the stand point of a performer, this is practical advice: much as I may feel strongly about the music I am playing, I must maintain a certain composure, or distance, from the emotions in it, in order to be able to properly execute the music for my listeners. Otherwise I risk

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<sup>2</sup> Budd, Malcolm, **Music and the Emotions: The Philosophical Theories**, New York: Routledge, 1985, p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> Beardsley, Monroe C., **Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism**, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1958, p. 553.

sloppy emotionalism. This does not mean that I detach myself from it, but that I strike a careful balance by subjecting my intense feelings about the music to the discipline required to bring it to life. For a listener, however, this seems antithetical advice. My advice to a listener would be to *give yourself over to the music and let it carry you where it will*. Never mind the Significant Form and the unconsummated symbolism (see the paragraph below). Let the beauty and magic of the music take precedence over all.

Langer says that the content of music has been symbolized for us, and what it invokes is not emotional response, but insight.<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> This brings to mind the *Liebestod* from *Tristan und Isolde*, which is so often likened to the waves of erotic passion. When we listen to the *Liebestod*, we will be aware of the passionate nature of the music, but we will not necessarily feel *erotic passion ourselves*. Budd calls the experience of the emotion in life, which has an object, the *primordial emotion*, while the secondary feeling of it, from listening to music which is an expression of it, the *non-primordial emotion*. In the case of the *Liebestod*, then, we will feel, not the erotic passion of one human for another, or *primordial emotion*, but a reflected passion which results from the involvement in the music, or *non primordial emotion*.

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

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<sup>5</sup> Langer, op.cit., p. 244.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

(D'Udine) who speaks of the tension and resolution in music as the counterpart to our lives.<sup>7</sup> I do not believe that is true of the pieces of music about which I will be writing. I believe that each composer of any age stands on the shoulders of all that has come before him, in the sense that the style in which he works, is one which grew out of all of his experience with music up until that time. In J. S. Bach's music, the tension and resolution within the texture (mainly suspensions) are an integral part of the style of his period. The way in which Ned Rorem uses tension and resolution reflects both his knowledge of all preceding styles and also his originality in applying techniques of his own age, the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the interpretation of the Walt Whitman text. In Rorem's *Pilgrim Strangers* there is a certain placidity of delivery in the recitatives which precede each gruesome description of the war scenes. This placidity is used in contrast dramatically and emotionally with the multi-voice texture of the scenes. In fact, the nature of the recitatives give an emotional break to the listener. And yet, the recitatives bring the story to a more personal level, as they are always an unaccompanied solo.

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 which used by teachers to create a subjective underlay to the music in order to have students listen.<sup>8</sup> (This brings to mind Beardsley's use of the word *extrinsic* in describing those qualities of a work of art which are about it or its background, rather than being *intrinsic*, or emanating from the object itself.)<sup>9</sup> She says that this is

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<sup>7</sup> Langer, op. cit., p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>9</sup> Beardsley, op.cit., p. 20.

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.” As she says, *music has fulfilled its mission whenever our hearts are satisfied*.<sup>11</sup>

Louise Rosenblatt’s concept of the *transaction* which takes place between the reader and the literature being read, is also relevant to the experience of the music listener, and so I want now to delve somewhat into the idea of what is the listener’s part in perceiving music. As Rosenblatt tells us, each reader (or listener) brings a different set of experiences to the encounter and therefore the transaction with the music will be different for each one.<sup>12</sup> I want now to try and flesh out the idea that each listener comes to the listening experience with different “baggage,” but a common beginning, in that we are all born into a particular culture, where music and language are already familiar to us as newborn children.

We know from recent studies of the human fetus, that the hearing apparatus is complete by the end of the sixth month of gestation. That means that the child-to-be is becoming accustomed to its world, the language of its mother, and the music of its culture while *in utero*. There is a doctoral

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<sup>10</sup> Langer, op.cit., p. 240.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>12</sup> Rosenblatt, Louise M., **Literature as Exploration**, New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1938, p. 26.

dissertation based on this research which resulted in a recording made with an intrauterine microphone. On one track, you can hear the singing of a child's song, and on others, there are varieties of styles of music, all sung to the belly of the mother, and heard clearly on the recording.<sup>13</sup> This may seem irrelevant until we think about how we came to enjoy the music which we know, and *not* to appreciate music which is alien to us. If you have ever heard or seen traditional Chinese opera, e.g. the legend of White Snake, you may better understand how enculturated we are to our own world and its music. Without study and experience in listening to the Chinese style, with its heterophony, we will very likely fail to appreciate what is beautiful to people of that or any other culture. The point that I am working toward is that it is no accident that we find expression of emotions in Western classical music, as opposed to Eastern Asian classical music. We have been immersed in it since before our birth. Then, as children and finally as adults, we have become familiar with particular styles of music, through listening and direct involvement. We find joy and satisfaction in listening to music which is in a familiar style, even if the particular piece being heard at the moment is new to us. All of this experience with music is what we bring to each listening experience. Whether it is music of great joy or of great drama or of great sadness, for us, it will resonate with familiarity because we have been immersed in that style (or styles) of music since before our birth. We will rarely choose something in a different (or even alien) style unless we have educated ourselves to those new sounds and make a conscious choice to expand ourselves by now including this new style in our range of choices for listening enjoyment.

A frequently voiced opinion about how one is affected by music in comparison with an optical viewing of a work of visual art, is that the effect of music is much more powerful than

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<sup>13</sup> Woodward, Sheila, **Womb Sounds, Authentic Womb Recordings**, Compact Disc ERD 001.

viewing even a very fine work of art. I will allow for exceptions here, as I know that visual artists very likely feel more intensely about their work than others. In general, however, there is a consensus that we are all more affected by music than anything we *see*. The next two paragraphs will make an effort to understand why.

David Elliott, in his book, *Music Matters*, quotes Stephen Handel, who says there is a profound difference between listening and looking. David Burrows says this is true because vision tends to distance us from the objects and events that it isolates, fixes, and distributes in space. In contrast, audition tends to foster intimacy with the world *by subordinating details of shape, size, and distance to inward experiences of continuously unfolding events and multi-directional energy*.<sup>14</sup> As Handel notes, *whereas looking makes each of us a focused observer, listening makes each of us a surrounded participant*. Another of his sources agrees: *if visual experience is of things out-there, sonorous experience is of events in-here*.

Here is yet another quote, this from Don Ihde:

If I hear Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in an acoustically excellent auditorium, I suddenly find myself *immersed* in sound which *surrounds* me. The music is even so *penetrating* that my whole body reverberates, and I may find myself absorbed to such a degree that the usual distinction between the sense of inner and outer is virtually obliterated. The auditory field surrounds the listener, and surroundability is an essential feature of the field-shape of sound.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, we take music *into ourselves* when we actively listen with mental and emotional involvement. This, for me, is helpful in understanding the intensity with which we respond to music, as opposed to art which is simply viewed. Perhaps this is why, when music is combined with film, the experience packs a greater wallop.

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<sup>14</sup> Elliott, David J., **Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education**, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 127.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Now I want to try and relate some of these views to two pieces of music. The first is the *Erbarne dich* section of the St. Matthew Passion, by J. S. Bach.<sup>16</sup> The second is *Pilgrim Strangers* by Ned Rorem.<sup>17</sup> I chose both of these pieces because they each had such a powerful effect on me when I first heard (or played) them, and no matter how many times I go back to them, the effect is the same. In fact, I can merely *think* about them and get chills. Before I go to the music, however, I would like to return to Monroe Beardsley's writing.

Beardsley is greatly skeptical of what most people conceive of as *program music*, and of what a *program* does to the listening experience. However, he waxes eloquent on the subject of words and music and how composers are able to take a poor, pathetic poem and create a fusion of words and music that raises the poem to great art. His Fusion Theory is a psychological theory, that the regional quality of coherence will appear and the words and music become parts of a *phenomenal whole*. He gave some wonderful examples of how the composer's setting of words created what is essentially a metaphorical elucidation, or even a fleshing out, of the meaning of the text.

It seems to me that the reason some of the examples Beardsley gave of a perfect fusion between words and music worked so well (e.g. Handel's *The people that walked in darkness*) is that the composer in question (Handel) was not simply setting *words* to music but was taking into account the meaning of the entire text.<sup>18</sup> This is true, also, for Bach's setting of the incredible *Erbarne dich* (Have Mercy, Lord) from the St. Matthew Passion. The violin plays a line which weaves in and out of the texture with musical figures which I can only describe as pleading and

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<sup>16</sup> Bach, J. S., **St. Matthew Passion**, BWV 244, Urtext, Vocal Score, Frankfurt: C. F. Peters. Section 47, Aria *Erbarne Dich*.

<sup>17</sup> Rorem, Ned, **Pilgrim Strangers**, for Six Male Voices, New York: Boosey and Hawkes.

<sup>18</sup> Beardsley, op.cit., p. 342.

weeping. The violin line is set in the higher register, while the soloist, a mezzo soprano role, is in the rich middle register, a contrasting of tone colors. The weeping and pleading of the violin echoes the words and musical line of the soloist. The string bass and continuo parts have a plodding, descending figure which both acts as a foundation for the intricate weavings of violin and mezzo soprano, and also creates the aura of extreme sadness and overwhelming grief. The text of the *Erbarme dich* section translates to “Have mercy on me, Lord, on my helpless tears; regard how my heart and my eyes weep bitterly for you.” The aria is sung at the point at which Peter has three times denied that he knows Christ and, as the cock crows, suddenly remembers Christ’s words that Peter will do exactly that, *before the cock crows*. The words of the preceding recitative are that “He went out and wept bitterly.” Then we hear the poignance of the following aria as if we could actually hear Peter sobbing in the background. It is not just the meaning of words themselves, but the pervading atmosphere of unrelenting sadness that is conveyed in this incredible piece of music.

It is my belief that the overarching communication of sorrow is so palpable in this piece, that even if the mezzo soprano were replaced by an oboe or English horn, with no text given, the effect would be the same. This is contrary to Langer’s theory that “not communication, but insight, is the gift of music; in very naive phrase, a knowledge of “how feelings go.””<sup>19</sup> Langer would have us believe, then, that the music for the setting of *Erbarme dich* is ambiguous, as she says all music is in interpretation, because it has a *transient play of contents*. I admit that some pieces of music may seem happy *and* sad to different people. This is not one of the pieces about which I can say that.

J. S. Bach had at his disposal all of the current practices of Baroque style: the thick texture of counterpoint, the rich chromatic harmony we know from his music, the sense of perpetual motion

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<sup>19</sup> Langer, op. Cit., p. 244.

in the rhythm, and the growing proficiency of orchestral instruments. He exploited all of these in creating a veritable tapestry of sound specific to his work in that style and in that period. In fact, Bach's work using these elements brought Baroque style to its highest peak, musically, dramatically, and emotionally. After Bach, the style he knew *had* to give way to another, as it had sustained all of the development possible.

In setting words to music, it is quite possible to simply chant the words over a single pitch, using an accent, perhaps, over important words, in order to stress the meaning. (The Baroque style, in which Bach was writing, is about as far from that austere concept as one can possibly get.) In order to emphasize particular words of text, composers of the past and the present have the option of placing them on higher or lower pitches (in contrast to those around them), of making them louder or softer (in contrast), of drawing them out on long notes, by creating melismas (many notes on one syllable), or by repeating them. In the Baroque period, all of these techniques were employed. The most characteristic of these is the use of melismas and the repetition of text. The works of Bach (and of Handel) use texts often consisting of only a few words. The pieces are extended through use of long notes (over faster moving passages in other voices), of melismas, and particularly through repetition. This use of repetition lends itself perfectly to conveying the grief of Peter after he had betrayed Jesus. The words "Erbarme dich, mein Gott, um meiner Zahren willen," ("Forgive me, my God; see my helpless tears") are repeated again and again, with the musical setting a bit different each time. In the second section, the words "Schaue hier, Herz und Auge weint vor dir bitterlich" ("See here, eyes and heart weep bitterly") are sung completely only once, and then, yet again, the "Erbarme dich" text returns for another six repeats, with much melismatic treatment. This programmatic and dramatic treatment of Peter's pleas for forgiveness and his feeling of helplessness

(unable to say anything other than, “forgive me”) render this piece, for me, literally overwhelming in its impact.

In *Pilgrim Strangers*, Ned Rorem has set a long section of prose from Whitman’s diary when he was a war correspondent during the War Between the States (Civil War). The words are a gruesome description of the war and its devastated and exhausted people. Rorem set the work for six male voices, unaccompanied. (It was originally commissioned by the King’s Singers.) Repetition of words for emphasis is out of the question, because of the length of the text. Instead, Rorem broke the work up into eleven scenes, each introduced by a solo voice recitative, and sung without pause to the end. The disjunct melody of the recitative evokes for me the sound of a wail, or lament. The writing is idiomatic of the twentieth century, i.e. full of harmonic dissonance, constant changes of meter to fit the word accents of the prose. Yet, the work is a product of a traditional musical mind in that the vocal lines are constructed using the same devices noted above: length of note, melismas, highness or lowness of pitch. It also makes use of counterpoint, another classical technique in vocal writing. One device for interpretation which Bach did not have the option of using is the *chord cluster*. This is when, instead of using the notes of a major or minor (or another recognizable form) chord for a euphonious sound, the notes used are side-by-side. An example is seen here when Rorem sets the words, “Once in a while some youngster holds on to me convulsively, and I do what I can for him.” The words are chanted on a chord cluster, spelled from bottom to top G-A-B-C-D-E. The effect is one of being glued together, a description of the youngster who held onto him convulsively and “glued himself” to Whitman.

Occasionally, Rorem breaks from the counterpoint and harmony (and chord clusters) and delivers a line in unison, all voices on the same notes at the same time. This is startling and drives

home the content of the line. One example of the use of this unison singing is in the setting of the line “youngsters from fifteen to twenty-one in the army.” Once again, this is a classic technique for giving emphasis, in vocal or instrumental music of all ages.

So profoundly sad I find this work of Rorem’s, it is difficult to conceive that, even without its tragic text, it would not be heard as conveying great sadness. I can imagine it being played by a string sextet, or a woodwind sextet. The effect of those wailing lines, the chord clusters, and the atmosphere unrelieved by joyful sounds, (sounds we associate culturally with *joy*) combine to immerse the listener in sadness.

One note of irony in the piece is when, in the wrenching hospital scene, the voices of nurses and soldiers can be heard, down the hall, singing a hymn in which are the words,

*Let every lamp be burning , for O we stand on Jordan’s strand.  
My days are quickly gliding by, and I a pilgrim stranger,  
Would not detain them as they fly, those hours of toil and danger;  
For O we stand on Jordan’s strand, Our friends are passing over.*

In reflecting on the essay by Danto, on the Death of Art, it occurs to me that Bach could not have imagined how a text like that of Whitman could result in music like that of Ned Rorem! Yet, if one is familiar with Bach’s style, it is not difficult to imagine how he might have set the Whitman prose. (He would have begun by reducing the text to a few lines.) In fact, if Bach could have heard Ned Rorem’s music, he might have proclaimed the death of Music!

In conclusion, I do not believe that a composer writes music in order to communicate a feeling that he, the composer has initially. I believe that the composer works from a profound and intense knowledge of music and of text (where present), and from highly developed musicianship, out of which emerges works of music which speak to those of his culture in a style which is familiar

to them. Where the style is not familiar to them, the music will not be appreciated or understood by the listeners. The listeners' feelings about the music are a result of their own individual transaction with the music.

A composer who works with text must have a love of words as well as of music. The sound of the word itself must be set so sensitively that there is a fusion between text and music. I believe that Bach and Rorem achieved that. In my opinion, Bach and Rorem both wrote their greatest music when inspired by a text. Bach's religious fervor and Rorem's literary instincts led each to texts which involved them intensely. However, the music which each of them wrote to underlay the texts I have spoken about here, is so exquisite that, heard even without the text, the atmosphere of sadness prevails and there is still great beauty.

This study has been a fascinating one for me and I thank you for challenging me to do it. I have never thought about music in this way and it has been revealing!

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