

The Reality of Music and the Realities in Music

The following text is a transcription of a lecture that I gave as a part of the symposium “Music with the real, new contexts for sound and image in performance and composition“ December 6, 2016 at the Anton Bruckner University in Linz. I’ve tried to preserve the spoken rhythm of the original lecture, which was delivered freely, almost as if “thinking aloud”. This contribution is meant to encourage us to examine more fundamental questions of our understanding of music without claiming to be an exhaustive treatment of the academic discourse in the field.

If we take a moment to examine the question of music’s relation to reality – whether and how music refers to, represents, reveals, and transforms reality – this immediately raises further questions. Which realities does music refer to? How should we describe the relationship between music and reality? Does music even refer to anything at all? Isn’t music above all a reality in and of itself and isn’t this enough? Even in addressing these few first questions, we are already forced to confront a fundamental issue: the question of the temporal nature of music. The wide range of the scholarly discourses on this topic and the sheer number of possible answers to this question make it impossible to identify one clear answer or even to give a concise overview of various approaches. Here, I will limit myself to one central thesis as the point of departure for our discussion. The characteristic feature of music is a certain “double state of being”¹ (cf. Brandstätter 2008). This means that, on the one hand, music can be perceived as a reality in and of itself but, on the other hand, it can also be experienced as a system of signs that refers to other realities or – more generally – makes reference to these other realities.

This double state of being that we have identified here as a characteristic feature of music is, on a fundamental level, valid for all artistic mean of expression. In aesthetics, various thinkers have attempted to encapsulate this double nature of art in various word pairs. Dieter Mersch speaks of the “duplicity of meaning and materiality”²; Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht thematizes the “oscillation between presence and meaning”³; Gottfried Boehm proposes the concept of the “difference between representation and presence”⁴. Even though each of these pairs of terms are part of their own distinct theoretical models, the unifying idea behind these approaches is the distinction between two ways of looking at art: a phenomenological view that focuses on its materiality locating it in things and a semiotic view that emphasizes its function as signs. The poet Paul Valéry penned a beautiful poetic image that expresses this oscillating and iridescent quality. In trying to capture the special nature of the literary work of art such as we see in poetry, he speaks of the “extended hesitation between sound and meaning”⁵.

Returning to music, if we thus assume that music represents a reality in and of itself – that is to say a musical reality – then the next question we must address is what differentiates the musical reality from the non-musical reality? If we were living in the 19th century, we would perhaps find it easy to answer this question. From a particular historical and European understanding of art music, melodic, rhythmic and harmonic structures can be taken as the elements that make up a particular “model of musical language”. However, starting with the ever-increasing range of musical material along with the growing number of new compositional techniques available to exploit these new materials that began to emerge at the turn of the 20th century and culminating in musicians questioning the fundamental

¹ Ursula Brandstätter, *Grundfragen der Ästhetik, Bild – Musik – Körper – Sprache*, Köln 2008, p. 74 ff.

² Dieter Mersch, “Ästhetik und Responsivität, Zum Verhältnis von medialer und amedialer Wahrnehmung”, in Erika Fischer-Lichte et al. (eds.), *Wahrnehmung und Medialität*, Tübingen and Basel 2001, p. 276.

³ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Epiphanien”, in Joachim Küpper / Christoph Menke, *Dimensionen ästhetischer Erfahrung*, Frankfurt 2003, p. 210 ff.

⁴ Gottfried Boehm, “Der Topos des Lebendigen, Bildgeschichte und ästhetische Erfahrung”, in Joachim Küpper / Christoph Menke, *Dimensionen ästhetischer Erfahrung*, Frankfurt 2003, p. 95 f.

⁵ Paul Valéry, *Windstriche*, Frankfurt am Main 1995, p. 40.

nature of music itself, which has been a feature of the contemporary dialogue on music since the arrival of John Cage on the scene if not earlier, the boundary between music and non-music is no longer so easy to delineate. Perhaps it would be helpful at this juncture to make a distinction between acoustic and non-acoustic realities? But this distinction is not so easy to make because we now live in artistic worlds where the movement of the human body or visual signs can also be perceived as music. Definitions and distinctions have thus become increasingly difficult to make.

Nevertheless, I would like to focus on music's double state of being in the following discussion. I will start by examining the potential semiotic character of art and then in a second step – picking up on the theme of this symposium – trace the use of 'concrete' materials in the historical record.

Music as Signs

The point of departure for this discussion is the thesis or claim that music references realities. In order to understand how music does this, it is helpful to first explain two fundamental ways that signs are actually able to reference reality. On a very fundamental and abstract level, we need to make a distinction between saying and showing. The semiotic function of saying can be best demonstrated by looking at linguistic utterances. The term "tree" denotes the object "tree" or rather our cognitive prototype of a tree. In order to function as a linguistic sign, it is not necessary for there to be any particular relationship between the sign and that which it denotes – the term for tree does not need to have anything tree-like about it – what is important is that this relationship has been established unambiguously by convention. The semiotic function of showing behaves somewhat differently. A painting or drawing of a tree possesses a wealth of similarities with the object it represents and denotes: similarities in respect to the contour, form, color etc. Thus, there is a relationship of similarity between the showing sign and that which it denotes, which simultaneously creates a closer bond between the two dimensions of the semiotic relationship. However, the distinction between saying and showing is in no way simply a question of the medium of expression (in the domain of language, there are of course examples of showing – this is at the heart of every poem – and conversely there are examples of denotative saying in visual signs – one only needs to think of traffic signs). However, it is striking what a prominent role showing plays in art.

How is music able to show? What can music depict by establishing relationships based on similarity? As music is an acoustic medium, it is first and foremost limited to copies and representations – in the "literal" sense – of acoustic phenomena. In this context, we typically speak of music's ability to express various things through tone painting such as the babbling of a brook, the thunder of a storm or the din of battle. Seen against the background of all the diverse manifestations of music, these "acoustical depictions" represent more of a special case in the context of European art music. But music is not limited to depicting the acoustical environment; music can also take musical phenomena as its point of departure. The result is a "music about music". This opens up a wide field of different points of reference, which range from parody techniques and musical quotations to treatments of musical forms or music-acoustic montages.

In addition to the potential for "literally" showing and "copying" acoustical and musical phenomena, we must, however, also consider the "metaphorical" semiotic functions. Here we should remember that the basis for showing is a relationship of similarity between the sign and that which is denoted. Thus, a musical element such as a melodic figure can be interpreted as being similar to the sound of a brook. The relation of similarity can, however, also be established on a metaphorical level. A sound object sounds in some sense like a visual phenomenon (a wide landscape), or a bodily gesture (a glancing blade) or an abstract idea (order dissolving into chaos). What is decisive is that the listener associates features of the music with features of another phenomenon that is in some way of a non-musical nature and thus creating relationship of similarity and thereby opening up a metaphorical semantic space. While literal relationships of similarity and the corresponding imagery are governed by convention, metaphorical references are based on subjective attributions and associations. Therefore, the semantic space of metaphorical references is a fundamentally open space, which enables us to

glimpse the diversity of realities. Metaphorical semiotic functions play a primary role in the domain of the arts – according to semiotics, they form the basic for the fundamentally open character of works of art.

Concrete Material in Art

While the first part of my analysis focused on the semiotic character of music and thus the question of meaning, the second section – in the sense of the second dimension of the double state of being – examines the materiality of art. We will begin by taking a look at the history of art in the 20th century. One striking feature of art in the first half of the 20th century is the important role the idea of “concrete material” began to play in different artistic fields – although this did not occur simultaneously in all areas, the different fields certainly exerted a certain influence on one another.

The term “concrete art” first appeared in the area of visual art. It was introduced by Theo van Doesburg and adopted as the program for the group of artists known as *Art Concret*. The term was used to refer to an artistic language that is based on mathematical and geometric principles, thereby consciously renouncing representation. Instead of representational or figurative meanings, these works feature geometric constructions.

In 1949, the French engineer and musician Pierre Schaeffer found new inspiration in the idea of the concrete and transferred it to the realm of music. In essence, his term “*musique concrète*” designates a compositional technique that is based on the use of sounds that have been recorded on fixed media. These recordings could include everyday noises as well as recordings of instruments. On the one hand, they are electronically processed and, on the other hand, arranged in a compositional montage.

Shortly after its first use in music, the term “concrete” finally appears in the area of the literary arts in the year 1954. Eugen Gomringer’s manifesto *vom vers zur konstellation* [“from verse to constellation”] is considered to be the founding document for so-called “concrete poetry”. In this movement, language is to some extent freed from its conventional meaning. The visual and acoustic dimensions of language are used as a means for literary expression. In the terminology of the discussion above, one could point out that language has emancipated itself from the function of saying and has concentrated exclusively on fiction of showing.

Art Concret, *musique concrète*, concrete poetry – is there actually one common idea or common concept behind these movements’ use of the term “concrete”? How is this term actually to be understood in different fields of art? In order to lay bare the differences and similarities, it is well worth taking a look at the situation in each of these three fields immediately preceding these developments.

Well into the second decade of the last century, the representation of the visible, outer reality was still one of the primary tasks of visual art. Pictures showed and represented reality. The development of *Art Concret* represented a significant step towards a form of “abstract art” that consciously placed concrete material devoid of meaning as the center of attention. Thus, the concrete became a form of abstraction (parallel to other developments in art history in the first half of the 20th century that also led the way to more abstraction, albeit for different reasons).

In contrast, the developments in the literary arts followed a different path. But here too it was about shedding the conventionalized semiotic functions. The saying semiotic function was to be replaced with the showing semiotic function. By returning to the concrete acoustic and visual material of language, the goal was to open up new semantic spaces. In this context, the concrete elements of the material (the acoustic characteristics of phonemes, the visual form) stood in opposition to the concrete, conventionalized meaning of language, which are decoupled from the materiality. One commonality with the development in the visual arts discussed above is the desire to break free from conventions and meanings that had become ingrained over the centuries.

The situation surrounding the origins of *musique concrète* presents yet another different context. At the time, the musical climate was dominated by tendencies such as twelve-tone music and serialism, i.e. musical languages that are to a certain extent characterized by their “abstractness” and the very fact that they lack meaning. As a reaction to the abstract sonic language of many composers of the late 1940s and early 1950s, composers began writing works that consciously integrated materials such as every day noises that had clear associative meanings. Through the use of material loaded with meaning, the generally abstract art form of music became concrete. Of course, by subjecting this concrete material to dissociative processes (be it electronic processing or montage), it is simultaneously abstracted.

Already from this short discussion of the historical context, we can see how difficult it is to get a grasp on the terms concrete and abstract. The situations the individual artistic fields were reacting to were too different from one another, and the resulting art works have given rise to multilayered processes of production and reception that are too complex to reconcile with each other. The common denominator in all these movements seems to be the tendency to consciously reject the conventionalized and almost automatized semiotic and semantic functions that have become ingrained in every field of art. What comes out of this process can be labeled as the interplay between meaning and non-meaning or between abstraction and reification. As I brought up at the very beginning of this contribution, the double state of being in art – its oscillation “between thing and sign” (as is the title of collection of essays on aesthetic experience from 2005)⁶ – seems to be (at least implicitly) one of the primary themes of every art movement that has dedicated itself to the concrete (of reality or of art?).

Contextualization

In the final step of my argument, I would like to take a look at the processes and mechanisms that are in play when concrete or abstract materials are used artistically, i.e. transformed aesthetically. How does meaning change? How is meaning established? Or how is it deconstructed?

“The meaning of a word is its use in the language.”⁷ This functional theory of language, which can be traced back to Wittgenstein, is a very helpful intellectual model for the context we are examining here. It is the use of signs that creates and regulates meaning. One could also say that meaning emerges out of the contexts in which it is used.

Then what exactly is going on in works of Art Concret, *musique concrète* or concrete poetry? To answer this, we must first distinguish two processes from one another: de-contextualization and re-contextualization. First, “elements” (these could be individual words or letters, harmonic progressions, sonic material or constellations of shapes etc.) are ripped from their original context, and in the next step they are placed into new contexts, which are thus new semantic contexts. The new contexts establish new meanings – these can be abstract or concrete. What makes these processes of de- and re-contextualization truly fascinating is that the “elements” used do not simply shed their past meanings. The original contexts surround them like an imaginary semantic space, which enters into a dialog with the newly created real semantic space. The result is an oscillation between different meanings, between meaning and non-meaning, between the abstract and the concrete.

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⁶ Getrud Koch/Christiane Voss (eds.), *Zwischen Ding und Zeichen, Zur ästhetischen Erfahrung in der Kunst*, München 2005.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford 1953, 43.