The Question Of Musical Meaning:
A Study Of Symbols, Universals,
And Charles Ives’ Concord Sonata

by

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“You play it with all kinds of memories, all working together...the dramatic memory of the way it unfolds; the synthetic memory of the way it coheres or the way it makes sense; and (if you’re lucky) a kind of spiritual memory of just the precise approach to life in general. But that’s nothing you can aim at very consciously—that’s a kind of reward.”

-John Kirkpatrick, pianist, on performing Charles Ives’ *Concord Sonata*
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-H.M., 2013
**Introduction**

Every age struggles with the function and value of music—its place amongst the arts, its ability to uplift or corrupt the soul, and its communal, intellectual and therapeutic benefits. Personally inspired by the question of how meaning could arise from a combination of seemingly meaningless tones and rhythms, I ventured to determine if music was a type of language, a formal system, or something else entirely. Those who have been exposed to the formal and contrapuntal intricacies in the music of J.S. Bach are familiar with the grammar-like rules, which serve an important role in his musical composition, or at the very least in its subsequent analysis. Here is at least one way in which music can be like a language. Bach is the paradigmatic example of this concept in Western schools of music, but musical grammars are in no way confined to any single composer, tradition, time, or place.

One of the main catalysts for this project was a book entitled *Godel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid* (*GEB*, for short) by Douglas Hofstadter. Central to the book’s argument is the exploration of connections between symbols in the world, especially music, and networks of symbols in the human mind. “The sounds of music do not refer to serfs or city-states,” Hofstadter writes, “but they do trigger clouds of emotion in our innermost selves; in that sense musical meaning is dependent on intangible links from the symbols to things in the world—those ‘things’ in this case being secret software structures in our minds.”¹ Both the form and content of *GEB* are multifaceted and unique. The book deals with themes ranging from number theory and self-reference, to art and music, to consciousness and artificial intelligence. Hofstadter infuses it with puzzles that challenge and engage his readers, as well as
fictional dialogues modeled after Lewis Carroll’s “What The Tortoise Said To Achilles” (published in *Mind*, 1895). *GEB* shows just how many different approaches can be used in the study of musical meaning. The book left me with many questions regarding what it is that music does, and how it is able to do it. More specifically, I was, and continue to be, curious about the age-old problem of how humanly organized sounds—music—can create some of the most significant and powerful experiences.

After reading *GEB*, I began to consider what it would mean for music to be a formal system. Formal systems are organized collections of terms and relationships that are governed by rules. Within these systems, one can utilize axioms and formulas to arrive at provable theorems. I knew from studying composition and Western harmony that music can be governed by rules. There are notations made up of primitive symbols. And there are musical syntaxes and conventions with correct and incorrect forms of combination (“Parallel 8ves, minus 10 pts.”). Perhaps, I posited, the secret to musical meaning lies somewhere within these complex patterns of composition. But I knew that I would have to go beyond Bach’s compositional system as the formal system to study, for musical meaning extends far beyond his techniques, however great they may be. And further, it seemed that this entire notion of “Music, the Formal System,” was a faulty premise from which to start, one that did not capture the aspect of music I was truly curious about, and one that would limit the direction of my search.

Therefore, I decided to slightly switch directions and study music alongside philosophy of language and a survey of linguistic theories. Music and language seem

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1 Hofstadter, 1979, p. 626
to have so much in common. They have both written and aural forms; they convey messages from a transmitter to a receiver; and they are both forms of human expression. For millennia, philosophers have concerned themselves with how words, grammatical formulations, and sentences are able to convey meaning. Why not examine music through the lenses of certain linguistic and aesthetic theories, and see if certain analogies arise that help explain this notion of musical meaning? My project then began to be based on the question, “What are some important philosophical similarities and disanalogies between music and language?”

This search led me to the writing of Susanne Langer, an American philosopher of language, art, and symbolism. Langer was interested, like many philosophers in the first half of the 20th century, in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of isomorphism of logical form in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). Does the secret to musical meaning, Langer wondered, lie somewhere in its logical form? The first chapter of this thesis will examine Langer’s philosophy of symbolism, and how it relates to a musical semantics of human emotions. Subsequently, I will assess how Langer’s theory holds up in response to criticisms brought against her by aesthetic theorist Malcolm Budd. Crucial to Chapter One are notions of music’s logical form, the value of an unconsummated symbol, and whether music’s semantic content expresses the morphology of human emotion.

Chapter Two takes a step back from semantic concerns, and examines music alongside the linguistic phenomenon of universal grammar. Noam Chomsky is the most well known linguist to attribute a psychological component to the study of language. He looked at the observed capacity in human infants to quickly learn any human language, given proper exposure, and hypothesized that some software in the
human brain provides a recipe for language acquisition. Related to this mental software for language acquisition is the concept of language universals—abstract, structural features common to all languages that rely on certain cognitive commonalities and account for the phenomenon of grammatical interpretation. Could music similarly exhibit structural universals that somehow account for its meaning? Or should the emphasis, with regard to meaning, be placed on how music is experienced, and not in the musical structure itself? To answer such questions, Chapter Two dives into theories on language universals, the aesthetic theories of Leonard Meyer, and cognitive and neurological theories about information processing. All of this leads to my hypothesis, that musical meaning results from universal connotative possibilities afforded by a structured listening, but bounded by features intrinsic to the musical stimulus.

Many philosophers of music claim to be discussing ‘music,’ and yet fail to provide any musical examples. Therefore, the third chapter is a case study of sorts. It is an historical and musicological analysis of Charles Ives’ Piano Sonata No. 2, Concord Mass., 1840-1860. With the Concord Sonata, Ives set out to express the characters and philosophies of four Transcendentalist authors in both musical and prose terms. Along with the four-movement piano sonata, Ives published Essays Before A Sonata, a collection of essays expressing his views on the four authors and his musical goals for the piece. Ives was curious, as I am, about the possibility of music’s ability to express anything that was normally expressed in non-musical terms. Chapter Three will examine the multitude of connotational varieties that Ives employs in the Concord. The piece affords a hypothesis about universality in musical experience, specifically with regard to the possibility of many kinds of connotation in
music. The goal of this chapter is to show, through musical examples, how some of the connotational possibilities suggested in Chapter Two can function in an actual musical setting.

Through the course of this project, I came to believe that if any meaning can be ascribed to music, it stems not from universality of formal structure, but from certain shared, possibly universal forms of experiencing music in a very abstract sense. I do not claim that universality of experience means universality of meaning. Rather, I acknowledge that meaning is both personal and cultural, while it also relies on certain universal aspects of perception that allow for a broad context of connotative possibilities and meaning in music.
Does Music Symbolize Our Emotions?
Susanne Langer, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Malcolm Budd
On Musical Semantics

Introduction

Most people would agree that music is not completely insignificant—its sheer popularity and ubiquity attest to something special about it. They might not be prepared to say that music is a language like English, Hungarian, or Chinese, but perhaps they would admit that it carries something across to its listeners. What exactly that something is remains elusive. Words, in one way or another, represent their objects. I write down my ideas and lo-and-behold, you think about them whether you want to or not. Music, on the other hand, is not as concrete. There is much less certainty about the thoughts and feelings you would have as a listener if I played you a piece of music on the piano, compared to the relatively stable meanings of the words you now read. Words feel, in some way, consummated with their objects; words and their referents share some deep bond. If music carries with it some type of content, it does not seem to be as strictly bound to it as a word is to its content.

Is music a symbol? If so, what type of symbol is it? What does it symbolize and how is it able to do so? Language is a type of symbol, and it is also a composite of smaller symbols. Music can similarly be built up from smaller units. Upon hearing a musical performance, maybe you feel that music is like language in other ways. Just as these sentences can be translated from one form—written—into another form—spoken—music can similarly be converted from a written notation into an aural form. What about the actual sound that hits a listener’s ears? Do these organized groupings of sound that we call music have meaning the same way that words do?
Susanne Langer: Music As An Unconsummated Presentational Symbol

This chapter draws its title from a specific use of the term ‘semantics.’ The definition I am using is nicely summed up by Jean-Jacques Nattiez in his book *Music and Discourse* (1990). He writes, “We will call ‘semantic’ any sort of extrinsic association with music, and we will call musical semantics the discipline that deals with explicit verbalizations of these associations, associations that (in current experience) most often remain in the state of latent impressions.”¹ The study of musical semantics moves towards the field of musical semiotics when we begin to study the link between the signifier (music) and the signified (the semantic content)—how music conveys whatever semantic content it may have. The degree to which these associations can in fact be verbalized at all is a major point of contention in the subsequently discussed theories.

What follows is an account and criticism of Susanne Langer’s philosophy of meaning, symbolism, and music, set forth in her book *Philosophy In a New Key* (1942). Since her theories draw heavily from the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), I will also provide a relevant account of his picture theory of language. Subsequently, I will highlight the criticisms brought by Malcolm Budd against Langer’s theory. Finally, I will provide my own views regarding these theories and their relation to the rest of this project. At times, Langer’s argument relies on very technical distinctions. Their connection to music may not be apparent at first. By the end of the chapter, the reasons for including such details will be clear.

¹ Nattiez, 1990, p. 104
Langer claims that music is an *unconsummated presentational symbol* expressing the *morphology of feeling*. In doing so, she denies that music functions as a sign referring to our emotions, and claims instead that it functions symbolically by referring to ideas about the forms of emotions.

Langer’s philosophy of meaning and art stems from her belief that man is a species in need of symbolization.¹ Human cognition is a symbolific process. People think and have ideas through symbols. As a result, symbolization is essential to human nature. Whereas the rest of the animal kingdom functions mostly through the interpretation of signs, humans also use symbols. The distinction between signs and symbols will be discussed further below. The human brain, according to Langer, actively translates experience into symbols to fulfill a basic human need, “a constant process of ideation.”² Unique among the animal kingdom, man creates “ritual, art, laughter, weeping, speech, superstition, and scientific genius” as a manifestation—or an end product—of all registered experience.³ Experiences are naturally transformed by the brain into ideas. To what extent this is a uniquely human endeavor does not really matter with regard to Langer’s argument of music as an unconsummated presentational symbol. The distinction between signs and symbols holds either way. Langer claims that, until Freud, philosophers of the mind neglected an entire half of the importance of symbolization. They credited it as an instrument of human rationality but not as an end itself. Just as sexual activity and food-gathering are necessitated by evolution, so too is the symbolization of experience. Language is the most obvious form of symbolization. Ritual and art are examples as well. And music

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¹ Langer, 1942, p. 41
² Langer, 1942, p. 42
³ Ibid, p. 42
⁴ Ibid, p. 43
is a specific type of symbol. Just as discursive symbols express states of affairs in the world, the semantic content of music as a symbol is, according to Langer, the morphology—the form—of our feelings.

**Meaning As A Function**

First we must define Langer’s use of the word *meaning*. There are two parts to meaning, both a psychological and a logical aspect.

The psychological aspect refers to the notion that whatever has meaning has meaning *for* a person. It is not meaningful in a vacuum. A symbol must be “employed” by a subject. It has some instrumental use to the subject. The logical aspect refers to the object itself. The object must be capable of conveying meaning.

Wherever there is meaning, there is an interplay between the psychological and the logical—something that is meant, and at least one mind for which it is meant. This bifurcated account of meaning is partially responsible for the confusion the term has often brought about. The logical sense leads us to ask, “What does that *term* mean?” The psychological sense leads us to ask, “What does *she* mean by that term?”

Philosophers have struggled to agree on what meaning actually is. Is it a quality of a word? Is it a relationship between terms and objects? Langer writes that the essence of meaning “lies in the realm of logic, where one does not deal with qualities, but only with relations.” Meaning, she argues, is a function. A function implies that there is a pattern connecting a central term to the other terms around it.

As an analogy, consider identifying a chord in figured-bass form. One can refer to the chord by its bass note and chord type, or by the relationship between the

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5 Ibid., p. 53
notes within the chord to the bass note, or even by the relationship of the chord to the home key. Any of these identifications mean the same chord. They each utilize a different means of describing the pattern that exists between the chord and a particular note within it. The important feature is that there is a term holding a key position in the relationship. Through a certain function, some can understand the relationship. What relates the terms to their objects is the subject. This view contrasts with the late Wittgensteinian view of meaning as use, and falls more in line with the Tractarian Wittgensteinian conception of meaning as referential.

Two Classes Of Meaning Functions: Signs and Symbols

Langer distinguishes between two meaning functions: signs and symbols. Both functions convey meaning, but they do so in different ways. Whereas Wittgenstein uses the term “sign” to refer to the perceptible aspect of a “symbol,” Langer offers a completely separate distinction between the terms that should not be confused with the Wittgensteinian uses.

Signs are simpler than symbols. They are “symptoms” of past, present, or future states of affairs. Signs and the states they indicate form a logical pair for a subject. There are thus three parts of every sign occurrence: the sign, which is readily available to the subject; the indicated state, which is more interesting and significant to the subject; and finally the subject himself. Storm clouds, for example, are a sign for future rain. Wet streets are a sign for past rain. Storm clouds and wet streets can be intrinsically interesting, but in the context of their use as a sign, it is the rain in these examples that is of more interest to the subject.

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6 Ibid, p. 55
The previous examples are natural signs, but artificial signs are equally relevant. The ringing of a bell, depending on the context, can mean a person is waiting at the door, a class is about to begin, a race has just ended, etc. Since context is relevant, signs can often be misinterpreted. Such mistakes are manifested as a form of disappointment. Animal behavior, including human behavior, is constantly guided by signs. Dogs hear their master at the door and jump up from the couch. Cats hear the sound of a tin can being opened and hurry to the kitchen. The simplest form of knowledge is the interpretation of signs. Signs evoke action appropriate to the presence of their objects.

Symbols, on the other hand, lead to more complex knowledge, as they themselves are more complex than signs. Langer argues that the interpretation of symbols is confined to human beings. Unlike signs, symbols are devices by which the subject makes an abstraction. Names are a basic type of symbol. They are not symptoms of a state of affairs. The object of a symbol need not be present with the symbol, and therefore symbols do not necessarily evoke action appropriate to the presence of their objects. Rather, symbols are “vehicles for the conception of objects.” Therefore, while signs announce their objects to their subjects, there is an additional step in the interpretation of symbols; a subject relates a symbol to a conception of an object, not the object itself. This intermediary step, that of conception, distinguishes symbols from signs, and human cognition from the cognition of other animals.

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7 Ibid., p. 57
8 Ibid, p. 60
The following diagram distinguishes the function of signs from the function of symbols:

**Signs**: Subject → Sign → Object

**Symbols**: Subject → Symbol → Conception of object → Object

Words can act as signs or symbols, but there is always a distinction. For example, if you hear a door open behind you, followed by a person giving the greeting, “Jack!,” you will most likely assume that Jack has entered the room. In this instance, you employ the name as a sign for Jack’s entrance. A name is used as a greeting and evokes a response appropriate to a person’s presence. In this case, the greeting was a symptom of Jack’s entrance. On the other hand, if you ask someone, “Who is coming over later?” and she responds, “Jack!,” the name evokes from you a conception of Jack. It is not a sign of his entrance. It is a symbol. Animals can understand names but only as signs, not as symbols. Whereas a response to a name as a sign would be to look around for the person, a response to a name as a symbol (and what humans often do) is ask, “What about him?” The ability to think about an object is the defining feature of symbolization.

To back up her claim on the importance of symbols in human cognition, Langer provides an account of how Helen Keller first understood symbols after a childhood of only interpreting signs. The story helps clarify the sign-symbol distinction, and is as a unique example of someone awakening to the power of symbols. Keller could interpret signs as a young child, recognizing the footsteps of her mother, or the smell of a spring day. But only at age seven, when she began working with her teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, could she eventually understand
symbols. “I am filled with wonder,” Keller writes in her autobiography, “when I consider the immeasurable contrast between the two lives which it connects.”

The first word Keller learned was “doll.” Sullivan handed her a doll, and then repeated a “finger-play” spelling out the letters “d-o-l-l” until Keller was able to repeat the letters back to her. She slowly learned to spell many words, but it was several weeks before Keller understood that words were names for actual objects, and so her ability to think was still not fully developed. For example, when Sullivan gave Keller her sunhat, Keller knew she was going outside and “this thought, if a wordless sensation may be called a thought, made me [Keller] skip with pleasure.”

Finally, after weeks of frustratingly confusing words such as “mug” and “water,” words eventually began to come alive as actual symbols. It was when Keller was taken to a stream and allowed to feel the water, while Sullivan spelled “w-a-t-e-r” out for her, that Keller first understood the connection of words and objects:

Suddenly, I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that ‘w-a-t-e-r’ meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! .... Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. ... [E]very object I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me.

This anecdote nicely depicts the difference between a sign—something to act upon—and a symbol—an instrument of thought.

**Connotation and Denotation**

9 Keller, 1903, p. 21
10 Ibid, p. 22
11 Ibid, p. 23, emphasis added
12 Ibid, pp. 23-24
13 Langer, 1942, p. 63
As mentioned above, there are three vital parts of a sign’s meaning: subject, sign, and object. For symbols, there are four parts: subject, symbol, conception, and object. A symbol connotes its conception, and it denotes its object. There are therefore at least three different forms of meaning: signification, connotation, and denotation. Langer uses these terms in a specific way:

3 Types of Meaning:

**Signification**: Subject $\rightarrow$ Sign $\rightarrow$ Object

**Connotation**: Subject $\rightarrow$ Symbol $\rightarrow$ Conception

**Denotation**: Subject $\rightarrow$ Symbol $\rightarrow$ Conception $\rightarrow$ Object

Some might argue that symbols signify conceptions because of the logical, direct pairing of the two. But signification and connotation (and thus symbolization) are distinguished by the fact that the end point of connotation is a conception of an object, and not the object itself.

Conceptions are personal. It is impossible to say to what extent each person’s conception of a given object differs from another person’s conception of the same object. This leads to questions about the possibility of communication. Communication is only possible, therefore, when conceptions are valid, that is, when they share the same concept of the object, even if the conceptions themselves are personal and unique. So while conceptions vary from mind to mind, concepts must be rigid. Symbols convey the concept of an object, but they instantly become conceptions as soon as a subject receives them. Langer writes:

The power of understanding symbols, i.e. of regarding everything about a sense-datum as irrelevant except a certain form that it embodies, is the most characteristic mental trait of mankind. It issues in an unconscious, spontaneous process of abstraction, which goes on all the time in the human mind: a process of recognizing the
concept in any configuration given to experience, and forming a conception accordingly.\textsuperscript{14}

Below, I will discuss how this applies to Langer’s theory of music as a symbol.

**Two Classes Of Symbol: Discursive and Presentational**

Having classified meaning as a function and distinguished signs from symbols as two different types of meaning functions, we move on to the logic of discourse, of actually saying something. It is only in discourse that truth and falsity enter the picture of meaning. A group of words picked randomly from a dictionary is not a meaningful sentence (although given enough attempts such an occurrence could statistically happen). Only with the use of grammar do groups of words have meaning. Grammar thus has a symbolific use, though it is not itself a symbol since it does not stand for the conception of any object. Following the ideas of Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Langer claims that:

> It has become apparent that a proposition fits a fact not only because it contains the names for the things and actions involved in the fact, but also because it combines them in a pattern analogous, somehow, to the pattern in which the named objects are ‘in fact’ combined...A proposition is a picture of a structure—the structure of a state of affairs...The picture is essentially a symbol, not a duplicate, of what it represents.\textsuperscript{15}

This means that what a picture represents is dictated by the logical arrangement of its elements, an idea taken directly from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.*

Langer’s argument relies on three important parts of the *Tractatus*:

1) “One name stands for one thing, and another for another thing, and they are connected together. And so the whole like a living picture presents the atomic fact.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, p. 72  
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p. 68  
\textsuperscript{16} Wittgenstein, 1921, 4.0311
2) “At the first glance, the proposition — say as it stands printed on paper — does not seem to be a picture of the reality of which it treats. But neither does the musical score appear at first sight to be a picture of a musical piece; nor does our phonetic spelling (letters) seem to be a picture of our spoken language...”\textsuperscript{17}

3) “In the fact that there is a general rule by which the musician is able to read the symphony out of the score, and that there is a rule by which one could reconstruct the symphony from the line on a phonograph record and from this again — by means of the first rule — construct the score, herein lies the internal similarity between the things which at first sight seem to be entirely different. And the rule is the law of projection which projects the symphony into the language of the musical score. It is the rule of translation of this language into the language of the gramophone record.”\textsuperscript{18}

The above quotes capture one of the most important points in Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, namely that there is a logical rule by which language and the states of affair that it describes are related to one another. An isomorphism exists. The information of one (the state of affairs) can be retrieved from the ‘picture’ presented by the other (language) through the use of a rule for translating between forms. Langer, taking from Wittgenstein, calls the process “projection,” and utilizes the appropriate analogy of a geometric projection of a map. The relationship between the sizes of landmasses on a Mercator projection is not the same as their relationship on a globe (or the Earth), but one can extrapolate the relative sizes based on a rule; all of the necessary information is contained in the projection if (and only if) one knows the rule.\textsuperscript{19} (p. 79).

Similarly, language functions as a projection. Langer claims, interpreting Wittgenstein, that the relationships between facts in propositions are like objects in a picture. Any relation, such as “A precedes B” can be rendered the way an object can

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 4.011
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 4.0141
\textsuperscript{19} Langer, 1942, p. 79
be rendered in a picture. One way to render that particular relationship spatially could be “A, B.” But, as Russell argues, “even if we adopted this method for temporal order, we should still need words for all other relations, because we could not without intolerable ambiguity symbolize them by the order of our words.”\(^{20}\) This is why words exist to symbolize relations. Otherwise one would be limited by the relations that can be literally represented. For this reason, Langer argues that symbols should not be too similar to the entities they express. “A structure cannot include as part of a symbol something that should properly be part of the meaning.”\(^{21}\) Language has names not just for objects but also for relations so as to avoid using those same relations to express themselves.

**Discursive Symbols**

The significant characteristic of discursive symbols (i.e. language), Langer insists, is that as a result of named relations, ideas are strung out into propositions, even if those ideas are actually dynamic, concurrent relationships. Here she disagrees with Russell who argues that language can depict events because, like events, language is a temporal series.\(^ {22}\) Relations between objects are treated just like objects themselves—as words. This leads to what Langer views as a characteristic shortcoming of discursive symbols: any idea which cannot be expressed as a string of named objects and relationships cannot be expressed in words. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, writes, “Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said can be said clearly.”\(^ {23}\)

\(^{20}\) Russell, 1927, p. 264  
\(^{21}\) Langer, 1942, p. 81  
\(^{22}\) Ibid, p. 81  
\(^{23}\) Wittgenstein, 1921, 4.116
Discursive symbols, for Wittgenstein, are more powerful tools than they are for Langer. She summarizes this view, which she attributes to Russell, Frege, Carnap, as well as Wittgenstein, as insisting that:

Nothing that cannot be projected in a discursive form is accessible to the human mind at all, and any attempt to understand anything but demonstrable fact is bootless ambition. The knowable is clearly defined...by the requirement of discursive projectability.  

Even though Langer agrees with these analytic philosophers up to a point, she believes the limits of human intelligence are wider than they would be prepared to allow.

**Different Symbols Can Provide Different Types Of Knowledge**

Langer’s major *musico-semantic* claim is that the field of epistemology goes beyond language (discursive thought). The problem, she claims, is that contemporary epistemology blocked progress beyond what language offers because of two widely held tenets:

1. Language (including mathematical and scientific languages) is the only means of articulating thought.
2. Everything which is not speakable thought is feeling.  

Meaningful language, as suggested by Frege, Whitehead, Russell, and Carnap, is guided by a strict standard of rules that most forms of everyday communication, especially metaphysical claims, do not live up to. “Many linguistic utterances,” writes Carnap “…have only an expressive function, no representative function.”

Wittgenstein argues that most philosophical propositions are senseless based on a

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24 Langer, 1942, p. 86  
25 Ibid, p. 87  
26 Carnap, 1935, p. 28
poor understanding of the logic of language. Langer agrees that the study of metaphysics is tightly bound to the study of meanings, but she laments that:

So long as we admit only discursive symbolism as a bearer of ideas, ‘thought’ in this restricted sense must be regarded as our only intellectual activity. It begins and ends with language. Without the elements of scientific grammar, conception must be impossible.

She will not accept a solely discursive based epistemology. Langer is provoked by Russell’s idea that:

Our confidence in language is due to the fact that it...shares the structure of the physical world, and therefore can express that structure. But if there be a world which is not physical, or not in space-time, it may have a structure which we can never hope to express or to know. Perhaps that is why we know so much physics and so little of everything else.

In response to this quote Langer writes her pivotal objection:

I do not believe that ‘there is a world which is not physical, or not in space-time,’ but I do believe that in this physical, space-time world of our experience there are things which do not fit the grammatical scheme of expression….They are simply matters which require to be conceived through symbolistic schema other than discursive language.

People think, learn, and communicate through discursive symbolism, but discursive symbols are not the only route to knowledge. Possibilities of knowledge exist in other symbolic forms as well, and it is a mistake to discount them.

Presentational Symbols

One of these alternative symbolic forms is presentational symbolism. This includes art forms such as music, photography, sculpture, and painting, among others.

Where discursive meaning relies on the successive meanings of words and

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27 Wittgenstein, 1921, 4.003  
28 Langer, 1942, p. 88  
29 Russell, 1927, p. 265
grammatical syntax, in presentational symbols, form and content are inseparable. Wherever a symbol operates, there is meaning, and different types of symbols can afford different types of meaning. Presentational symbols, Langer argues, allow for the conception of ideas where discursive language may fail. “An idea that contains too many minute yet closely related parts, too many relations within relations...is too subtle for speech.” Therefore, an epistemology based solely on discursive thought leads to an insufficient theory of mind. “Language is a special mode of expression, and not every sort of semantic can be brought under this rubric.”

According to Langer, true language, or discourse, requires:

1. Vocabulary and syntax - words with fixed meanings, and composite meanings based on syntax combining such words
2. Definitions (dictionaries) - single words equivalent to combinations of other words
3. Translation into other languages

Presentational symbols do not satisfy these criteria. There are no units with individual meaning. For this reason, Langer does not classify music (nor other presentational symbols) as a language. There is no smallest independent symbol. There are no basic units within a photograph analogous to letters or words in language. Visual representation has no vocabulary. Certain musicologists insist that music does have a vocabulary, but Langer is not one of them. Furthermore,

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30 Langer, p. 88
31 Ibid, p. 93
32 Ibid, p. 94
33 Deryck Cooke argues against Langer’s notion that music has no fixed vocabulary. There are two ways to interpret his argument. Let’s call these two points the strong-vocab theory and the weak-vocab theory. The weak-vocab theory would be based on the linguistic notion (offered by Langer, but also earlier by Russell and others) that the meaning of words is constantly influenced by their use and by the use of every other word. Language is in a constant process of self-alteration. Every word’s meaning is dependent on every other word’s use, and meaning. Langer also insists that this is how music functions—notes do not have fixed content, but in the context of a given piece, specific notes,
presentational symbols cannot be used to define other symbols. One cannot define an image through another image, nor translate any presentational symbol into another. There is no equivalent sculpture for a picture. There is not even an equivalent picture for another picture. They can share a ‘total reference,’ but they do not share equivalence of smaller parts as two languages can. Nonetheless, presentational symbols, like all symbols, carry meaning because their logical construction allows for conceptualization of their objects.

Presentational Symbols And Feeling Share A Logical Form

Langer argues that feelings, like states of affairs, have forms which can be articulated through a logical isomorphism. But whereas states of affairs in the outer world can share form with discursive symbols, feelings (part of the inner world) only share a form with presentational symbols. What exactly is the form of a feeling? This harmonies, and gestures certainly have functions, perhaps unique to that piece, perhaps not. The weak vocab theory as suggested by Cooke would then state that within the context of each piece, or even each musical tradition (slightly less ‘weak’ of a theory, suggested by Meyer in Music, The Arts, and Ideas), there are somewhat fixed vocabularies of tones, harmonies, and progressions. He offers examples from Western Art music that are along the lines of “Within piece X, the minor sixth chord always suggests a feeling of Y.”

The strong-vocab theory, which Cooke also occasionally hints at, states that there are certain universal vocabularies to musical gestures. Any ascending motion signifies “outgoing, active, assertive emotion” (p. 115). Moving from the 1-3-5 would thus be outgoing through a joyful note (the 3rd) and therefore expresses outgoing joy. The strong theory is more difficult to defend and it is not clear that even Cooke supports it to the fullest extent. Although he does make some universal sounding claims such as:

To rise from the lower dominant over the tonic to the minor third, and fall back to the tonic with or without the intervening second, conveys the feeling of a passionate outburst of painful emotion, which does not protest further, but falls back into acceptance—a flow and ebb of grief” (Cooke, 1959, pp. 137-8).

For the purposes of examining Langer’s argument, we will assume that neither the strong- nor weak-vocab theories afford music the status of discursive language.
is an important question. Without answering it, one cannot argue that a symbol could share its form and thus symbolize it.

**On Significance In Music**

Music is the critical presentational symbol for Langer because it has a purely connotational form. The cardinal virtue of language, on the other hand, is denotation. The significance of art, especially music, is that its meaning lies in expressive forms. Form is significant for artists because it is only through form that art expresses any content. And unlike plastic and literary arts, music is non-representative. It is purely form. “The meaning of art belongs to the sensuous percept itself apart from what it ostensibly represents.”  

It is a commonly held view (though not undisputed) that there is some connection between music and emotion. As we shall see, Langer offers a unique argument as to the way in which music has such an effect.

**Emotions and Music: Not A Sign Relationship**

Charles Avison, an 18th Century British musicologist, is an early proponent of the claim that music arouses emotions in its listeners. Music, he argues, causes joy and sorrow, courage and fear. But Langer counters, “If music really frightens us, why do we listen to it?” Certainly people do things that frighten them, such as bungee jump and watch scary movies, so in this sense Langer’s criticism is not convincing. But it becomes clear that she is correct in claiming that music does not necessarily cause the emotions that it may nonetheless symbolize. Avison argues that

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34 Langer, 1942, p. 209
even if we may not actually feel such emotions, we at least sympathize with those who are feeling them. And the people who are feeling such emotions are the musicians playing the music.

Langer finds many problems with the notion that music is the expression of a musician’s actual emotions while performing the music. First, the very fact that music can simultaneously express many different emotions would be problematic for a performer. Where one person hears conflict, another person may hear passionate love, and a third could hear tranquility. It does not seem reasonable to suggest that a performer simultaneously feels all of the possible interpretations that an audience may perceive. Also, with regard to announcing concerts in advance, does this require a performer to assume complete foresight of his emotions? Furthermore, music expresses emotions through artistic form, and yet we express ourselves without such form all the time. Why is there a need for such elaborate artistic form if self-expression can manifest itself in such simple ways as expressive yelps, laughs, or facial expressions?³⁷

There is separate but related claim that it is the composers’ emotions, not the performers’, that a piece of music expresses. But how would that account for the many variations in performance and interpretation of the same piece?

In response to such questions, Langer argues that music’s significance lies not in any symptomatic evocation of emotion, but rather in a semantic fashion—the same way that language relates to its conceptual content symbolically.³⁸ Music neither conveys the feelings of a performer, nor does it cause feelings in its listeners; rather,

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³⁵ Avison, 1775
³⁶ Langer, 1942, p. 214
³⁷ Ibid, p. 216
it expresses feelings to them. It allows feelings to be conceived. This is an important distinction. Music does not do this the same way discursive symbols do, nor how other presentational symbols do. Nonetheless, expression of feelings must involve a shared logical structure. Music is not just a personal sign of someone’s emotions, but a semantic symbolism with a content of ideas.

It would be a mistake to interpret Langer’s semantic view of musical symbolism to be a reference to literal onomatopoeic sounds or confined to the programmatic music of the 19th century, made famous by Berlioz, Strauss, etc. In fact, much of the power of that music stems from its use of re-appropriated signs, such as bells, hammers, hoof beats, and other forms of sound painting. While these techniques could certainly be emotionally effective, especially with their concurrent use in the increasingly popular field of opera, they are not the symbols of feeling to which Langer refers. These techniques are apt to mimic instances of when or how certain feelings come about. But Langer is arguing that music provides knowledge of human feeling, not outright experiences of feelings.

**Distancing and Formalizing**

Rather than expressing the feelings one currently feels, as Langer refers to it, a “plea for sympathy,” music formulates and expresses the form of feeling itself. Music may share the same subject matter as self expression, i.e. feelings, and it may even use some of the same techniques that self expression uses (e.g. dynamic

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38 Ibid, p. 218
39 A critical difference between the presentational symbolisms of painting and music, for example, is music’s dynamic unfolding, compared to painting’s static form of presentation.
40 Ibid, p. 219
41 Ibid, p. 222
contrasts) but music as a symbol has *distanced* itself from emotion and also *formalized* its expression.

What is distancing? Distancing is the “hall-mark of every artistic projection (sic).”\(^{42}\) It makes emotions conceivable just as language makes states of affairs conceivable. Just as one can describe Jack through language (“Jack”) without his being actually present, music can make emotions conceivable even if they do not exist inside the subject. States of affairs occur outside a subject and thus the power of discursive symbols is that they can describe both states of affairs which do exist and those which do not. But emotions only occur within a subject. Thus while signs may cause emotions within a subject, symbols allow emotions which may or may not be felt by the subject to be conceivable. This is what is meant by “distancing.” It accounts for the difference between the theory of music as self-expression and the theory of music as logical-expression. Distance means the subject is not actually feeling the emotions expressed, just as a symbol is not actually the symptom of a state of affairs the way a sign is.

What about formalization? Since we can assume that the psychological subject of music’s meaning is the listener, we must analyze the logical aspect—how meaning can be conveyed within the symbol. As discussed above, Langer shares Wittgenstein’s belief that shared logical form between symbol and object is necessary to convey meaning. Langer claims, “That musical structures logically resemble certain dynamic patterns of human experience is a well-established fact.”\(^{43}\) Langer is saying less here than it may first appear. She is not yet making the bolder claim that music resembles the dynamic patterns of human inner experience, but merely that

\(^{42}\) Ibid, p. 222
music shares similarities with the movements of physical objects in the world: accelerando, crescendo, their opposites, etc. Objects in our world also speed up, get louder, among other processes. This is how music resembles the dynamic world.

Eventually, though, Langer does make a bolder claim based on the notion that the core of musical relationships are tensions and resolutions. Langer argues that certain aspects of inner life have formal properties similar to those contained in musical patterns.\(^44\) Besides music sharing the dynamic properties with our outer experiences, it shares the tendency to have tension and then resolve, like our inner experiences. This is enough, she insists, to say that there is a shared logical form between music and the subjective experience of emotion.

Furthermore, music has many attributes that makes it a good candidate to be a symbol, Langer argues. That does not immediately make it a symbol for emotion specifically, though. Nonetheless, music has separable items that can be combined and rearranged (notes, phrases); they are not significant on their own, i.e. just like letters or words, they do not have much value unless combined; they are easily distinguished (perceptibly so) and remembered; and finally their use changes each other’s character.\(^45\)

What about musical vocabulary? This is another place where Langer sees music as differing from discursive language—it has no vocabulary. She insists, “to call the tones of a scale its words, harmony its grammar, and thematic development its syntax, is a useless allegory, for tones lack the very thing that distinguishes a word

\(^{43}\) Ibid, p. 226  
\(^{44}\) Hoeslin, 1920  
\(^{45}\) Langer, 1942, p. 228
from a mere vocable: fixed connotation or ‘dictionary meaning.’ While music may have a semantic function, its lack of fixed semantic function, along with its lack of syntactic rules for combining such parts, leaves it unable to express the way languages can with its combined, definite names.

This leads to a problem. If music cannot denote that which it expresses, and it cannot combine names into complex syntactical relationships, how can it lead to the type of conceptual content that Langer insists symbols express? F. Heinrich argues:

There are many musical works of high artistic value that baffle us when we try to denote by one word the mood they are supposed to convey. This alone suffices to make the conception of music as a sentimental art, or an art of expressing sentiments, quite untenable. Whatever music symbolizes, it cannot be singled out. Can that which cannot be named be known? Langer argues in the affirmative, and further that this is a characteristic strength of musical symbolism.

Language certainly utilizes individualized objects, characteristics, events, and emotions to great effect. Does this mean that language is the only form of articulation? “Music,” Langer argues, “articulates forms which language cannot set forth.” And it does so specifically because it has a different terminology and pattern than discursive thought. Why do we assume that if something cannot be translated into discursive thought then it cannot be expressed at all? This neglects to realize that discursive thought is itself symbolic, even if we take it to be literal. Langer declares, “There is no literal expression, but only another kind of symbol.”

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46 Ibid, p. 228  
47 Heinrich, F. See Langer, 1942, p. 233  
48 Langer, 1942, p. 233  
49 Ibid, p. 234
thought is itself symbolic, which Langer argues it is, why should discursive symbols be the only type of symbols that are accepted as epistemically valuable?

Finally, Langer writes, “Because the forms of human feeling are much more congruent with the musical forms than with the forms of language, music can reveal the nature of feelings with a detail and truth that language cannot approach.” As to what exactly this form is, we will see that Langer never truly offers a satisfactory theory.

So far, this discussion has taken for granted that music, even if not a discursive language, is somehow an expression of feeling, specifically. But that view is not representative of theorists everywhere. In fact, the more fervent argument in this musical debate usually stems from the non-believers in musical meaning. Insisting that music has meaning, they argue, detracts from its true sensuous virtue. This debate is discussed in detail in Chapter Two. Langer dismisses the debate by insisting on the dichotomy of music as either significant or meaningless. If it is not significant, it must be meaningless. It could still be significant, though, without being significant specifically of feeling. Malcolm Budd’s specific iteration of this argument will be addressed later in this chapter.

Langer preemptively responds to such criticism by conceding a little bit of ground. Music says something, she argues, but only in generalities. It does not have specific content. It only abstracts from feeling. It expresses the morphology of feeling, the general form of feeling. An analogy would be algebraic equations which show only the form of equations, and are still meaningful without being filled in by specific numbers. Therefore, music is missing one important part of true symbolism: fixed

Ibid, p. 235
import (meaning). This is what Langer means by “unconsummated.” Music is a “limited idiom, like an artificial language, only even less successful.” This explains how certain musical forms can be equally interpreted as happy or sad. Rather than viewing this as a paradox, Langer sees this as merely a side effect of the fact that sad and happy (and many other) emotions have similar morphology. Music, for Langer, is a “form capable of connotation, and the meanings to which it is amenable are articulations of emotive, vital, sentient experience. But its import is never fixed.”

Langer’s final point, after defending presentational symbolism, is an attack on discursive language. In short, discursive thought is unable to express emotions because discursive thought and emotions do not share a logical form. Discursive language’s content is too specific, unlike music’s “play of content.”

**Budd’s Critique of Langer**

Malcolm Budd has his own comprehensive view on musical meaning, but for my purposes I will only focus on his criticisms of Langer that I find most compelling. His objections to Langer can be grouped into three main categories:

(A) Inaccuracy in taking over Wittgenstein’s language and philosophy;

(B) Unclarity of the new concepts proposed;

(C) Fallacious or problematic arguments, in which cases Budd provides relevant counter-examples.

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51 Ibid, p. 240
52 Ibid, p. 240
53 Ibid, p. 243
(A) Inaccurate Interpretation/Appropriation of Wittgenstein

Budd claims that Langer uses Wittgenstein’s terms “fact,” “state of affairs,” “object,” “structure,” and “form” differently than Wittgenstein intended. She therefore offers only a “verbal imitation” of his view.\(^{54}\) This is problematic for her overall argument because it undermines her attack on discursive symbols, an attack that forms the basis for her presentational symbol theory. In discussing discursive symbols, Langer commandeers Wittgenstein’s idea of a similar structure being shared by a discursive symbol and that which it symbolizes. When she moves to presentational symbols, she carries over this view of analogous structure. Therefore, if her initial interpretation of Wittgenstein is problematic, those of her arguments that depend on this interpretation may themselves be problematic. Namely, her claim that music is a presentational symbol for the morphology of feeling would require that the configuration of objects making up emotion be analogous to the form of music.

Objects, for Wittgenstein, are what make up facts. Their configuration is the determinate way they relate to each other. The logical form of a state of affairs, the thing that propositions can share with a state of affairs, is the possibility of this structure. Langer refers to “the pattern in which named objects are ‘in fact’ combined” in a discursive symbol as being somehow analogous to that which it symbolizes.\(^{55}\)

Langer’s use of “object” here differs from a *Tractarian* “object.” Objects are abstract to Wittgenstein. Objects are nameable, but only within elementary propositions. Objects are those things which exist in every possible world. They

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\(^{54}\) Budd, 1985, p. 111

\(^{55}\) Langer, 1942, p. 68
constitute the form of the world.\textsuperscript{56} Wittgenstein does not and cannot produce an example of one, even though he argues that they must exist. Rather, they are transcendentally deduced. On the other hand, Langer thinks that, as far as language is concerned, one can identify objects. She refers to the pattern in which “named objects are ‘in fact’ combined” as the form that propositions picture.\textsuperscript{57}

Form in the \textit{Tractatus} is not the same as the form of feeling for Langer. In the \textit{Tractatus}, form is the configuration of objects. If emotion has form in a \textit{Tractarian} sense, then it must have a set of elements. Langer does not offer suggestions of what those elements of emotion could be. If the configuration of a group of objects is analogous to the form of emotion, then one could say that emotion has form. Langer fails to back up this claim. We are left guessing both the types of objects configured in emotion and in music.

Budd views Langer’s loose use of the term “object” here as a failure in her explanation of a discursive symbol.

(B) Unclarity of Concepts

Budd criticizes Langer’s theory as lacking clarity in two of its proposed concepts: defining the form of feeling, and specifying the level of musical structure that is analogous to this form. Both of these unclear concepts are integral to her argument, and without clarifying them, her theory remains unconvincing.

If music represents the form of feelings, then feelings must have some form that makes them unique. Otherwise, music could be representing something, or anything, other than feeling. Langer admits that different feelings, like happiness and

\textsuperscript{56} Proops, 2004, p. 5
sadness, can have the same morphology. It is for this reason that music does not represent specific feelings. So feelings can share form with other types of feelings. That is to say, emotions are not unique in form, compared to other emotions. Are emotions as a class unique compared to other phenomena, in such a way that allows music to represent their form and not the form of anything/everything else? Budd denies this. “The ways in which emotions and feelings can develop have nothing distinctive about them.” The dynamic aspects of music may be shared by our emotions, but this is also true of many other processes. This means that feelings can share form with opposing feelings (happiness/sadness), and with phenomena completely outside the emotive realm, such as—to use Budd’s examples—the setting sun, the mounting of storms, or the explosion of volcanoes. Thus, Budd claims, rather than representing the morphology of feeling, music simply represent the morphology of process. This is a much broader field than Langer allows for.

This naturally leads one to ask: at what level does musical structure have a form analogous to the morphology of process (or feeling)? Budd points out that there is no context-free way to determine what level of musical structure one is referring to. For example, Beethoven’s Diabelli Variations, a set of 33 piano pieces based on one theme, can be musicologically examined on many levels. Surely no one’s feelings are of theme and variation form, which would be a high level structure at which one could examine the Beethoven variations. The likelihood of a particular musical form sharing logical form with feeling is inversely proportional to the detail in which a piece of music is studied. The deeper the musical analysis, the less the music’s form seems analogous to that of feeling.

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57 Langer, 1942, p. 68
Instead of analyzing specific musical works, could it be that music in general shares form with the morphology of feeling? This is also unsatisfying for two reasons. First, it neglects the variety and depth of musical forms and styles that exist. And secondly, it ignores the complicated but nonetheless important consideration of musical value. At what musical or compositional point do pieces of music start to take on the form of feeling? “The truth is that if the structure of a musical work can be fitted to some form that feeling is likely to follow, this will only be in so general a manner as to omit most of the detail that gives music its value.” This topic of discussion will be addressed in a new light in Chapter Two.

(C) Fallacious/Problematic Arguments

Budd’s next set of criticisms all examine aspects of Langer’s theory that he finds fallacious or problematic.

Langer underestimates discursive language’s ability to describe the inner life of feeling. Where discursive language fails, musical presentational symbolism succeeds. For Budd, discursive language does not fail where Langer insists it does. Budd concedes that we do have difficulty in describing feelings at times, but not in describing the morphology of feeling. This must be how discursive language fails, though, since this is how Langer insists musical symbolism works. Budd responds that while we have difficulty describing the quality of feelings, we do not struggle with the temporal pattern or the morphology. We actually can describe the form of our feelings discursively. It is the quality of our experience of feelings with which we have difficulty.

58 Budd, 1985, p. 114
Our only difficulty arises, Budd argues, because feelings are themselves imprecise. Sometimes we are not sure how we feel. This is not a shortcoming of language, but a testament to our complicated emotional lives. Budd’s argument as to how discursive language can describe feeling is as follows. Thoughts are integral to feelings. Thoughts can all be represented discursively. As long as we accurately specify the thoughts accompanying our feelings, we can introduce precision into our discursive accounts of feeling. Thus, by describing the thoughts that accompany feelings, one can discursively describe feelings. Langer underestimates the resources and precision of discursive language. Even with her problematic account of discursive language, Budd admits that Langer could still be correct about music’s ability as a presentational symbol to represent the morphology of feeling. It is simply a weaker claim than she takes it to be.

Budd next claims that Langer is wrong about the ability of music to give insight into feeling. Langer insists that music allows us to reflect on feelings by symbolizing their form in a certain manner. Just as discursive language allows us to make patterns and relations of our experience of the outer world, music allows the same for our inner experience, emotions. But since music is only an unconsummated symbol, Budd denies that it can reveal anything except the dynamic aspects of feeling, such as development, change, and intermingling. He dismisses this as having no importance. This is unimportant because if we are unaware of certain aspects of inner life, we would only be unaware of “varieties of feeling,” and not “the possible

59 Ibid, p. 118
60 Langer would counter here that, no, she perfectly accounts for its precision. Rather, Budd undervalues the importance of an imprecise symbol in expressing emotions’ imprecision.
61 Budd, 1985, p. 113
ways in which feelings might alter us” i.e. their dynamic aspects.\textsuperscript{62} In summary, music may symbolize the morphology of feeling, but that is of no value, for we are already familiar with it.

Budd next takes issue with the fact that Langer defines symbols as instrumental, and yet does not explain music’s non-instrumental use—that it is listened to for enjoyment. Thus, Langer’s conception of music does not hold up to her own definition of a symbol. She writes that an item is a symbol for a person of another item if and only if the two items share similar structure and the person uses the first item to conceive of the second. This implies an instrumental interest in the symbol, as opposed to valuing the symbol itself. In fact, Langer writes that the symbol is of less interest to the subject than the object it helps the subject conceptualize (See above on Signs vs. Symbols). This does not account for the fact that music clearly has more than an instrumental value to a listener.\textsuperscript{63} Music is intrinsically appealing; it is not simply listened to in order to learn knowledge of emotion. It is not always—that is, necessarily—a symbol. Similarly, for some people maps could be intrinsically valuable. Does that take away their status as symbols? Does this mean music can act as an unconsummated symbol, but it does not have to? Does this disqualify it as a symbol?

If listening were a form of knowledge acquisition, as Langer claims, why would anyone listen to a piece of music repeatedly? Most instances of knowledge acquisition are not readily repeated, Budd argues, but people will listen to the same piece of music dozens or even hundreds of times, especially with the advent of

\begin{itemize}
\item[Ibid, p. 113]
\item[63]Contrast this with a map or language: at least on a scale of instrumental use to intrinsic value, music is further to the end of intrinsic value than those other symbols.
\end{itemize}
recorded music. Therefore the kind of knowledge we receive from music must either be pleasurable to receive, or the knowledge must not be extracted and retained when it is received. Langer provides no reason for why we would find it especially pleasurable to gain the type of knowledge that music affords. But she does argue as to why we repeat it. The form of feelings vanishes from consciousness immediately into, in Budd’s words, “highly condensed versions of themselves.” 64 Works of art such as music, unlike our memory, can retain these forms for our repeated access to recover them.

If the forms of emotions are so elusive, why can art hold onto the form, especially if the forms are supposedly analogous between the music and our inner experience? Is elusiveness a necessary part of the logically analogous structure? Does an isomorphism of form imply equal degrees of elusiveness? Budd thinks so, and insists that we only return to music for the pleasure intrinsic to the music, not to relearn some type of elusive knowledge.

Budd’s last argument is that Langer’s theory does not clarify musical value. It does not account for good music compared to bad music, or even a subjective view that there is such a thing for someone in particular. It is commonly held belief that different musical works have different values for different listeners. Some music is considered undistinguished and some is valued as good music. Without getting into the aesthetics behind such value-claims, one could nonetheless ask: do both undistinguished and distinguished musics equally symbolize the form of feeling? Furthermore, there are many different styles, genres, and vocabularies of music. Do these symbolize the form of feeling equally well? Just as not every discursive symbol

64 Ibid, p. 117
has equal literary value (e.g. a grocery list compared to a Dostoevsky novel), could it be that not every presentational symbol has musical value?

Langer’s view is that bad art does not articulate or present feeling. Instead, it corrupts it. How does one distinguish between a work that does not articulate feeling, and a work that simply does not articulate feeling in a way that the listener comprehends and identifies with? As Budd argues, “If it is necessary to determine in a manner independent of the form of a musical work itself the form of feeling that is supposed to be the subject of the work (to establish its accuracy), what method is available? Langer does not answer this.”

Conclusion

Although in the end I want to reject Langer’s theory that music symbolizes the form of feeling, I do want to highlight some valuable parts of her argument. Her suggestion that there is potential for knowledge beyond that which can be offered by an exclusively discursive perspective is provocative, and became a point of contention in subsequent epistemic debates. Even more valuable is her attack on the sign relationship between music and emotions. Listening to music is often an emotional experience, but Langer is right to highlight the symbolic component of distancing that occurs upon hearing music, the ability to conceive of emotions in a different way from actually feeling such emotions.

Budd’s criticism is also helpful in bringing forth some weaknesses in Langer’s theory. Two main criticisms stand out. First, Budd shows how superimposing Wittgenstein’s picture theory of language onto music is not a straightforward process.

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65 Ibid, 1985, p. 119
Langer’s attempts to do so were creative, but ultimately failed to be convincing. Secondly, Budd correctly points out that one must be specific in locating the level of musical structure to which one’s theory refers. Claims regarding musical structure become meaningless when they are not properly contextualized. This methodological input became valuable in my own analysis of Charles Ives’s music in Chapter Three.

In looking at the debate between Langer and Budd, it seems that they share a common presupposition. Namely, they are both concerned with how music conveys something in particular. Even though Langer argues that music functions as an unconsummated symbol, she nevertheless believes that music does convey something, specifically the morphology of feeling. Budd expands the possibility of Langer’s claims to include the entire morphology of process. In both cases, music functions symbolically within a fixed range of *a priori* meanings. I want to reject this premise, and examine the possibility that music, though not meaningless, does not have specific denotations or even connotations. Rather, it has many different types of connotative possibilities, which each play a separate role in the potential for musical meaning. Claiming that there is no fixed range of meanings is not to say that the musical stimulus is entirely arbitrary. The specific work is certainly relevant. I do not go so far as to claim that music is simply a window or mirror encountered by the listener, entirely open to an infinitude of interpretations. The connotative possibilities must be bounded, in some way, by properties intrinsic to the particular piece of music. Therefore, in the subsequent chapters, I will move away from an examination of music itself as the sole source of its meaning, and take a broader approach that focuses on an interplay of musical structure and the psychology of experiencing it.
Are Musical Universals In The Music
Or Just In Our Heads?
Noam Chomsky, Dane Harwood, Mark Changizi and Leonard Meyer
On Musical Universals

Introduction

Langer’s thesis is that a necessary part of musical meaning is its logical structure. As a presentational symbol, it symbolizes the morphology of human feelings. This chapter will offer an alternative view, suggesting that what is necessary for musical meaning lies not in the logical half of musical symbols—the music—but in the psychological half—the listener. The variety of different thinkers woven into this chapter are unified by the common thread of focusing on the way we process symbols, including both language and music.

Relying on the theories of Noam Chomsky and other linguists, we will first examine the notion of universals in language. What necessary features exist in all human languages? It is my hope that doing so will provide insight into how universals relate to meaningful communication across all different types of languages. We will explore whether universal linguistic concepts have analogues in music. An important issue that arises in connection to this discussion is how to define music. What gets included in the argument? While this question is certainly related to my project, it is not the main focus. Rather than being dogmatic about what ‘counts’ as music, I try to consider the degree to which different humanly organized sounds fall in line, or fail to fall in line, with the claims I make. I always keep in mind the following quote by David McAllester: “Any student of man must know that somewhere, someone is
doing something that he calls music but nobody else would give it that name.”¹ Using a universal-structure based approach to account for musical meaning will be rejected in favor of a cognitive, information processing approach.

We will then look at two theorists who study the way we process music. Dane Harwood provides a cognitive-psychological perspective, and Mark Changizi represents a neuro-evolutionary perspective. This section will argue that if anything universal accounts for musical meaning, it is not the syntax or structure of the music, but a structured listening.

Next, influenced mostly by the aesthetic theories of Leonard Meyer and the musico-semantic theories of Jean-Jacques Nattiez, we will examine the connotative properties of music, and connect this back to certain universalist theories of Chomsky. This section will ask the question, “How does music connote?”

Musicologists, musicians, historians, and anthropologists each, to some extent, examine these questions. The aim of this chapter is to study them from a philosophical, linguistic, and cognitive perspective.

Chomsky et al. On The LAD and Universals

In the 1950’s, Noam Chomsky proposed the theory of universal grammar. This idea stems from the observation that human beings are born with the unique, innate ability to acquire and organize language. Other species, even if exposed to the same stimuli, do not have such abilities. Whatever it is which humans possess and other species lack that accounts for language, Chomsky refers to as the language acquisition device (LAD). The LAD enables a newborn child to acquire the language

¹ McAllaster, 1971, p. 379
of his or her community rapidly and with limited input. The abilities and the constraints of the LAD continue to be of interest to linguists. It is argued that these constraints, whatever they may be, account for certain universal characteristics in all human languages.

Even if the posited LAD is not responsible for language universals, scholars within the field of descriptive linguistics have, as we shall see, suggested other reasons for the phenomenon of universals in language. This does not imply that all languages are simply variations on the same theme. Rather, it means that certain aspects of every language are arbitrary, while other aspects seem to be invariant—to pop up in all languages.

A notable arbitrary aspect of language is the direction in which it is written and read. It is not arbitrary in the sense that it has no influence on meaning. Clearly, English sentences must be read from left to right in order to convey the intended meaning. On the other hand, English, Arabic, and Chinese are all read in different directions, and this fact does not seem to influence the overall expressive powers of these languages as languages. In this sense, the direction in which a written language is written and read is arbitrary.

The supporters of the LAD and universal grammar theories posit that if one examines language at a more general and abstract level, certain invariant features will remain constant across all languages. These are called absolute universals. They are of the form “for all languages $L$, property $P$ holds of $L$.” Examples of absolute universals include the existence of vowels, pronoun systems distinguishing at least

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2 Hawkins, 1988, p. 3
3 Ibid, p. 5
three persons and two numbers, and (some include) Chomskyan generative grammar.\textsuperscript{4} There are also universals of the form “If language L has property P, it will have property R,” wherein property P is not a necessary property. For example, if a language contains a color word for red, it will also have a color word for white and black. If a language contains a color word for blue, it will also have a color word for green and yellow.\textsuperscript{5}

Some claim that absolute universals are the result of, and therefore provide insight into, the \textit{a priori} (genetic/cognitive) innate bases for language (e.g. Chomsky). The universals exist, that is, because of cognitive abilities and limitations that all humans possess. Others view absolute universals as the result of semantic considerations: universal grammatical forms stem from corresponding semantic interpretations (e.g. Ed Keenan). Still others view universals as the result of the pragmatics of discourse (e.g. Paul Grice). Other camps attribute universals to the limited processing and production powers of human machinery in real time, such as short-term memory limitations (e.g. Susumu Kuno). Finally, and most relevant to this project, language universals have been explained as a result of human perceptual systems and human cognition (e.g. Michael Lee).\textsuperscript{6}

Lee is interested in how the structure of our everyday experiences as humans on planet Earth influences and is reflected in the structure of our language. It is almost so obvious that we fail to notice the fact that, while languages are human-created systems of communication, they exist in the confines of the real world.\textsuperscript{7} Humans within entirely different language communities share similar brain hardware,
but they also share experiences independent of language community and neural systems. Examples include the effects of gravity, the cyclical patterns of our days and years, the spatial domains of our bodies, etc. From these shared experiences spring language universals. By studying language, we can study how our outside forces influence our conceptual experiences. As Lee writes, “The major moral of this exploration is that our everyday experiences as humans on Earth exert more pressure on linguistic systems than has traditionally been recognized.”

There is thus another bifurcation of language universals. First, there are those which are universal by definition, how we define “language.” Then there are those which, “have as their antecedent property contingent properties of life on Earth....If we all moved to Venus, however, only universals of the first type may survive.” Lee argues that the ideas of 19th-century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, highlighted in the following quote, are incorrect:

> But even after we become acquainted with the structures of language and classify them, we can draw no accurate conclusions outside the domain of linguistics proper....The true and unique objects of linguistics is language studied in and for itself.¹⁰

Lee argues that linguistic analysis can reveal truths about human beings and the world we live in. I want to make a similar argument about music.

**Seeger: Homology, Analogy, Heterology**

Charles Seeger highlights potential methodological pitfalls stemming from music-language comparisons, which are important to our understanding of how music

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⁷ Lee, 1988, p. 211
⁸ Ibid, p. 212
⁹ Ibid, p. 241
¹⁰Ibid, p. 212, emphasis in original
fits into these linguistic theories. One should confront them by discussing issues of homology, analogy, and heterology between music and language.

**Homology:** Music and speech are both sound-production techniques employed by humans that communicate some message from a producer to a receiver. Both techniques rely, to a non-fixed extent, on a shared tradition or practice between producer and receiver for the signal to be received as a message. The sounds of language and music are derived from a corpus of smaller sounds, along with a procedure for combining them. Furthermore, representation in the sense of “presenting again” certain functions, constructions, and relationships are integral to both music and language.

**Analogy:** In both speech and language, small units are combined to form larger and larger strings. It is traditionally held that as the units get smaller, so does the meaning. The smallest meaningless unit used for constructing meaningful phrases in language is a phoneme—a single, irreducible sound of some sort. The “a” in “father,” for example, is a phoneme. Music has no such easily identifiable unit. Tones and rhythmic beats are likely candidates. This separation of tone from rhythm does not fully capture how they function together in music, though. Alternatively there is Seeger’s holistic term *museme*, which references a tone-beat. This phoneme/museme analogy falls apart when one compares the next level of linguistic structure: words, or *morphemes*. Morphemes are words with one meaning that can be distinguished in sound from other words. They are not analogous to musical phrases or chords, though. The relationship between a piece of music, or an entire canon of music, with its *musemes* is more abstract and fluid than the relationship between words and sentences or languages. The message contained in a linguistic signal-message
complex depends on the meanings behind morphemes, and not strictly the sounds (or signals) that contain them. With music, the message and its signals cannot be so easily separated, which leads to the following heterology between music and speech.

**Heterology:** The most glaring, and yet also controversial, heterology between music and speech is that while both can be described, in some sense objectively, in terms of pitch, loudness, timbre, tone, rhythmic accent, etc., such descriptions capture drastically different aspects of music as compared to language. Language is made up of sounds, but it necessarily functions by describing a universe beyond the sounds. With music, this ability seems to be a contingent feature. Philosophers of language have long struggled to understand what the exact correspondence is between discourse and the other phenomenal experiences that our senses provide. The correspondence—the relationship—is crucial. The modality of such a relationship in music will be a focus of the ensuing sections.11

**Meyer On Universalism**

In his article in *Ethnomusicology* entitled “Universalism and Relativism In The Study Of Ethnic Music” (1960), Meyer proposes a new paradigm for studying music with regard to *universalism*.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a reigning academic musicological viewpoint characterized music as a universal language.12 Differences between different cultures’ musics were dismissed as apparent rather than real. Musical styles merely hid the absolute principles underlying all the world’s music. Musicologists need simply to uncover these universal laws, it was thought, and music’s

11 Seeger, 1960, pp. 224-261
communicative powers will consequently reveal themselves. This, Meyer insists, did not happen.\textsuperscript{13}

A period of musical relativism followed next. This entailed ceasing the search for universals, and instead examining a culture’s music strictly through that culture’s own lens. In the relativistic view, there is no value in comparisons made from perspectives outside the music’s culture of origin. Such comparisons do not take into account the subjective/contextual reception necessary to understand a particular piece of music. Soon, this too went out of fashion, as people realized that there was no need to choose between the extremes of a) universalism and b) complete relativism.

As a result, the cross-cultural search began, a search to find and understand those musical processes which existed in many different cultures’ musics, and those which were unique to particular traditions. This led to the problem of deceptive appearance. Two cultures, for example, may seem to use the same scale, and yet they may interpret them quite differently. Conversely, two cultures may appear to employ radically different musical structures, which nonetheless share much in the way of a general underlying principle. In many cases, the apparent structure of music tells one nothing about the way it is interpreted in any particular setting. The cross-cultural approach failed because it could not account for these types of deceptive appearances.

Meyer insists that all of these approaches to descriptive ethnomusicology failed because they treated music as an object to be observed.\textsuperscript{14} Like a physicist researching the laws of physics, they merely described the observed principles without positing a cause, specifically a human cause. Regularities, if found, must be

\textsuperscript{12} Meyer, 1960, p. 49. For an extreme case, see the writings of Richard Wagner.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, p. 49
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, p. 50
described in the contexts of the cultures from which they arise. Furthermore, regularities must be explained with regard to the question: what are the contextual and human causes of these observations? Psychology begins to enter the picture. Studying music, Meyer argues, must combine a study of the stimulus with a study of the responding individual.\footnote{Ibid, p. 51}

Terms will, consequently, change meanings. “Mode” will no longer simply describe a physical phenomena pertaining to the ratios of different frequencies. It will describe a psychological experience as well. Concepts like tonality will not simply be described as the result of statistical occurrence, but will also be connected to the psychological underpinnings of the experiences they bring about. Meyer demands a musicology that does not simply provide data, but also provides theory connecting objective phenomena and psychological responses.

“What we should ask,” Meyer proposes with regard to the problem of universalism contra relativism, “is whether beneath the profusion of diverse and divergent particulars, there are any universal principles functioning.”\footnote{Ibid, p. 51} Meyer does not mean universal musical principles, per se, but rather universal principles underlying the human connection to music. This will bring a focus to psychological concepts which may explain and help interpret the diverse musical processes found in our world.

The problem, Meyer insists, is not whether music evokes connotations (see Langer). A significant amount of evidence supports the notion that it does. Nor is the problem, from his view, about the propriety or aesthetic value of the connotations. The question is whether the connotative processes are similar in different cultures,
whether similar musical processes and structure give rise to similar, or culturally analogous, connotations. Scales, modes, and means of variation—all vary from culture to culture.\textsuperscript{17} But what remains constant regarding the human construction of that perception? Meyer supports multi-cultural-musicality (learning other cultures’ music if one wishes to truly theorize about it) to help answer questions of syntax and associative aspects within a musical work.

Meyer distinguishes between three aspects of musical enjoyment: the sensuous, the associative-characterizing, and the syntactical. Every piece can have all three, though they may be weighted differently.\textsuperscript{18} Associative-characterizing enjoyment, pleasure that arises from the nature of associations one makes with a musical stimulus, can stem from either the sensuous or the syntactical. Meyer is not clear on how one distinguishes between the sensuous and syntactical. It seems that the sensuous is based on how the notes sound, perhaps timbre and even melody, the pulse, the groove, etc. Syntactic concerns, on the other hand, seem very connected to Western notions of compositional form. Meyer is not explicit regarding this, though.

In talking about syntax, he may, alternatively, be speaking in the broader sense of music’s kinetic/dynamic unfolding (a feature Langer also highlights), and the expectation and resolution that this entails:

The Kinetic position, thus specified, can be crudely summarized as follows: the significance of a musical event—be it a tone, a motive, a phrase, or a section—lies in the fact that it leads the practiced listener to expect, consciously or unconsciously, the arrival of a subsequent event or one of a number of alternative subsequent events. Such expectations (or ‘subjective predictions’) are entertained with varying degrees of certainty, depending upon what is felt to be the probability of any particular event in a specific set of

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, p. 51
\textsuperscript{17} Meyer, 1967, p. 7
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, p. 34
musical circumstances. Or, viewed objectively, because of the way the human mind perceives patterns and because of the listener’s learned stylistic habits, one musical event implies subsequent musical events with particular degrees of probability.\footnote{Ibid, p. 44-45}

Meyer insists that this “felt” probability is a product of the frequency with which a particular musical relationship has been experienced by the listener.\footnote{It would be interesting to study how Meyer’s discussion of “learned stylistic habits” relate to Chomsky’s discussion of LAD and the notion that there simply is not enough negative-evidence for an infant language-learner to accurately learn grammar as effectively as he actually does. Unfortunately, that will not be discussed in this paper.} Below, we will expand on this idea and connect it to Natiez’s notion of musical \textit{introversive} meaning.

\textbf{Harwood On Information Processing}

In Dane Harwood’s article, “Universals In Music: A Perspective From Cognitive Psychology” (1976), Harwood considers linguistic structuralist approaches as a tool for understanding musical meaning. He dismisses them in favor of a different type of structure: \textit{structured listening}. Central to his argument are principles of information processing. Absolute structural universals, akin to those found in language listed above, do not seem to exist in the world’s music. Structural features that are central to Western traditions—such as tonal harmony—or to certain West, South, and East African communities—such as an emphasis on interwoven rhythmic complexity—are not found to operate on a universal basis.\footnote{Harwood, 1976, p. 528}

Based on a combination of both auditory processing and the values and meanings selected by a social community, Harwood describes his theory of structured listening.\footnote{Ibid, p. 523} This theory focuses on how people in a community listen to their music, rather than focusing on what it is they listen to. His approach is connected to the field
of information processing. The following two hypotheses of information processing are central to his account:

(1) Information about the world is processed (transformed) in “chunks.” Each of us imposes a series of abstractions on what we perceive. This reduces the complex perceptions we experience into abstract representations of the world, which provide more meaningful information and can be stored in our memory.

(2) We do not simply abstract, but we also construct. We “go beyond the information given.” Cognition involves successive levels of processing based on both active and passive applications of abstract “categories.” And, significantly, our constructions are partially based on the way we expect the world to be.

Therefore, while structural universals may be nonexistent, we can potentially look for musical processing, and subsequently constructing, universals. Note that the information processing approach stresses the construction of meaningful patterns from information in the environment. Harwood lists five empirically determined processing universals that each have culturally and context dependent parts, but which have been shown to share similar cross-cultural information processing.

These are:

1. Pitch perception: The basilar membrane in the inner ear vibrates at a frequency and location determined by the frequency of incoming auditory stimuli. Depending on the incoming frequency, either the location or the frequency of basilar response is primary in constructing a perception. For the most sensitive range of human pitch perception, 100-1000 Hz, both responses are active. This is a likely candidate for explaining a universality of pitch construction.

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23 Miller, 1956
24 Bruner, 1957
25 Neisser, 1967
26 Harwood, 1976, p. 527
from auditory processing, and has implications regarding the design of musical instruments.

2. *Octave generalization:* Both in terms of equating the pitch values of octave relationships, and in terms of the phenomenon of octave stretching (octave perceptions no longer holding a strict 2:1 relationship at high frequencies), research suggests that subjective octave generalizations seem to be a perceptual universal.

3. *Discrete scale pitches:* Although the use, size, and groupings of scales varies considerably in different musical systems, the universal phenomenon of “chunking” information into meaningful, repeatable categories that can be mapped and systematized is thought to be the root of such patterns.

4. *Melodic fission:* Known also as “auditory stream segregation,” melodic fission allows for one single melodic line to be perceived as two (or more) distinct melodies based on the relative frequencies within the groups. Many cultures rely on this perceptual effect in their music, and in most cases a threshold of 3-4 semitones distinguishes different streams in constructing coherent melodies.

5. *Melodic contour:* In terms of remembering melodic information, research shows that, due to cognitive “chunking” processes, it is the contour and not the exact frequency relationships that remains most salient upon hearing and subsequently reconstructing melodies. Melodic contour is hypothesized to provide similar cognitive
constraints to musical transmission within a tradition that syntax provides within a language.

Using an information processing approach suggests that there are some important perceptual and cognitive factors involved in the human creation and use of symbolic systems. Such systems include both music and language. As suggested by Lee above, the symbolic systems we use are not created in a vacuum, but rather by people within the confines that Earth-bound experiences afford. These processing universals may help explain the universal connotative possibilities of music for which I will subsequently argue.

This idea leads to Harwood’s theory that our use of symbols is “iconic” with how we think the world is. He uses “iconic” in the sense that it is used by Charles S. Peirce, meaning the two phenomena share certain properties. Note that Harwood does not claim that symbols are iconic with what they represent, but with how we think the world behaves. This means that by examining how people create and use symbols, we can understand how people think the world behaves. Music has extra-musical connotative potential, therefore, because it develops partly as an expression of how people view non-musical aspects of the world. For example, one could posit that the cyclical patterns of Javanese gamelan compositions reflect a different outlook towards time than the Western orchestra and its corresponding linear compositions. Furthermore, musical expectations can arise based on both prior musical performances and other cultural and linguistic customs. Examples of such expectations will be discussed below. First, we will explore a theory that may explain how Harwood’s notion of symbols’ “iconic” use fits into neuroevolutionary history.

27 Ibid, p. 528
How Neuroevolution Harnessed Musical Symbols

As the previous hypotheses regarding information processing imply, perception and cognition occur at multiple levels in our minds. Our brains piece together many different types of information to form what, at our highest level, become our conscious perceptions. What we actually perceive at a conscious level is a highly processed construction of the input stimuli. Cognitive scientist Mark Changizi is interested in how human symbol systems develop, and specifically how they “hijack” existing cognitive features to do so. He also provides an important example of how stimuli, particularly symbol systems like music, can be meaningful in ways that, on a conscious level, may not to have anything to do with the stimuli’s apparent form.

The three cultural artifacts Changizi is most interested in are writing, speech, and music. All three, he argues, were “harnessed” by certain aspects of the human brain that were themselves “harnessed” by natural selection. Furthermore, he argues that music is a highly emotive system because humans perceive music at lower brain levels in ways similar to how they perceive other emotional stimuli at lower levels. A simplified version of his theory says that when we perceive other people to be sad, which is an evolutionarily valuable ability, we are picking up on cues (at a very low cognitive level) that share much in common with music we would describe as sad, although his theory is not restricted to emotional responses.29

Changizi hypothesizes that for each of these three cultural phenomena (writing, speech, and music), there is an aspect of nature to which our brain is

28 Ibid, p. 529
evolutionarily primed to be sensitive. As a result, we exploit certain features of these parts of nature for our own cultural purposes. For writing, that part of nature is opaque three-dimensional objects. Written language very much resembles, to the lower levels of our brain, the objects we experience every day in nature. Thus, our eyes and brains can easily distinguish and recognize symbols in written systems (letters) because of the adaptive visual object recognition capabilities our brains have acquired through evolution.

Our spoken symbol systems, Changizi hypothesizes, harnessed parts of our brain that were sensitive to solid-object events. Solid objects mainly interact in three ways—by hitting, sliding, and ringing (what occurs after an interaction). All of the phonemes in human language—plosives, fricatives, sonorants—sonically resemble one of these solid-object events. Even though our bodies are able to produce many other kinds of sounds, our brains’ auditory event recognition capabilities have harnessed our speech to resemble solid-object events. The ability to perceive and distinguish those particular sounds had the greatest evolutionary advantages. We therefore use these sounds in spoken language because our brains are primed to be sensitive to them.30

Finally, the part of nature responsible for musical symbol systems is human movement. Humans make a series of idiosyncratic sounds when they move throughout the world, and at low neural levels, these sounds resemble elements of music. As I have tried to stress, not all music is made up of the same basic elements. Changizi’s theory is couched in the notion that certain sonic features such as frequency and rhythm can be separated and analyzed in a laboratory. Thus his

29 Changizi, 2011, p. 111
account does not encompass all conceptions of music, but it is nonetheless helpful for this project.

Our ability to recognize and interpret human movement-sounds has been vital throughout evolutionary history. The ability to perceive emotions in other members of one’s group has certain evolutionary advantages. Therefore, certain types of music exploit these elements of sound and we consequently respond to them as we would respond to other emotional stimuli. For example, walking consists of three main sounds: a toe-strike, a heel strike just before the toe strike, and between-the-step noises resulting from limb and torso movement. The mood of the walker has been shown to influence the relative accent and timing of each component. Changizi cites a study which demonstrates that subjects have a tendency to accurately perceive the emotion of a walker simply through an audio recording of walking sounds. This is only the bare beginning of evidence that music has a potential for emotional responses based on low-level perception. But Changizi suggests that understanding how we hear the difference between a sad walker and a threatening walker will help explain how we can similarly hear music as sad or threatening.

Changizi’s study is confined neither to rhythm nor to emotional responses. Pitch changes, he hypothesizes, are used in music because the ability to perceive the Doppler effect as a means of spatial awareness is adaptive, especially with regard to human movers. The Doppler effect entails that the perceived pitch of a moving object changes depending on its relative movement toward or away from a listener. Being able to aurally distinguish between objects that are falling, moving toward, or moving

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30 Ibid, p. 32
31 Ibid, p. 114
32 Ibid, p. 113
away from one’s body is evolutionary valuable. At a low level of processing, therefore, pitch changes have the potential to evoke associative responses because our brains naturally associate frequency change with location change.\footnote{Ibid, p. 149}

The work of Changizi is not definitive. I have only provided a few of his examples to convey how his ideas relate to my own project. Not all humanly organized sounds recognized as music fit into the categories of his research. His ideas nonetheless provide relevant context for the notion that music has a unique potential for evoking different types of meaningful responses based on neural features we all share.

**Deep and Surface Structure in Music**

As discussed above, Meyer explains how one must confront the problem of deceptive appearances when comparing different types of music. In linguistics, Chomsky proposes a similar, potentially analogous problem that arises from his notion of generative grammar. Generative grammar is an approach to studying musical syntax based on different semantic categories within any possible sentence. The problem at hand concerns the relationships between what Chomsky refers to as *deep structure* and *surface structure*.\footnote{Ibid, p. 149} These two types of structure can (and do) interact with each other to influence the semantic interpretation of a sentence. An example of two sentences with different surface structure, but the same deep structure:

1. John hit the ball.
2. The ball was hit by John.
Chomsky provides an example of two sentences with similar surface structure, that nevertheless have very different meaning and deep structure:

3. John is certain that Bill will leave.
4. John is certain to leave.\textsuperscript{35}

Surface structure is defined as “a representation of the phrases that constitute a linguistic expression and the categories to which these phrases belong.”\textsuperscript{36} Deep structure is defined as, “a representation of the phrases that play a more central role in the semantic interpretation of a sentence.”\textsuperscript{37} Deep structure is not equivalent to meaning, but it is more fundamental than surface structure to interpreting a sentence’s meaning. Thus, while the surface structure of (3) is very close to its deep structure, the surface structure of (4) is farther from its own deep structure. Surface structure nonetheless must play an important role in determining meaning (e.g. emphasis in pronominal phrases can change meaning). Deep structure cannot exist without surface structure. Deep and surface structure taken together are what Chomsky calls \textit{syntactic objects}. But while the rules relating deep and surface structures are allegedly well understood, the rules relating syntactic structure and semantic meaning are still quite elusive.\textsuperscript{38} For when it comes to this relationship, questions of fact, belief, and context of utterance enter the picture.

Are there musical analogues of surface structure and deep structure? A direct analogue does not seem likely, but depending on the aesthetic theories of who you ask, certain people may propose close comparisons. Let us now examine some different aesthetic theories of music.

\textsuperscript{34} Chomsky, 2006, p. 93
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, p. 92
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, p. 92
Meyer On Aesthetic Categories of Music Reception

In proposing a potential analogy between language’s deep/surface structure and music, one must distinguish between potential views regarding the interpretation of music. Leonard Meyer distinguishes between four aesthetic positions regarding musical meaning. He divides them into two flexible, overlapping dichotomies. The first dichotomy is between absolutism and referentialism. The absolutist camp views all musical meaning as residing within the work itself, in perceiving the relationships and patterns contained within the music. Referentialists, on the other hand, contend that music also refers to the extramusical world “of concepts, actions, emotional states, and character.”39 These two views are not mutually exclusive—the same works of music can and do communicate meaning in both the absolutist and referentialist sense.40

Referential meaning can arise in multiple ways. In some cultures, meaning is attached to specific pitches, tempos, rhythms, and modes. Some absolutists claim that such meanings are illegitimate because they are learned and not universal. But purely musical meaning also depends upon learning.41 The ability to perceive patterns, transitions, variations, etc. in a given style of music is not innate. Furthermore, discursive language is referential and its referents are learned through experience and context as well. This does not delegitimize the communicative power of language. Therefore the learned character of certain types of musical reference should not be immediately written off.

37 Ibid, p. 93
38 Ibid, p. 97
39 Meyer, 1956, p. 1
40 Ibid, p. 2
Another objection to referential musical meaning denounces its flexible, unfixed nature. To this argument, Meyer points out that non-musical “plastic” arts do not have fixed meaning either. All artworks rely on multiple connotative interpretations.\textsuperscript{42} This is not a satisfactory response with regard to a language analogy, though, assuming that one takes language’s reference to be fixed (or at least less flexible than music’s).

Meyer’s second dichotomy resides within the \textit{absolutist} camp, distinguishing between two types of absolutism: formalism and expressionism. Although both formalists and expressionists view musical meaning as intramusical (non-referential), they differ in their views on precisely how musical meaning functions. Formalists have a strictly intellectual stance on musical meaning. For them, all meaning extends from perceiving and understanding the relationships within the musical gestures. The way in which music functions—and a listener’s intellectual appreciation of it—is musical meaning for the formalists. Expressionists, on the other hand, argue that these musical relationships can somehow “excite feelings and emotions in the listener.”\textsuperscript{43}

Expressionists are often mistaken for referentialists, although a critical difference separates the two. Referentialists can believe that what music refers to is, amongst other things, emotions and feelings. Expressionists believe that emotional reactions can arise \textit{in response} to music, but not as a result or reference to emotions. Thus Meyer distinguishes between referential expressionists (the former), and absolute expressionists (the latter).\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, p. 2
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, p. 2
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, p. 3
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, p. 3
Meyer chooses to concern himself only with formalists and absolute expressionists (though he does not discredit referentialism). Formalists and absolute expressionists each have their own philosophical problems to confront. Formalists, in their claim of strict intellectual meaning, have failed to explain how abstract, non-referential tones can in any way become meaningful. Absolute expressionists have failed to say how sound patterns can *cause* the emotional responses that expressionists insist they cause.

In the following sections, I propose ideas based on a variety of aesthetic receptions: formalism, absolute expressionism, and referentialism bounded by certain cultural prerequisites.

**Connotation as Universal; Lack of Musical Deep Structure**

Chomsky points out that we have observed a capacity that appears universal in all competent language speakers. The capacity is the ability to consciously or unconsciously (mostly the latter) distinguish between grammatical and ungrammatical strings of words. This is the output of the capacity. But what accounts for the capacity? What unconscious rules do we follow, for both particular languages and language in general, to distinguish the grammatical from the ungrammatical? There are two parts to Chomsky’s theory: (1) the abstract output which we observe (the distinction between grammatical and ungrammatical) and (2) a search for rules with respect to all languages.

Similarly, there are certain types of reactions that are common to all music listeners, which present the possibility of an analogous musical capacity. The capacity is *not* the ability to distinguish stylistic ‘grammatical’ passages of music from non-
grammatical passages; nor is it the ability to distinguish the beautiful from the ugly; nor even the skilled performer from the unskilled. Although all of these capacities have been observed, Meyer seems to be describing a more abstract, universal capacity. We have reactions to music. Where Chomsky points to a capacity in language users to unconsciously assess grammaticalness, I posit a capacity in music listeners to perceive connotations in the music. Furthermore, music can provide multiple types of connotations. Because of the structured listening that results from the ideas Harwood and Changizi set forth, music has the universal trait of connotative possibility.

Aspects intrinsic to musical structure such as pitch and rhythm are not the invariants. The universal is in the reaction to music (something very abstract). With language, we react to strings of words by saying ‘grammatical/ungrammatical;’ the disanalogy is that the grammatical/ungrammatical distinction is a feature of the structure of sentences, whereas in music, connotation does not have to do with music’s deep structure. In both cases, something about the stimulus (language, music) influences the human response. The difference is that with music, there is no deep structure as there is with language.

As an analogy, consider the phenomenon of taste. We can say that taste is, at least partly, a matter of how a subject reacts to the food in question. Nothing is sweet, sour, salty, minty, etc. without a person putting it in her mouth and saying, “This is sweet.” The chemicals that constitute a piece of food exist without the subject, but the response is a subject-dependent one. “Wait!” says the chemist. Taste is also a reaction to a very specific chemical structure within the substance in question. A peach would not taste sweet if it lacked the particular chemical structure that makes it
so. The visual appearance of the peach gives no indication of its molecular structure with regard to sweetness. A crafty artisan could make a confection that looks and feels deceptively like a peach, but tastes entirely different. As subjective tasters, it is the chemical structure we react to, not the appearance. Similarly, in language it is the deep structure that governs our perception of grammar. Surface structure can influence deep structure, but in the end deep structure provides the logical basis for a grammatical sentence. In this way, taste and language are similar. In music, it is different. There is no deep structure to react to. Rhythm, harmony, melodic motifs—everything is surface structure. Or rather, there is only one structure. Whereas in language, deep structure is tightly bound to our perception of meaning, in music, there is no bifurcation of structure, but music nonetheless allows for a perceived connotation.

**Mill On Connotation in Language**

In *A System Of Logic*, John Stuart Mill provides an account of one of the many divisions of names—that of connotative and non-connotative. The latter signifies a subject only or an attribute only. Connotative words, on the other hand, denote a subject, while also implying an attribute. Hence, a “German” denotes any subject from Germany. Contrast this with the disparaging slang word from World War I and II-era Britain, “Boche.” The term denotes a subject from Germany, while also implying the attribute of savagery. Thus a subject and an attribute are signified at once. Central to the concept of connotation is one meaning of a word that is separate from what is understood as the word’s primary meaning.

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45 Mill, 1874, p. 34
For Mill, all concrete general names are connotative. The seemingly non-connotative word “man,” actually connotes such attributes as “corporeity (sic), animal life, rationality, and a certain external form.” The attributes are signified indirectly, the subject denoted directly. Proper names, on the other hand, are non-connotative. They are “purely attached” to their subjects. All other words get meaning from connotation.

Mill distinguishes between primary meaning and connotational meaning. Here resides another difference between music and language. Music may have primary meaning, but there is no constant or correct primary meaning as Mill suggests exist in language. Primary meanings are variable. What is constant are the possibilities of connotation. Since I want to argue that the universal feature common to music is connotative possibility, we now examine some theories as to how exactly music is able to connote.

**Connotation in Music**

Nattiez suggests that meaning arises whenever a connection is made to other objects of experience. Meaning stems from the possibility for connections. Music, I will argue, has the ability to contain a multitude of connective-possibilities, and thus connotative meanings.

Meyer refers to the specific notion of *image processes*, which can be either conscious or unconscious thoughts and associations, but are more personal and less communal than the broad term *connotation*. I will use the terms for personal *image*
processes and communal connotations interchangeably. Some types of connotation are unique to music, while others show up in other symbolic forms besides music. After a brief account of these more common forms of connotation, we will examine the connotative possibilities unique to music.

Two types of connotation which music shares with other symbol systems are (1) conventional connotations based on continual association or contiguity and (2) connotation based on similarity in representation. Both of these are forms of extra-musical reference, of music somehow referring to concepts outside of music itself. Within culturally specific contexts, music may take on connotative properties based solely on how often it is associated with the occurrence of a particular event or idea. For example, in many places with Christian music traditions, the timbres of a pipe organ instantly connote religious, exultant, or spiritual feelings. It would seem that such connotations arise not because of a necessary bond between the organ and the aforementioned concepts, but rather because the organ has traditionally been used to accompany church services for centuries. Even outside of a church, people who are accustomed to this tradition may still, consciously or not, connect the sounds of an organ to ideas of religion and spirituality.

Non-musical symbols can similarly have culturally standardized connotations based on association. The color red, for example, with its conventional use in traffic lights, has come to be used as a warning to ‘stop’ even in other non-traffic related situations. Juxtaposing red alongside green and yellow will only heighten such connotations. While theories may exist regarding why the exact color choices were originally selected for traffic signals, at this point it has become strictly conventional for red to connote ‘stop’ and for green to connote ‘go.’
The second connotational form which music shares with other symbols is connotation by similarity in representation. At a high level of conscious processing, this can take shape as program music, or sound effects. For example, a certain rhythmic progression on the organ or guitar may sonically resemble the sound of an approaching train. As Changizi argues, at lower perceptual levels of processing, musical sounds can sound like even more abstract stimuli, such as the rhythm of a sad person walking. The visual arts provide many of their own examples of connotation by similarity in representation. Since at least the time of the ancient Greeks, phallic imagery has been used in the visual arts to connote ideas of masculinity or virility, even when male genitalia are only expressed via similarly shaped representations. This is actually a combination of both similar representation (the various phallic shapes) and association (the cultural associations between phalluses and certain concepts or character traits).

An important difference exists in the two aforementioned forms of connotation with regard to the relationships between the symbols and their referential content. With connotation by similar representation, the form of the music has an apparent necessary connection to its referential content. If it sounded substantially different, it would no longer be possible for it to connote the same content. With connotation by association, on the other hand, personal connections are made by the listener. For this reason, the subjective content of the listener’s mind, based on the listener’s own experiences with those associations, will hold the most influence on the connotative properties of the music. Hofstadter refers to this multitude of personal associations as an individual’s “semantic network.”

Hofstadter, 1979, p. 371
may feel very natural or inevitable to a listener, but they are always based on personal or cultural association. The connotations by association are separate from, though potentially interwoven with, those caused by the music’s actual structure.\(^{51}\)

In Nattiez’s semiology of music, he emphasizes the interplay of two forms of meaning that stimulate musical connotation. It is the instability of this interplay, he argues, that separates music from other symbolisms. He refers to these two types of connotation as introversive and extroversive semiosis. Coker refers to the same phenomena as congeneric and extrageneric. Meyer also discusses these concepts, and gives them the name designative and embodied meaning. While they go by different names, the idea behind them is consistent. Introversive semiosis is musical reference to previous or future musical signs.\(^{52}\) I further separate the introversive into two classes of intermusical and intramusical introversive semiosis, the former referring to different works of music, the latter to music within the same piece. Both types of introversive semiosis are closely related to Meyer’s notion of absolute formalism. Extroversive semiosis is musical reference to anything that is not a musical work, what we have been referring to throughout this paper as extramusical reference.

Meyer’s terms, designative and embodied meaning, do not have strictly musical application. Any symbol has designative meaning when it refers to something that is not itself. Embodied meaning, as when storm clouds refer to an impending storm, occurs when something refers to past or future parts of itself. Embodied meaning, therefore, is very much related to expectations. Musically, Meyer writes, “the way in which expectations are satisfied, delayed, or blocked [embodied meaning] plays an important part in the characterization of the designative meaning

\(^{51}\) Meyer, 156, p. 258
of a passage, in the same way that we make inferences about an individual’s character on the basis of his behavior in a particular cultural situation.”

Like Meyer, Nattiez focuses on how introversive semiosis influences extroversive, and vice versa. The degree to which intro- and extroversive semiosis are emphasized is a stylistic and conventional consideration. What Nattiez insists makes music unique, though, is the fact that introversive semiosis can be the primary form of semiosis within a musical work. In all other art forms and symbolisms, he argues, extroversive semiosis is primary. Partly because of its dynamic unfolding, partly because of the way it is listened to, and partly because of its lack of fixed denotative content, music has the special ability to refer to itself while also providing a connotative complex, particular to each listener, from which many other types of connotation may arise.

One way that music can have introversive semiosis is simply through repeating a musical gesture. This can be as specific as recapitulating the same melody, or as general as using harmonies or rhythms that are common to an overall style. In both cases, the music’s meaning relies on and refers to previous or future musical gestures. As a listener within a given musical style, one must have the psychological experiences necessary to perceive such gestures.

A related way that music can have introversive semiosis is through its ability to rely on and play with a listener’s expectations. Meyer suggests that this can be done in three distinct ways: (1) delaying an expected consequent of a musical gesture, (2) creating an ambiguous antecedent, the consequent of which is undeterminable,

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52 Nattiez, 1990, p. 114
54 Nattiez, 1990, p. 118
and (3) adding an unexpected consequent to a standard antecedent.\textsuperscript{55} Each of these techniques can interact with a listener’s expectations, creating new connections with regard to other musical events. As Natiez would argue, the potential for meaning increases with the increase in perceived connections.

Conclusion

Music provides its listeners with the possibility to hear connotative meaning through introversive and extroversive reference. Chapter Three will provide specific examples of different forms of musical connotation in an actual musical setting. It may not be the case that connotative meaning always arises, and it will certainly not be the case that meaning is universally constant. But anything that counts as listening to music must have the possibility for a multitude of perceived connotations, based on cognitive and processing universals, and personal and cultural associations.

\textsuperscript{55} Meyer, 1967, p. 10
Introduction

Charles Ives’ Piano Sonata No. 2 “Concord, Mass. 1840” is perhaps the most ambitious keyboard sonata ever composed—formally, thematically, and conceptually. Pianists who dare to attempt the work, which usually lasts around forty-five minutes, consider it one of the most challenging pieces they ever perform. It is a “full-course banquet,”1 of shifting meters, perplexing dissonances, and a piling up of themes. The Concord also provides a unique compositional platform for studying the communicative capabilities of music. Ives attempts to convey explicit connotations, personalities, and ideas with it. Furthermore, Ives has given us a comprehensive text, Essays Before A Sonata, in which he lays out the program, aesthetics, and technique within his music.

There are two ways in which this paper will examine (and utilize) the Concord, and they are separate but very much related. First of all, it will study the goals and techniques that Ives sets out for this piece. This will involve historical, musicological, and aesthetic analysis. It will hopefully become clear why the Concord, of all pieces, was chosen as the subject of such an endeavor, for the piece is directly connected to the project of this paper. Subsequently, the Concord will be used as a case study for the theories of connotative musical meaning exposited in the previous chapter. Special emphasis will be given to Ives’ use of one particular theme from Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.

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1 Moore, 2013
Contextualizing Ives: A Brief Biography

In a book on Beethoven’s *Fifth* (a piece which pre-dates the *Concord* by a century, but whose relevance will soon become clear), music writer Matthew Guerrieri characterizes Charles Ives as “a Transcendentalist born too late and a modernist composer born too soon, and both traits were family legacies.”

Ives’ late timing with regard to modernist music is debatable, but Guerrieri is correct to highlight three salient features of Ives: his modernist tendencies to borrow from and recapitulate earlier works while breaking down traditional forms; his clear intellectual descendence from the 19th century American Transcendentalist authors; and the musical and ideological debt that Ives owes to his family, especially his father, George Ives.

In October 1874, the local newspaper in Danbury, Connecticut announced, “[George] Ives’ Brass Band has included among its soloists an infantile performer on the *vox humana,*” announcing the October 20th birth of Charles Ives. This humorous headline only slightly exaggerates the degree to which little Charles was literally born into a life of music. The newspaper was curiously accurate in its understanding of Charles’ place in the world he had just entered.

George Ives was a classically trained cornet player and a bandleader. During the Civil War, he was the youngest bandmaster in the Union Army, leading a band that was at least once called the best band in the military. This duty meant playing often, and knowing a lot of music, including war songs (e.g. “The Battle Cry Of

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2 Guerrieri, 2012, p. 141
3 Danbury News, 10/28/1874, quoted in Swafford, 1996, p. 2
4 Swafford, 1996, p. 19
Freedom), popular songs (e.g. “Home, Sweet Home”), and hymns (e.g. “Nearer, My God, To Thee”).

George was also known for his musical curiosity. In Danbury after the war, George would instruct part of his band to march around the town park playing a tune, while another part of his band marched around it in the opposite direction, playing a different tune. All the while, George would stand in the middle. It was an experiment in distance, dissonance, and interwoven musical materials. George was also fascinated by the unique sounds of different instruments and he strove to stretch their limitations. He was particularly drawn to the interesting overtones of church bells, and tried to recreate them on the piano. Charles recalls that his father:

…had a weakness for quarter-tones—in fact he didn’t stop even with them. He rigged up a contrivance to stretch 24 or more violin strings and tuned them up to suit the dictates of his own curiosity. He would pick out quarter-tone tunes and try to get the family to sing them, but I remember he gave that up except as a means of punishment.⁵

As Charles grew up, George immersed him in both the classical training which he himself had studied, especially Bach’s counterpoint, and the popular music and experimentation that so fascinated him as a town bandleader. Charles matured in a thriving musical culture, part of a generation that experienced a wide array of living styles which have now become, in many ways “museum pieces.”⁶ The influence that George’s repertoire and musical experience had on Charles cannot be overstated. He endowed Charles with practical musical training, an eccentric taste for musical experimentation, and his own sense of the importance of music in community.⁷

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⁵ Ives, 1961, p. 110
⁶ Swafford, 1996, p. 100
⁷ Ibid, p. 14
During his first months at Yale, Charles lost his greatest mentor, the man who understood him and his musical gifts better than anyone. On November 4, 1894 George Ives, age 49, suffered a stroke and died. At this critical point in Charles’ growth, when he was trying to figure out the direction of his life of music, the one person who had played the most significant role in that development left him. Charles looked to many sources to fill what he described as the “vacuum” left by his father’s death—rigorous studies, a wild social life, and the most intense organ job in New Haven. But his greatest source of consolation, his “reassuring and true friend who stood by me [him] one ‘low’ day, when the sun had gone down, long, long before sunset,” was the writing of Henry David Thoreau. This literary bond with Thoreau became a major influence on Ives’ creative life that lasted for years to come.

Besides George Ives, the man who most influenced the early musical education of young Ives was the new music professor that arrived at Yale the same fall as Charles, a man by the name of Horatio Parker. He played a significant, though controversial, role in Ives’ musical development. Where George had been a tinkerer rooted in American culture, Parker was a traditionalist, whom Ives viewed as “governed too much by the German rule.” In one of Parker and Ives’ first meetings, the young student gave his professor a composition of his to critique. Parker reprimanded Ives for an unresolved dissonance in it, exclaiming, “There’s no use for that.” Ives, who knew the rules of resolving dissonances but did not feel bound by such restrictions, wrote to his father about the experience. “Tell Parker,” George wrote back, “that every dissonance doesn’t have to resolve, if it doesn’t happen to feel like it, any more than every horse should have to have its tail bobbed just because it’s

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8 Swafford, 1996, p. 104
the prevailing fashion.”¹⁰ It is not surprising that Ives wrote of Parker, “[he] was a composer and widely known, and Father was not a composer and little known—but from every other standpoint, I should say that Father was by far the greater man.”¹¹ Although Ives would never admit it, the European musical orthodoxy that Parker imparted to him shines through as a great influence on Ives’ later work, both as a solid foundation and something against which he would rebel. Furthermore, he learned from Parker certain ideals about music’s ability to “accomplish something of profound moral and spiritual value...[as] a vehicle of human evolution and redemption.”¹²

Ives eventually found a musical mentor in New Haven who shared his taste and encouraged his work, the choirmaster at Central Church, John Cornelius Griggs. Unlike Parker, Griggs was not afraid of some Ivesian experimentation. “My opinion,” Ives quotes Griggs as responding to one of Ives’ pieces, “is that God must get awfully tired of hearing the same thing over and over again, and in His all-embracing wisdom he could certainly embrace a dissonance—might even positively enjoy one now and then.”¹³

After graduation in 1898, Ives moved to New York. When he realized that his passion for art might mean his future family would “starve on his dissonances,” he took a job with the Mutual Life Insurance Company. On Sundays, he traveled to New Jersey where he was a relatively conservative organist and choirmaster at First Presbyterian Church in Bloomfield. Ives quickly worked his way up Mutual’s corporate ladder, from a clerk, to an assistant of the actuarial department, to

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⁹ Ives, 1972, p. 49
¹⁰ Ibid, p. 116
¹¹ Ibid, p. 115
eventually being transferred to one of Mutual’s flagship agencies, the richest of the day, Charles H. Raymond and Company. Raymond eventually fell apart, and Ives started his own company with a friend he had met there named Mike Myrick. Ives remained at Ives & Myrick, making a more than comfortable living until he retired. By that point, he had become quite successful and influential in the life-insurance business. But this by no means occurred at the expense of his artistic output, as we shall see below.

The Concord: Composition, Concepts, and Context

“I remember in particular the Concord Sonata, which has always impressed me as his greatest work. He illustrated what he was attempting to do by reading passages from Emerson, Alcotts, Hawthorne, and Thoreau and then playing passages after he had read them to convince me that the music was expressing the words of the author.”
- Brewster Ives, nephew of Charles Ives

The Piano Sonata No. 2 “Concord, Mass. 1840,” also known as the Concord Sonata, is a piano work in four movements. Each movement is titled for a different Transcendentalist author from Concord, Massachusetts—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Alcotts (the literary family that included Bronson Alcott and his daughter Louisa May Alcott), and Henry David Thoreau. Published along with the Concord were a series of essays, Essays Before A Sonata, made up of an Author’s preface, a prologue, an essay on each movement, and an epilogue. The Essays lay out Ives’ own views on the lives and philosophies of the Concord authors, as well as provide insight into certain musical techniques that Ives uses in the composition.

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12 Burkholder, 1996, p. 113
13 Cowell and Cowell, 1968, p. 35
During his time as a music student at Yale, Ives studied English and American literature with an influential Yale professor, Billy Phelps. It was in Phelps’ class that Ives first began using literature as musical inspiration. He composed a set of overtures during his class called “Men of Literature,” which were probably the earliest origins of the Concord. He also wrote an essay for Phelps’ class on Emerson, which contained the beginnings of his Essays Before A Sonata. The Yale literary magazine to which Ives submitted it rejected the essay. Undeterred, and perhaps even motivated by the rejection, Ives continued composing around these literary ideas for the next fifty years.

Ives returned to the “Men of Literature” sketches many times in forming what we now call the Concord Sonata. Most of the piece was written between 1911 and 1914, but the Concord was much more a product of habitual revision than it was the result of concentrated inspiration. The exact genesis of the Concord is a mystery to this day. There are many clues that Ives and others have left behind, although at times they contradict one another. During a vacation in the Adirondacks in the summer of 1911, Ives noted in his diary, “Idea of Concord Sonata.” The idea combined a sketch of an Alcotts overture he had written in 1904, a 1907 piano concerto called Emerson, extracts from a 1909 piece entitled The Celestial Railroad, based on the Hawthorne by the same name, and his overtures from his Yale days. By October of that year, Ives had apparently completed a draft of a piano movement now simply called Hawthorne. The following summer, Emerson was in a presentable draft state,
and *The Alcotts* and *Thoreau* followed in some form by November of 1914 and May of 1915, respectively.

The official premier of the *Concord* did not occur until twenty-five years later in 1939, in a performance by pianist John Kirkpatrick in New York City. But neither the preceding twenty-five year period, nor the subsequent decade meant compositional stasis for the *Concord*. In 1919, Ives spent time simplifying some of the more complex passages on the sonata, and reducing the dissonances in *Emerson*. This was part of his effort to get a version ready for publication. It was also around this time that he compiled his thoughts into *Essays Before A Sonata*, and wrote a new Prologue. In his diary for January 1919, Ives wrote, “Worked at Thoreau—trying to make people think Thoreau movement sounds like Thoreau.”  

Throughout 1920, Ives struggled through different proofs of the *Concord*. After music publisher G. Schirmer finally published 750 copies for Knickerbocker Press in 1920, Ives mailed them out the following year to “hundreds of strangers in hope that somewhere they would take root.”  

This 1921 edition was the official First Edition. Over the next few years, professors would perform and lecture on this edition, to a minimal degree, but at the time the piece did not become popular. From 1920-1940, Ives continued to recast the piece into new forms, combining new ideas with older sketches. Even when Kirkpatrick performed the premier, he did not play this First Edition version. Instead, based on a combination of the First Edition, Ives’ sketches and notes, and some of Kirkpatrick’s own minor alterations, Kirkpatrick performed a unique, original version of the *Concord*. The idea of Kirkpatrick performing his own version was not seen as disrespectful by Ives, for even he never

17 Ibid, p. 286
played it the same way twice, and “almost always resented the thought or the fancied obligation that he should put it down precisely, because he loved to improvise it.”¹⁹

In 1947, eight years after the premier performance and twenty-six years after the First Edition, a second edition was published. In response to the constant flow of revisions he received from Ives during those years, Ives’ editor wrote to Ives’ wife, Harmony, begging her to convince her husband to end the meticulous revisions. “The [printing] plates,” he complained, “absolutely will not stand any more.”²⁰

**Emerson**

> “*Trust thyself.*”
> “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.”
> -Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self Reliance*

Ives completed the first draft of the first movement, *Emerson*, in the summer of 1912, but Ives’ connection to Ralph Waldo Emerson began before Ives was even born.²¹ The father of Transcendentalism was a looming figure in young Ives’ life, his ideas trickling down through the family elders. Emerson had slept in the Danbury house in which Ives grew up, and was a personal acquaintance of Ives’ grandmother, Sarah, and his uncle, Joe.²²

Ives drew a connection between the philosophy of Emerson and the compositions of Beethoven, ending his *Essay* on Emerson by writing:

> There is an ‘oracle’ at the beginning of the Fifth Symphony—in those four notes lies one of Beethoven’s greatest messages. We would place its translation above the relentlessness of fate knocking at the door...and strive to bring it toward the spiritual message of

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¹⁸ Ibid, p. 288
¹⁹ Perlis, 1974, p. 220
²⁰ Guerrieri, 2012, p. 150
²¹ Swafford, 1996, p. 257
²² Ibid, p. 258
Emerson’s revelations—even to the ‘common heart’ of Concord—the Soul of humanity knocking at the door of the Divine mysteries, radiant in the faith that it will be opened—and that the human will become the Divine.23

As we shall see, Beethoven plays a looming role in this movement, and in the Concord as a whole. For Ives, both Emerson and Beethoven symbolize a divine faith in humanity, as they were both heroic writers, spiritual explorers, and non-conformist creators.

What is it that Ives admires in Emerson, so much so that he dedicates the first movement to him? First of all, Ives respects the creative individuality that Emerson represents. “He is a creator,” Ives writes in his Essays, “whose intensity is consumed more with the substance of his creation than with the manner by which he shows it to others.”24 This sentence could equally have been written about Ives himself. For years, Ives composed fanatically without publishing or performing any of his work. Inspired by Emerson, Ives strove to project the image of a composer who cared only about the content of his compositions, and not its reception. Ives was successful in this endeavor. In the review for the 1939 premier of the Concord, music-critic Lawrence Gilman wrote, “For nearly half a century [Ives] has been experimenting with musical sounds...working quietly and obscurely (as revolutionary spirits in the regions of the mind so often work), known only to a few inquisitive students.”25 When Ives finally did receive the Pulitzer Prize for his Third Symphony in 1946, he claimed, “Prizes are for boys,” and gave away the prize money.26

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23 Ives, 1961, p. 36
24 Ives, 1961, p. 21
25 Swafford, 996, p. 412.
26 Woodstra, et al., 2005, p. 642 – Few realize that Ives did, in fact, spend large sums of money in an attempt to publicize his work at this point in his career.
More so than Emerson’s self-motivated creative drive, Ives respects Emerson’s character. He writes that Emerson has the “open courage of a kind heart, of not forcing opinions” and not the “underhanded courage of the fanatic [who] would force opinion.” Ives treasures the story of a woman (perhaps his grandmother) who insisted that she loved to hear Emerson speak “not because I [the woman] understand him, but because he looks as though he thought everybody was as good as he was.” In response to this story, Ives asks, “Is it not this courage—the spiritual hopefulness in his humility...that makes his symphonies of revelation begin and end with nothing but the strength and beauty of innate goodness in man...the greatest and most inspiring theme of Concord Transcendental philosophy?” Faith in humanity, the central theme that Ives respects in Emerson’s work, becomes the central theme in the composition which Ives devotes to him.

Musical Themes

The Concord does not faithfully follow the traditional sonata form, but it nonetheless has much in common with the form of major eighteenth and nineteenth century instrumental works like the sonata and symphony. Ives, like Beethoven, sought to reinterpret the form, stretching its limits without abandoning its ideology.

The Concord is written in the standard four-movement arch. The first movement is not the usual exposition of themes, free development, recapitulation, and coda that one expects to hear in sonata form, but it does outline and develop a theme that plays an integral role throughout the rest of the composition. In fact, it contains

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27 Ives, 1961, p. 31
28 Ibid, p. 35
29 Ibid, p. 35
30 Block, 1996, p. 31
multiple themes, and multiple iterations of each one. Ives borrows the nineteenth century techniques of cyclic form, thematic transformation, and the development of motivic families. Unlike the standard sonata, there is almost no literal phrase repetition and no section at all is repeated verbatim. Ives was quite clear when he said, “The nice German recipe...to hell with it!”31 Even so, he lets himself be inspired by the schema—alluding to it, and punning off of it.

The Concord, like Wagner’s Ring before it, is a complex network of themes—fragmented, and rhythmically transformed—and musical quotations (of both Ives and others). The themes, though multitudinous, can be grouped into two families. Block refers to these families as the Human Faith family (note the name, an allusion to Emerson and Beethoven, originally used by Ives himself in his essay, The Alcotts), and the Cornfield family.32

The Human Faith family is made up of seven motivic fragments, ranging from three to eight notes. Each fragment is an allusion (rhythmic, melodic, or both) to themes borrowed from other composers, or original themes that Ives develops throughout the Concord. These are thus forms of both intermusical and intramusical introversive reference. The fragments occur individually, in small groupings, and at three points throughout the Concord they appear all together in what we will refer to as the Human Faith melody This happens twice in the third movement, The Alcotts, and once in the flute part at the end of the finale, Thoreau.

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31 Duckworth, 1999, p. 47
The source material for this family includes, most famously, Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*—specifically the first four notes known as the Fate motif. The name for the motif comes from a famous anecdote told by Anton Schindler, Beethoven’s friend, secretary, and biographer, who quotes Beethoven describing the sound of his symphony as the sound of Fate knocking on the door. The quotation of these four notes can be seen in the middle of the Human Faith melody excerpt, beginning with the eighth-rest followed by a high E-E-E-C pattern. It has been transposed, but rhythmically the quote is identical to the original.

![Beethoven, Fifth Symphony, "Fate" Motif](image)

Although the entire Human Faith melody is never presented in *Emerson*, its components appear in various forms. Below is one of many examples of the Fate motif appearing in *Emerson* in Ives’ own style: a new voicing of the original G and E-flat, slightly augmented rhythmically.

![Ives, Fifth Symphony in Emerson, p. 18, 3ys. 1](image)

There are four other quotes within this family: Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier Sonata* (Op. 106, 1818), *Martyn*, a hymn composed by S.B. Marsh (1834), *Missionary Chant* by Charles Zeuner (1832), and *Columbia, The Gem of the Ocean* by David T. Shaw (1842). The other two motivic fragments are Ives originals.

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32 Block, 1996, p. 32
These musical quotations were not chosen arbitrarily. Similarities, namely the short-short-short-long signature involving a descending third, tie Beethoven’s Fate motif to Martyn and Missionary Chant. As we shall see below, there are extra-musical reasons for their selection as well.

Within the first two systems of Emerson, Ives introduces first a fragment of the Human Faith melody, then Beethoven’s Fate motif, then another fragment of the Human faith melody, and finally another quote of Beethoven’s Fifth. The opening is a preview of what is to come in the rest of the piece—an overwhelming bombardment of simultaneous phrases and fragments. “All minds quote,” writes Emerson in
"Quotation and Originality. “Only an inventor knows how to borrow, and every man is or should be an inventor.”"\(^{33}\) Clearly Ives took these words to heart.

**The Phantasmal Hawthorne**

“And then did my excellent friend Mr. Smooth-it-away laugh outright, in the midst of which cachinnation a smoke-wreath issued from his nostrils, while a twinkle of lurid flame darted out of either eye, proving indubitable that his heart was all of a red blaze.”

- Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Celestial Railroad*

Movement Two is a tribute to Nathaniel Hawthorne, a man who, “feels the mysteries and tries to paint them rather than explain them,” and whose practicality as an artist makes him, “more artistic than Emerson.”\(^{34}\) Interestingly, Ives writes, “Any comprehensive conception of Hawthorne, either in words or music, must have for its basic theme something that has to do with the influence of sin upon conscience.” But the Hawthorne that Ives aims to capture is of a different sort. Ives is intrigued with the Hawthorne who ventures into wild, “half-childlike, half-fairylike (sic) phantasmal realms,”\(^{35}\) represented by such allegories as his short-story, *The Celestial Railroad,* on which Ives based some of his first musical sketches of Hawthorne. Ives does not attempt to capture the popular Hawthorne, but rather a very specific conception of the author, in all of his many, often contradicting sides.

**Hawthorne in Music**

By most accounts, Ives finished a draft of *Hawthorne* before any of the other movements.\(^{36}\) The piece is supposed to be a scherzo—lighthearted and fast—and the

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\(^{33}\) Emerson, 2003, p. 467

\(^{34}\) Ives, 1961, p. 41

\(^{35}\) Ibid, pp. 41-42

\(^{36}\) Swafford, 1996, p. 257
organization of the piece is constantly changing. John Kirkpatrick viewed the structure as symmetrical: phantasmagoria/nocturne/ragtime/alternation of ‘chaos,’ ‘hymn,’ and ‘march’/ ragtime/nocturne/phantasmagoria.\textsuperscript{37} According to him, it requires a piano that lets the pianist “fly through the air with no effort whatever.”\textsuperscript{38}

All of the Human Faith family appears in the movement, as does Beethoven’s Fate motif, but most prominent in \textit{Hawthorne} are allusions to one specific member of the Human Faith family, the patriotic \textit{Columbia, The Gem Of The Ocean}.

\textbf{The Alcotts: The Family and Bronson}

\textit{“Our ideals are our better selves.”}

- Amos Bronson Alcott

One could view the entire \textit{Concord} metaphorically as a way for Ives to recreate and re-experience his own father.\textsuperscript{39} In this view, each movement captures a different aspect of George’s character. Emerson, then, represents the prophet, the first teacher, the father as seen through the child’s eyes. Hawthorne represents the mystery and adventure that George clearly instilled in Charles. And \textit{The Alcotts} is in many ways a tribute to Amos Bronson Alcott (usually referred to by his middle name), father of \textit{Little Women} author Louisa May Alcott, symbolizing the father as a man within a whole family unit. Although Bronson Alcott is not often held on the same

\textsuperscript{37} Struble, 1996, p. 45
\textsuperscript{38} Perlis, 1974, pp. 217-8
\textsuperscript{39} Feder, 1997, p. 165
level of influence as Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau, he is in some respects, “even more original, courageous, and visionary than his more famous contemporaries: the most transcendent transcendentalist of them all.”

A teacher, writer, and educational reformer, Bronson valued and respected children and their viewpoints more than most of his contemporaries. He was also an avid abolitionist. Even though Bronson struggled financially for most of his life (until the success of his daughter’s books were able to support him), he always let his morals guide his work. For example, he started an experimental school in Boston that controversially admitted an African American student. On at least one occasion, he even refused to pay Massachusetts taxes, citing the state’s commerce with slave states as morally reprehensible, and something he did not wish to support financially. He also struggled with an experimental commune, called Fruitlands, which was founded on his Transcendentalist principles and relied on self-sustaining farming practices. Fruitlands ended up dissolving after only a few months, unable to survive through New England’s harsh winters.

Ives chose not to emphasize the Alcotts’ struggles, but rather what he saw as “a strength of hope that never gives way to despair—a conviction in the power of the common soul which, when all is said and done, may be as typical as any theme of Concord and its Transcendentalists.” The piece sketches life in the Alcotts’ Concord home. It especially highlights the fatherly voice of Bronson (“Concord’s greatest talker”) as he guided the intellectual upbringing of his daughters in much the same way.
way that George had guided Charles’ musical upbringing. The movement evokes an idealized version of the Alcott home—“a romanticization of hardship, patterned after the...home in Little Women rather than the actual Alcotts freezing Fruitlands.”

The idealization does not exclude conflict. As we shall see in the analysis below, the musical conversations taking place in The Alcotts reflect an overbearing Bronson in the family parlor, with “a manner something of a cross between an inside pompous self-assertion and outside serious benevolence.”

**The Alcotts’ Musical Conversation**

Of all four movements, The Alcotts makes use of Beethoven’s Fate motif most often and most saliently. The opening line is made up of two phrases, each containing two different iterations of the famous motif. Ives has changed the harmony from the powerful C minor to the sweet B-flat major. While this harmonization helps romanticize the family parlor setting, Ives programs family conflict into the piece as well.

The musical conversation in the piece can be heard as a pianistic battle between the Transcendentalist ideals of Bronson and the natural, childlike rebellion of his young daughters, which he also tries to respect. When the piece takes a turn into

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43 Feder, 1997, p. 165
44 Guerrieri, 2012, p. 144
45 Ives, 1961, p. 45
46 Guerrieri, 2012, p. 144
improvisatory, chromatic two-part counterpoint, the Beethoven theme quickly thunders back in—the daughters trying to have some fun, before being guided back into the high-minded staples of their father’s generation. The battle rages on as the young Alcott girls play *Old Scotch Airs*, and Wagner’s “Bridal March” from *Lohengrin*. The allusions symbolize the new generation, both musical and literary. Furthermore the “Bridal March” sounds conveniently like an inversion of Beethoven’s Fate motif.

Next, *The Alcotts* quotes a melody that would surely enraged abolitionist Bronson—a minstrel song called “Stop Dat Knocking at De Door,” the sheet music of which instructs the performer to sing it, “in imitation of two rival niggers, Gumbo & Sambo” (A.F. Winnemore, 1847).

The reference to knocking on a door brilliantly manages to both allude to the famous Beethoven myth and express the views of the discontented daughters. Ives’ weaving of the Beethoven theme into *The Alcotts* highlights:

Both the cause and the effect of the Transcendental propaganda on behalf of Beethoven and his music, the sensation of untrammeled power it must have first provided, and its dutiful assimilation into the next generation’s domesticity. Bronson is apparently in that

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47 Ibid, p. 145
The perennial parental conundrum, trying to convince his children that he was once cool.48

The Alcotts also introduces the Human Faith melody in its first complete and definitive form (see above). It first appears at the end of the first section (p. 55, sys. 1-3) in B-flat major, and then in C major at the end of the movement (p. 57, sys. 4-5).

The Reassuring Friend

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”

-Henry David Thoreau in Walden

Emerson may have been Ives’ hero, but Thoreau held the most special place in Ives’ heart. Where Emerson was the teacher and guide, Thoreau represented the personal, sentimental, and artistic attachment that Ives also felt for his own father. As mentioned above, Thoreau was Ives’ “reassuring and true friend,” whose writing provided solace after the passing of George Ives.

The Essay on Thoreau opens, “Thoreau was a great musician, not because he played the flute, but because he did not have to go to Boston to hear ‘the symphony.’”49 The quote captures many aspects of Thoreau’s character that Ives respected and strove to emulate—his musicality, his independence, his appreciation of nature and its sounds, and his socially maverick personality. For Thoreau, the wind blowing through the trees “wears better than the opera, methinks,” the owl passing through a flock of geese “one of the most thrilling discords I ever heard.”50

48 Ibid, p. 145
49 Ives, 1961, p. 51
The Musical Thoreau

Unique amongst the sonata’s movements, Thoreau features a flute part at the end. This is Ives’ special homage to Thoreau, a gift of sorts, as it is a reference to the instrument he brought with him to Walden Pond. Even though the flute plays the Human Faith melody on the last two pages of the work, Thoreau is really the home of the Cornfield family of musical motives.

The name for the Cornfield family comes from Stephen Foster’s song “Massa’s In De Cold Ground” (1852). Its chorus contains the refrain:

Down in de cornfield
Hear dat mournful sound:
All de darkeys am a weeping —
Massa's in de cold, cold ground.

-Stephen Foster, 1852

The Cornfield melody in the Concord is a quote from this particular part of the Foster piece, specifically the first two lines. The Foster melody is a standard use of ‘sound-painting’—depicting the words “Down in de cornfield” by literally moving down the scale in the melody.

The family is made up of five different five-note descending patterns based on this Cornfield motive. The Human Faith family and the Cornfield family share certain
common features. A three-note motive made up of a descending major second followed by a descending minor third shows up frequently in *Emerson* and *Hawthorne*, and fits equally well as part of the Human Faith family or the Cornfield family. Similarly, one four-note phrase from “Columbia, The Gem of the Ocean,” lends its first three notes to the Human Faith family, and its last three notes to the Cornfield family.

*Thoreau*, and thus the sonata as a whole, concludes with an extraordinarily ambiguous cadence. The last new note of the piece is a C-sharp, appearing over an A-C-G ostinato in the bass. This brings out a harmony of D, making the C-sharp a leading tone, conveying the powerful sense of irresolution.\(^5^1\) As Henry Cowell remarks of the conclusion:

> And never has the leading tone been fraught with so many implications. It will obviously resolve to the upper tonic eventually...but one is inescapably led to the realization that this suggestion of simultaneous tonic and dominant chords has only opened a new cycle of duality on a new plane of musico-philosophical existences. As the Sonata concludes, one senses that the ending is not final and that the music will continue to sound in the imagination and to grow.\(^5^2\)

If only Professor Parker could read the praise earned by one of Ives’ unresolved dissonances. One cannot help but connect this lack of closure to Ives’ own compositional relationship with the piece. He continued to work on it throughout the span of his life, refusing to be satisfied with a conclusion.

\(^{51}\) Block, 1996, p. 46  
\(^{52}\) Cowell and Cowell, 1968, p. 201
Connotation In The Concord

With the Concord, Ives utilizes musical connotation for multiple purposes. There is strictly musical, introversive connotation—quotations and variations of earlier music used for both their musical and cultural value. Then there is extra-musical connotation—striving to capture the ideas, characters, and personalities of particular Concord authors within purely musical terms. Clearly these two processes must be related. If Ives is trying to express the words and characters of the Transcendentalist authors, the musical quotations he employs are part of that project. But the musical connotations have their own value, and Ives is aware of the balance that exists between the program (capturing ideas, images, etc.) and “reasonable, i.e. artistic” considerations. Therefore, the Concord represents an attempt to use connotation by similarity (Ives’ quotations) as a form of introversive connotation that simultaneously links to extroversive meaning, stemming from the quoted music’s cultural associations. By examining the different types of connotation Ives uses, we can assess my claims about the connotative processes within music, and that what may be universal in music is the possibility of a listener arriving at connotations.

Ives’ Thoughts On The Matter

Ives begins the Prologue to Essays Before A Sonata by asking the question “How far is anyone justified, be he an authority or a layman, in expressing or trying to express in terms of music (in sounds, if you like) the value of anything, material, moral, intellectual, or spiritual, which is usually expressed in terms other than

53 Ives, 1961, p. 3
Although Ives has explicitly set out to capture the Concord authors in his music, he is ever the skeptic that he is in any way able to do so. This skepticism is the main theme of the Prologue.

The questions that motivate Ives include: Is program music detrimental to music? Do all forms of inspiration necessarily rely on actual life experiences that somehow come through in the music? Is all music, therefore, in some ways, programmatic? Does it matter if the program behind music is conscious or subconscious? Is a composer who is inspired by a mountain lake acting any more objectively than a composer who is inspired by the subjectively great character he perceives in his companion? Who gets to determine the degree of music’s programmatic success? Do such considerations matter? Ives concludes the prologue uncertain about music’s programmatic possibilities, but optimistic about its overall potential: “We would rather believe that music is beyond any analogy to word language and that the time is coming...when it will develop possibilities inconceivable now—a language so transcendent that its heights and depths will be common to all mankind.”

**A Library of Allusions In Beethoven’s Fifth**

As shown above, Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* plays a special role in the *Concord*. We have seen some of the ways that the Beethoven motif makes its way into the sonata, but now two questions remain: Why? And to what effect? How does Ives’ use of Beethoven give substance to my earlier claims of connotation? In order to

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54 Ives, 1961, p. 3  
55 Ives, 1961, p. 8
fully understand how and why it is used in the sonata, a brief history of the famous “first four notes” is helpful.

Beethoven provided no program for his *Fifth Symphony*, but even he was not immune to questions regarding its meaning. In a humorous anecdote, a listener once asked Beethoven for the reason behind the symphony’s unusual opening and its meaning, to which Beethoven answered “The beginning sounds and means: [singing the melody with an analogous four-syllable German phrase] *You are too dumb!*”

The opening of Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* has a long history of associations. While no one could ever hope to understand every association any piece of music has, let alone one as culturally pervasive as Beethoven’s *Fifth*, Ives was certainly aware of the motive’s significance both musically, and historically.

The short-short-short-long meter that opens the symphony and recurs throughout was known in classical rhetoric as a *quartus paeon*. Any combination of three short syllables and one longer one is known as a paeon, and when the long syllable ends the phrase, appearing fourth, it is the *quartus*. The epic poet Homer, whom Beethoven read and revered, writes about the *paeon’s* namesake, Pæeon, in Book V of the *Iliad*. The rhythmic foot became a standard ancient rhetorical device often used to evoke martial images and pleas for healing after battle. Aristotle identified the paeon in his *Rhetoric* as the only poetic rhythmic technique that was also suitable for oratorical prose.

It has an off-balance 3:2 meter (three short beats, to one double-length beat) that stands out in both speech and music. In the 1970’s, a music-education researcher named Edwin Gordon set out to determine what made certain musical patterns

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memorable. He found that out of 533 different rhythmic cells on which he tested young students’ abilities to learn and recognize repetitions, the *quartus paeon* was the only one classified as both “difficult” (less than half the subjects identified an actual repeat as a repetition) and “static regressive” (the age of the student did not influence this perception). It is purely conjecture whether these metrical attributes were part of Beethoven’s compositional consideration, but he nonetheless used a motive with ancient heroic overtones that, even after repeated listening, fails to sound repetitive.\(^5\) Perhaps this helps explain the motive’s staying power.

This should by no means imply that there is only one way to hear or interpret the piece. Essayist Robert Haven Schauffler, in his 1929 bestseller *Beethoven: The Man Who Freed Music*, has the following to say about interpreting Beethoven’s *Fifth*:

To Brown it may signify a fierce conflict with a sexual obsession. To Jones a desperate campaign against an inferiority complex. To Robin an old-fashioned pitched battled *a la* “Paradise Lost,” between the forces of good and evil. To a victim of hysteria it may depict a war between sanity and bedlam. To a neurasthenic a struggle between those two mutually exclusive objectives: “To be, or not to be?” To an evolutionist it may bring up the primordial conflict of fire and water, of man with beast, of civilization with savagery, of land with sea.\(^5\)

Schauffler assumes that each of his straw men hears a conflict within the *Fifth*, but the crucial point is that the palette of interpretation is vastly colored.

In the century following its composition, the *Fifth* was subject to many interpretations, and in doing so it was also sentimentalized. Especially in Victorian England, but also in America, the *Fifth* came to represent high tastes, Romantic fantasies, and “feminine” sensitivities. It was constantly referenced in poetry and

\(^5\) Aristotle, Book III, ch. 8  
\(^5\) Guerrieri, 1996, pp. 18-19  
\(^5\) Schauffler, 1936, p. 217
novels, used as a literary device whose symbolism was easily understood by the audience of the time.

Ives was frustrated by the way his contemporaries interpreted Beethoven. Of Toscanini’s popular renditions of the symphonies, Ives writes in a letter to his friend:

He plays the notes B[eethoven] wrote down—plays it nice, even, up-down precise, sweet pretty tone, cissy-sounding way—not the music of Beethoven....A Nation Mollycoddled by commercialized papp—America losing her manhood—for money—Whatever faults the puritans—they were men—and not effeminate!! Wake up America—kill somebody before breakfast.60

People have long felt that Beethoven’s piece, whatever it may say, says something. More accurately, the *Fifth Symphony* is particularly susceptible to people wanting to discuss what it is that it might be saying. Ives and I had similar, though different, reasons for choosing to study the pieces we did. I chose Ives’ piece as a subject for research because it clearly attempts to say something. Perhaps Ives chose Beethoven’s piece as a subject for composition because so many people want to discuss what it is that Beethoven was saying. Beethoven’s *Fifth* gave Ives the opportunity to finally say something definitive with a piece whose meaning has been perennially debated.

With the *Concord*, Ives was able to use Beethoven’s motif as he saw fit. Its fame, familiarity, power, and cliché, were all part of Ives’ consideration for how he himself wanted it to be heard. “Beethoven’s music doesn’t come out of the previous generation and lead to the next,” Guerrieri writes of Ives’ appropriation, “it stands outside time, it transcends time, and history coalesces around it.”61 I do not fully agree with Guerrieri’s assessment here. History does coalesce around Beethoven’s

60 Ives and Owens, 2007, p. 305
61 Guerrieri, 1996, p. 148
music, but this by no means implies that it stands outside time. It is precisely because of what time, tradition, and generations of interpretation have done to the four-note motif, that Ives is able to do with it what he does. Its many associations allow it to become a library of allusions. And Ives, through connotation by similar representation—the many ways in which he musically references the motif—forces his listeners to access this library. Critically, though, it is only through a specific cultural background, one that includes previous exposure to Beethoven’s music, that these allusions can be accessed.

Consider the following thought experiment. It is entirely plausible that someone could learn to play the *Concord Sonata*, or even simply hear it, without having the faintest clue about who the Transcendentalists or Beethoven were. Without the *Essays* to guide him, and no cultural knowledge of the subject matter, would that person have any possible way of discerning the Emersonian character, or the heroic fate-motif within the *Concord*? It seems impossible that he could. The program behind the *Concord* is entirely based on very specific knowledge and associations that are in no way universal. With the right knowledge, and especially with the assistance of Ives’ *Essays*, the program can make sense and fit the music. But that does not account for the case mentioned above.

How, then, does the *Concord* exemplify in any way the claim that music is universally a platform for this multitude of connotative possibilities? Not everyone who hears the *Concord* hears the Transcendentalists or Beethoven. Similarly, Chomsky never claims that everyone who hears English is able to understand English sentences. Rather, he makes the much different claim that everything that counts as language is rule-governed in some way. Rule-governedness is universal to language.
Chomsky goes even further. There is something common to all those rules. In particular, those rules distinguish the grammatical from the ungrammatical. The rules, he insists, have to do that. They have to characterize parts of a sentence in an abstract way, such that they account for the phenomenon of grammatical sequences of syntactic categories. Meanings are obviously not universal. Meaning is entirely separate from Chomsky’s claims about the universality of grammatical rules.

What is universal in music is the possibility for a listener to hear in the music reference to both introversive and extroversive connotations. The possibility is the crucial element. It will not always be the case that everyone hears connotations in every piece music. Ives’ case gives us a way to formulate this idea based on the Concord’s myriad of connotative possibilities. Different styles of music will certainly offer their own expressions of this idea. Where Ives chose the rhythms and harmonies of Beethoven, and Beethoven—consciously or not—chose a meter that mimicked an ancient cadence of speech, other styles of music could use techniques that have little in common with these. But anything that counts as listening to music must have the possibility for many types of connotative meaning to arise.

Ives utilizes connotation through similar representation with the use of musical quotation. These intermusical introversive connotations thus spawn personal, extroversive connotations by association with anything that a listener relates to those quoted pieces or styles. Ives’s musical choices certainly encourage a very particular association, especially alongside his Essays, but we have established that they are by no means necessary. The variations and altered recapitulations of earlier themes are Ives’ way of bringing out intramusical introversive meaning. And all of these forms
of connotation unite to help create the extroversive picture of Concord, Massachusetts and four of its greatest thinkers.
Conclusion

This paper does not end with a dogmatic theory for the entirety of musical meaning. It was never meant to. Perhaps in the future, neuroscientists will have mapped the connections in the brain in such a comprehensive manner that we can literally see the associations being made as someone listens to a piece of music. “Aha!” we will shout, “This song truly does refer to Thoreau, sitting by Walden Pond. You can see so right here on this monitor.” Or maybe one day, a philosopher will lay out an argument about the logical form of music so convincingly that musicians the world over will read it, drop their instruments, and reply, “That perfectly captures everything I have ever tried to do in my musical life.” It is my hope and my strong belief, though, that such a day will never come. Music simply does not seem to lend itself to such strict categorization.

What can we take away from this project? The three chapters each provide different approaches to examining the concept of musical meaning: a logical/semantic view, a search for universals, and a musical analysis providing examples of how connotations functions. I will now provide an overall argument by highlighting the valuable components of each section, and how they can function together.

In Chapter One, we saw how Langer emphasized symbolization and logical form, all in support of her claim that music is an unconsummated presentational symbol for the morphology of feeling. Both she and Budd worked under the presupposition that there is singular class of objects to which music can refer. I rejected this claim in support of the broader claim that music has a multitude of connotative possibilities, which are bounded by the particular musical stimulus. Langer is right that the lack of a fixed referent is an important quality of
presentational symbols such as music. It is this feature that allows for the multitude of connotative possibilities discussed in Chapters Two and Three.

In Chapter Two, we tried to make sense of what the notion of musical universals could mean. Musical syntax did not seem to provide a satisfying solution, so we turned to the psychological component of listening and constructing connotational meaning. This is where a central part of my argument was developed. Universality in musical experience manifests itself in the possibility of connotation through introversive meaning, associative characterizing, and their interplay.

Finally, in Chapter Three, we studied how Ives took full advantage of the connotative possibilities in music. He tapped into a culturally specific library of allusions, weaving its contents into a piece that emphasizes both the formal and referential nature of the medium. In one piece, albeit one exceptionally dense and monumental piece, Ives was able to provide us with a diverse array of examples that show how the many types of musical connotation can function in a specific musical setting.

I conclude with a hypothesis. If the age-old obsession with a profusion of different musics implies anything about the potential for musical meaning as a universal phenomenon, then, as with language, there is the potential for the existence of abstract universals. If these universals exist they will reveal themselves in perception, as forms of experience, rather than in any particular musical structure. Music has the potential for both introversive and extroversive reference based on how people listen to it. This interplay results in an expansive array of connotative possibilities, which may fall anywhere on a spectrum from emotional to material. The
connotative possibilities rely on both the musical stimulus and the experiences from which the listener can draw to create his own connections.

I would like to invite my readers, upon considering this hypothesis, to read one final quote, and then put down these discursive thoughts and enjoy a favorite piece of music:

In our particular intellectual culture we take delight in reading the passionate iconoclasms of Nietzsche or the witty sobriety of Bertrand Russell. Yet the voice of Bach’s music seems to remind us that great art works contain more permanent substance than any form of discursive thinking. Upon listening to his greatest works...we surrender reverently to this voice of spiritual reality that speaks from strata of thought deeper and more immutable than any intellectual forms of communication.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) Chiapusso, 1980, p. 1
Appendix Of Musical Examples

Ex. 1 p. 84
Ives, Human Faith Melody in The Alcotts, p. 57, sys 4-5

Ex. 2 p. 85
Beethoven, Fifth Symphony, “Fate” Motif, mm. 1-4

Ex. 3 p. 85
Ives, Fifth Symphony in Emerson, p 18, sys 1

Ex. 4 p. 86
Beethoven, “Hammerklavier” Sonata, mm. 1-2

Ex. 5 p. 86
Marsh, S.B., “Martyn”

Ex 6 p. 86
Zeuner, Charles, “Missionary Chant”

Ex. 7 p. 86
Shaw, David T., “Columbia The Gem Of The Ocean”

Ex. 8 p. 88
Ives, “Columbia, The Gem Of The Ocean” in Hawthorne, p. 44, sys 3-4

Ex. 9 p. 90
Ives, The Alcotts opening, p. 53, sys 1

Ex. 10 p. 91
Winnemore, A.F., “Stop Dat Knocking At My Door”

Ex. 11 p. 91
Ives, “Stop Dat Knocking At My Door,” in The Alcotts, p. 56, sys 1

Ex. 12 p. 93
Foster, Stephen, “Massa’s In De Cold Ground,” “Corn Field” Motive

Ex. 13 p. 93
Ives, “Massa’s In De Cold Ground,” in Thoreau, p. 62, sys 1
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