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KIVY AND LANGER ON EXPRESSIVENESS IN MUSIC

Abstract: From 1980 onwards, Peter Kivy has put forward that music does not so much *express* emotions but rather is *expressive of* emotions. The character of the music does not represent the character or mood of the composer, but reflects his *knowledge* of emotional life. Unfortunately, Kivy fails to give credit to Susanne Langer, who brought these views to the fore as early as 1942, claiming that the vitality of music lies in expressiveness, not in expression.

Key words: emotion, expressiveness vs. expression, physiological vs. cognitive views, symbolism, musical significance

During the second half of the twentieth century the question as to whether, and to what extent, music is capable of expressing something as quintessentially human as *emotion* has exercised many authors on the philosophy of music. Measured against the volume of paper printed with texts that in one way or another treat this question, the return is rather poor. Many of these authors apply the methods of analytical philosophy, which is to say that a plethora of ad hoc conceptual distinctions is generated, which at first sight seem closely reasoned, but in the end have little to add to a better understanding of the expressive qualities of music.

Peter Kivy's Saint Bernard

An author who, over recent decades, has taken centre stage in this debate is Peter Kivy. Kivy, to his merit, displays a much greater understanding of the history of the question of musical expressivity than many other Anglo-

Saxon authors do. Yet even he seems to feel the need to claim a unique position in the literature and to magnify the distinctions between himself and other authors.

Kivy has long been engaged with the philosophy of music. His first work, *The Corded Shell* (Kivy 1980)¹, became an immediate bestseller. Amidst his many other books, the *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music* (Kivy 2002) stands out as an excellent guide to get acquainted with the field. The illustration that starts off *The Corded Shell* is rather unusual for a work on the aesthetics of music: sitting on a wooden floor a Saint Bernard looks out at us giving the distinct impression that it is feeling uneasy with being the eye-catcher of the book. The caption of the photo reads: “The Saint Bernard Has a Sad Face”.

Yet, the dog’s expression and its description in the caption give a clue as to what Kivy wants to make clear about the expressive properties of music; one might even say that this first illustration sums up what Kivy will go on to put forward concerning the aesthetics of music, even if his writing becomes much more differentiated and nuanced. What would the doggy have looked like if it had been fully aware of its glorious position as the visual opening statement of an introduction into the aesthetics of music? The answer can only be: *exactly the same*. And the caption would still read: “The Saint Bernard Has a Sad Face”.

We are faced with a paradox: when we feel that somebody is looking a little sorry, we tend to assume that s/he will be feeling unhappy. A failed exam, unlucky in love, a bad night’s sleep, anything might have caused someone to look dejected to our eyes. Yet when we take the melancholy that we see in the Saint Bernard’s face to be an expression of the animal’s state of mind, we make an error: this is just the way the dog *always* looks.

Physiological as opposed to cognitive points of view

Kivy has no difficulty in detecting parallel errors in descriptions of the character of a piece of music. As in the case of Donald Tovey, author of the well-known *Essays in Musical Analysis*, when he describes the music of

¹ The complete text of this book is included in his later *Sound Sentiment – An Essay on the Musical Emotions*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.

the second part of Beethoven's *Eroica* as "utterly broken with grief". If that be the case, an empathetic Kivy suggests: "Shouldn't we try to cheer the poor thing up?" (Kivy 1980: 6)

It is a striking introduction to the basic distinction which informs Kivy's theory of musical expression. As is to be expected from an analytic philosopher, he finds the solution of the above-mentioned paradox in a linguistic distinction. When we say: "The Saint Bernard Has a Sad Face", we do not mean to say: "The Saint Bernard's face *expresses* sadness"; we mean to say: "The Saint Bernard's face is *expressive of* sadness" (1980: 12). What is the difference between the two? The dog's face looks sad, without the dog having to feel sad. The impression the dog's face makes on us has been abstracted from the emotion that can be taken as the *cause* of an expression of sadness. In other words: there is a species of expressiveness which should not be taken to be a representation of a truly experienced emotion.

With this move Kivy turns against a venerable tradition in the history of Western music. In the Romantic era, the composer was taken to express his deepest personal feelings in music. But even earlier, in the writings of the Baroque era and of *Empfindsamkeit*, many an example can be found of views on the expressiveness of music in which no distinction is made between a musician who *is* cheerful, and music which *sounds* cheerful. As in for instance the well-known passage in Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's *Versuch über die wahre Art das Klavier zu spielen* [*Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*] from 1753:

"A musician cannot move others unless he too is moved. He must of necessity feel all of the affects that he hopes to arouse in his audience, for the revealing of his own humor will stimulate a like humor in the listener. In languishing, sad passages, the performer must languish and grow sad. (...) Similarly, in lively, joyous passages, the executant must again put himself into the appropriate mood. And so, constantly varying the passions he will barely quiet one before he rouses another. Above all, he must discharge this office in a piece which is highly expressive by nature, whether it be by him or someone else. In the latter case he must make certain that he assumes the emotion which the composer intended in writing it." (Bach 1949: 152).

Here music is taken to be a kind of infectious disease, and in the context of eighteenth century thinking about emotions, this is less of an anomaly than it seems today. Events happening in the world could well have a direct impact on our physical constitution, while emotions were thought to be under the influence of the *humours* or of the *animal spirits*, that, according to Descartes, liaised between the mind and the body. In treatises such as Mattheson's *Der vollkommene Kapellmeister* (1739) we find an application of this way of thinking to music. Yet, according to Kivy, Mattheson takes a giant leap forward as he takes the correlation between the movements of the animal spirits and the character of the music not to be a mechanical one. What is reflected in the music is, rather, the composer's *knowledge* of emotions, which does not require the listener to be infected with the emotions that the composer expresses in his music.

In the philosophy of music of the twentieth century, the old-fashioned “physiological” views on how music works have been almost entirely replaced with the “cognitive” views which Kivy believes are to be found in Mattheson's work for the very first time – and to which he wholeheartedly subscribes. Many words and even works have been devoted by Kivy to convince us of a point that, perhaps, can not be expected to accord to the intuitions of all and every music listener, yet is not so terribly convoluted that it takes a retraining of the mind to work it out. I often feel that minor differences in approach with other philosophers are blown up out of proportion in order to justify the ocean of ink.

Symbolic transformation

To illustrate this with one striking example, I will now turn to what Kivy himself thinks sets him apart from Susanne K. Langer (1895–1985). Langer shared an avid interest in and sympathy for Wittgenstein and his conceptual precision with many other American philosophers. Yet she never, unlike many of her compatriots of later generations, let herself be trapped by the analytical tradition.

Her best-known book, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Langer 1978)², is devoted entirely to symbolism – in language, in ritual, in myth and in the arts. Not in the sense that existing symbols were to be translated into their meanings; her interest was focused on the ways in which symbolism *works*. With that question in mind, she devoted an entire chapter to *significance in music*. This chapter is often read out of context. Commentaries on it often fail to mention that Langer's text should be read in the context of her reflections on the functioning of the human mind, and not as a contribution to the aesthetics of music. The human mind is set apart by an activity which Langer, following her European forebear Ernst Cassirer, characterizes as *symbolic transformation*: impulses that permeate into our consciousness are transferred to a different domain of signification. This constitutes a cognitive act, of which we need not necessarily be conscious. When listening to music we recognize in an insistent, yet conceptually inaccessible way something about the structure of our emotions: “*music articulates forms which language cannot set forth*” (Langer 1978: 233).

How does Kivy set his views on the expressive character of music against Langer's? From the very first time he mentions her name in *The Corded Shell* (1980: 34), he attempts to steer clear of her. Kivy refers to Langer when she remarks that the physical effects of music affect the unmusical listener in the same way that they do the musical listener – from which she concludes that these effects have more to do with *sound* than with *music* (or, as I would reformulate it, they are the effects of *hearing* music rather than *listening* to it). Kivy condemns this view: if the engendering of emotions is an effect of sound and not of music, then Langer must be suffering from the preconception that music *cannot* arouse emotions. However, when we read Langer in her own context, we find that she is not so much talking about the arousing of emotions, but about primary somatic changes in heartbeat and breathing patterns. She writes that these are more easily influenced by sound than by music, and she adds that the sounds used in psychological experiments are

² Although only one chapter of the book deals with music, there is a musical allusion in the title: the word “key” also means “tonality”. The “new key” referred to is *symbolism*.

irritating rather than inspiring (Langer 1978: 212). When we return to Kivy, we find that his quoting of Langer is preceded by a remark about a baby who burst into tears at the sound of a trumpet. That the poor child is frightened to death by the noise is to be expected, according to Kivy, and has nothing to do with any connotation one might associate with trumpet music. In what way exactly does this remark differ from Langer's observations on primary physical reactions being due to sound rather than to music?

We encounter another attempt to put Langer down on the question of the historical role of Schopenhauer. Langer has adopted Schopenhauer as one of her chief inspirations. In her view Schopenhauer has recognised a form of emotive symbolism in music, which does not result from the emotional state in which the musician finds himself (as many of Schopenhauer's contemporaries still believed). Here too Langer's views are in accordance with Kivy's: music has to do with audible emotionality, to which the listener is responsive. However, this is not the expression of a person's state of mind. Kivy responds to Langer's declaration of support for Schopenhauer by taking a swipe at her: he believes that the German philosopher "does not point forward to the semantic theory of Langer so much as backward to the resemblance theory of Mattheson (by which I mean to pay him a compliment)" (Kivy 1980: 44).

Emotions and conventions

The two aspects that seem to annoy Kivy most, and which in his later works re-emerge as reproofs of Langer's work, touch on the core of the theory. The first aspect concerns the nature of the relationship of meaning between music and emotionality. Langer refers to this relationship as being *symbolic*, in a sense of that term which she has first carefully distinguished from the discursive symbolism which we meet in the realm of language. The syntax and semantics of language are not open to willy-nilly manipulation: we can look up *what* a word means in a dictionary, but the fact *that* the word has this specific meaning cannot be deduced from the form of the word itself. In music it is the other way round: the "meaning" of chords and phrases cannot

be looked up in a glossary. If music nevertheless does have meaning, then this has to be ascribed precisely to its forms: musical structures resemble outer-musical ones, those of our emotions in particular. Langer approvingly quotes psychologist of music Carroll Pratt who claims that the auditory characters of music “are not emotions at all. They merely *sound* the way moods *feel*...” (Langer 1978: 244, 245). There is a certain formal analogy, an *isomorphism*, between the two, and when a relationship of meaning is realised in this way, then Langer speaks of *presentational symbolism*, as opposed to the discursive symbolism of language.

Kivy does not approve. Even if he too recognises a *resemblance* between music and the emotions, he denies that the isomorphism Langer speaks of is sufficient to claim a symbolic relationship between music and emotion. Music should also *refer* the listener to these emotions. In other words, there must be a *convention of meaning* before it can be said to be a symbol: “(f)or even iconic, ‘look-like’ symbols must ‘mean’ by convention” (Kivy 2002: 30). Which does not apply to music.

The difficulty here is that Kivy’s argument rests on a restriction that, in the wake of Charles S. Peirce, has become attached to the concept of “symbol” in Anglo-American semiotics. This restriction entails that the concept of *symbol* is used only for the kind of signs that lack a natural relationship with what they signify, and rely on *convention* (such as a designation) or *agreement* (such as a right-of-way sign). The concept of symbol is certainly one of the most difficult to apply unambiguously, but at this point Kivy should have realised that *symbolism* (and not music) is the *new key* to which Langer’s book is dedicated. On coming to Chapter VIII, the reader has become acquainted with Langer’s use of the concept of symbol in the tradition of Cassirer. In her previous chapter, symbolism in mythology is discussed; the reader has become familiar with just about the strongest symbol which mythology can offer: the moon as a symbol for femininity. Long before Wittgenstein came up with his picture theory, long before Peirce decided that a symbol must not have a natural relationship to whatever it symbolises, even long before anyone had learned to read or write, people had noticed that both the moon and the

human female had a 28 days cycle. Therefore, “moon = woman”, whatever the exact nature of the copula may be. That is what old-fashioned philosophers like Cassirer and Langer (or Freud, for that matter) refer to as a *symbol*. Would Kivy really mean that this requires an explicit “convention of meaning”? The strength of Langer’s contribution to the understanding of the capacities of music lies exactly in that she shows that music, in so far as *significance* can be ascribed to it, works *implicitly*, as in mythology, and not *explicitly*, as in language.

A second reproof Kivy repeats time and again ultimately refers again to this difference between implicit and explicit acquisition of significance. Kivy presents his own theory of expressiveness as a conception in which music relates to the garden-variety of individual emotions, whereas, in his representation of Langer’s position, she relates music to emotionality in general. According to him, Langer denies any possibility of music being expressive of individual emotions (Kivy 1980: 46). But where does he get this idea from? It is true that Langer does not elaborate on the various emotions that can be related to music; it is also true that she emphasizes that music cannot distinguish between the various emotions *in the way language can*, and it is even true that she points out that some musical forms allow both a sad and a happy interpretation. But she distances herself from a conception (defended by Hauptmann and Carrière) in which music “conveys general forms of feeling”: however much she admires the insights into the cognitive value of music that it expresses, she considers this conception to be too abstract to do justice to the emotional values and the vitality that characterise each piece of music.

Langer does not deny that music relates to *individual emotions*; what she does deny is that they relate to *the emotions of the individual*. A short quote, in which she aligns herself to the insights Schopenhauer and Wagner brought to the question:

“Feelings revealed in music are essentially *not* ‘the passion, love or longing of such-and-such an individual’, inviting us to put ourselves into that individual’s place, but are represented to our understanding ...” (Langer 1978: 222).

Langer's theory, formulated in an era when romantic conceptions of expression reigned supreme, is a classic example of the cognitive conception that Kivy pursues: "(n)ot communication but insight is the gift of music; in very naïve phrase, a knowledge of 'how feelings go'." (1980: 244).

In conclusion: of all Anglo-Saxon philosophers of music seeking the limelight today, Kivy is the most informative and the most readable. Anyone who wants an introduction into this field will find him an invaluable guide. Of Langer however, he draws a caricature; he fails to inform his readers that Langer presents music as a form of implicit symbolism, enabling us to sense emotions not *in* it, but *through* it: "Articulation is its life, but not assertion; expressiveness, not expression" (Langer 1978: 240). I'm afraid I can't escape the conclusion that Kivy, in spite of his recognition of her pioneering role in the question of music's relation to the emotions (Kivy 2002: 27), finds it hard to accept that Langer preceded his Saint Bernard by almost half a century.

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Алберт ван дер Схоут

КИВИ И ЛАНГЕРОВА О ЕКСПРЕСИВНОСТИ МУЗИКЕ

(Резиме)

Старо питање да ли музика може да изражава емоције заузело је централно место у филозофији музике након Другог светског рата, посебно у САД. Наиме, још се од барокног доба веровало да музика

може да изражава и изазива емоције (нпр. Драјден /Dryden/): „Коју то страст музика не може да подстакне и угуши”!). Током XX века гледишта се мењају. Музика се више не посматра као посредник физиолошког искуства емоција, већ као њихов симбол. Идеја подстицања (*arousal*) замењена је идејом препознавања. Дебата се шири – симболизација или репрезентација? – а поједини њени учесници траже строге и прецизне критеријуме за избор појма којим би се описао семиотички однос између музике и емоција. Ипак, чини се да недостаје јасна веза између тог избора и њихових погледа на значај музике. Стиче се утисак да је расправа о музици на изванредан начин увучена у актуелну филозофску дебату, посебно у области аналитичке филозофије.

Један од најзначајнијих аутора на овом пољу је Питер Киви (Kivy). Од 1980. године он у својим радовима подржава прелазак са теорије подстицања на когнитивну теорију. Ипак, често критикује Сузану Лангер (Langer), која је на веома инспиративан начин указала на потребу за таквим преласком још 1942. године у својој студији *Филозофија у новом кључу* (*Philosophy in a New Key*). Чему онда критике? Да ли Киви не жели да призна да је Лангерова пола века пре њега дефинисала поменути прелазак? На основу начина на који он упућује/не упућује на гледишта Лангерове, тешко је избећи овакав закључак.