

Poetics in Music

A brief encounter with stories and music

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In musical composition there are particular ways a composer can depict certain emotions or ideas through rhetorical figures, much like in literature. In fact most of the rhetorical figures discussed in music, in particular by Joachim Burmeister, are borrowed from the realm of literature. Igor Stravinsky also had many views on what musical poetics is and how it should be viewed. This paper will discuss some concepts of musical poetics, and maybe even poetics in general, using concepts from Burmeister and Stravinsky, but also thoughts of my own.

What is the composition of music, and why do we do it? The very same question can be asked by authors, painters, poets and anybody working in the area of humanities. Is it merely the organizing of sound into a preformed structure as many would have us believe? Is it the artistic form of mathematics, as many surrealists would tell us? Or should it be free and uncluttered by such arbitrary things as form and structure, should it be a “happening”? Whatever the view of composition you would take there is a singular point that combines all of it. Story! Music is the telling of a story, be it predetermined or perhaps improvisation in the moment. Even if the piece is a depiction of an image, it is still a story-like concept; you are telling the listener your particular reaction to an image, which is much like telling a story, or reading of a poem that is an author’s or poet’s reaction to an image.

There are many compositional tools that can be used to evoke certain emotions or give the listener a certain image of what might be happening in a piece of music. Obviously in film, ballet, opera and venues of this sort, the picture, at least the surface picture, is given to you. So what do you do then? Well then it is even more important to delve into a piece and figure out the true meaning of what you are hearing. In the tone

poems of Liszt, Straus, Debussy or many others, there are definitely images that belong to these pieces, but we as a listeners are usually left to imagine them for ourselves.

Stravinsky believed that we are living at a time when this imagination is leaving us, and that was decades ago...where are we now? Is it all gone, have we gone by the way of the Hollywood film and the pop sensibility of not having to think for ourselves and adapting all art to the basic elementary type of instant gratification and lack of understanding?

Making music, art, poetry or whatever creative avenue one may chose to do, is about telling a story and having an imagination. In order to structure a piece well - structure itself having various meanings and aptitudes, but structure at least in the idea that there are connections between different points in the piece and having a sense of progression (not progression in the harmonic sense but that of plot) - there must be some kind of story behind the piece that unfolds through sound over time. This story may be completely abstract and may not have any "characters" as we understand them from literature and may not even be told in words, but there still must be a plot of sorts, shaping and driving the piece into a well "structured" work, meaning a piece that flows over time and, in short, not only does not bore the audience but allows them to travel with the music and its story with anticipation.

In these stories, there may be no characters, as I have mentioned, but there is still a timeline, and a shape that is pre-determined by the composer, which may change over the process of writing, but still has a shape somewhat related to the original thought. The piece must have a timeline in the sense that certain things happen in certain moments and later moments have connections to earlier moments because the earlier moments are what drove the plot so that the later moments could happen. It is the same in actual stories, the

telling of ideas (abstract or concrete) as they pass through time and space. Stravinsky said, “music is based on temporal succession and requires alertness of memory. Consequently music is chronological art, as painting is a spatial art. Music presupposes before all else a certain organization in time”¹. Music uses sound as the vessel to pass these ideas through time, not just because we want to hear them, but because these stories need to be heard and without a vessel a story becomes stagnant and invisible, and left with the urge to be told, even in the abstract, with no realization, and thus, is left to eventually fade away and becomes lost.

Burmeister believed that the way to depict this story is to make use of rhetorical figures in the music to give passages special meaning, evoke certain emotions and propel the piece through time. For example the *mimesis* figure, which, in literature, is “the imitation of another person’s characteristics”, and is supposed to be able to excite the gentler emotions because it “consists mainly of banter”². In music this would be equivalent to a light question and answer section of a piece that can delight the listener in its playfulness and is an extremely effective tool for a composer. Another fine example is the *anadiplosis*. In literature this figure is the repeating of a word that occurs at the end of one phrase at the beginning of the next to give it extra emphasis³. In music this could be the repetition of a particular note, or even small fragment of the previous phrase in the next phrase to give that note or motif extra emphasis and shows the listener that this is important, perhaps because it will return later in an even more important setting like in the *climax*, which is another rhetorical device or using a *mora*, a deceptive resolution with gives the listener a sense of extreme anticipation for the true resolution. Or even a

¹ Stravinsky, Igor. *Poetics of Music*. (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1942), 28.

² Burmeister, Joachim. *Musical Poetics*. (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1993), 167

³ Burmeister, 167

pathopoiia, which is the use of chromatic half-steps in a melody to depict the idea of mourning. These are just a very few of the figures that can be employed to give an idea of the many different kinds of functions these figures can be in music.

Stravinsky, in his book *The Poetics of Music*, brings in the idea that music is not music until it is organized by a human being who is sensitive to “nature’s many voices...who in addition feels the need of putting them in order and who is gifted for that task with a very special aptitude”⁴. Stravinsky believed that in the hands of a human such as this, all that is not music will become music and is a “conscious human act”. Stravinsky brings in the idea that music that is ordered by such a person will “make us participate actively in the working of a mind that orders, gives life, and creates”⁵. I would go so far as to say that within this very concept of Stravinsky’s lays the natural use of rhetoric. We use it in speaking and writing of all kinds without even knowing it most of the time. So when a composer writes a piece of music he or she will usually use many of these figures naturally because it is what he or she uses in their everyday language, even though being unaware of it. So it would follow in my mind that when a trained composer who is conscious of these tools and uses them as such, their compositions will progress above the realm of amateur and reach a new plane of musical thought and understanding, in short, they will simply be better pieces. Stravinsky said, “Art in the true sense is a way of fashioning works according to certain methods acquired either by apprenticeship or by inventiveness. And methods are the straight and predetermined channels that insure the rightness of our operation”⁶.

⁴ Stravinsky, 23.

⁵ Stravinsky, 23.

⁶ Stravinsky, 24.

Burmeister believed that by using the figures of rhetoric music goes beyond “the simple method of composition and with elegance assumes and adopts a more ornate character”⁷. Burmeister even goes so far as to say, if the definitions of these rhetorical figures are “faithfully learned by heart, they will serve quite sufficiently in place of rules”⁸.

Although these two scholars are from different times and seem to differ in many ways, I believe that there is a way to understand both views, and apply them to our own music making, fuse them together into one process. Ken Wilber, a prominent contemporary American philosopher has built a theory around creating a synthesis of ideas from past and present, to transcend the past but also include it. Wilbur believes that we must find synthesis between contrasting ideas, or worldviews, in order to successfully survive, meaning flourish through progression of the mind and not the digression to an earlier time⁹. I believe that the case of poetics in music, in particular the ideas of Burmeister and Stravinsky, is a similar case and we must find a synthesis. Stravinsky firmly believed in structure and solidity, and I believe Burmeister did as well, even though they went about it through different methods: Burmeister through conscious use of rhetorical figures to lend contrast and importance, and Stravinsky through similarity for “what it loses in questionable riches, it gains in true solidity”¹⁰. I believe there is room to believe and employ both methods, even within the same music.

⁷ Burmeister, 155 & 157.

⁸ Burmeister, 157.

⁹ Wilbur, Ken. *A Brief History of Everything*. (Boston: Shambhala Publications. 2000)

¹⁰ Stravinsky, 32.