

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

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## MUSICAL LANGUAGE

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It. *Linguaggio musicale*; Fr. *Langage musical*; Germ. *Musikalische Sprache*; Span. *Lenguaje musical*. The expression “musical language”, or “language of music”, is widespread both in specialist literature and in common language. It is used to refer to the general idea, deeply rooted in Western music theory, that music is a distinct communicative and expressive system but akin to verbal language. In particular, music has often been considered as the “language of feelings”, capable not only of arousing specific emotional reactions but also of representing their course and expressing their content. Starting from the eighteenth century, with the consolidation of the tonal system, and even more so in the romantic period, the comparison between music and language became more and more frequent and codified, referred to vocal and then even to instrumental music. The crisis of the tonal system impacted on the concept of musical language, not simply removing it, rather leading to a theoretical refinement.

### IS MUSIC A FORM OF LANGUAGE?

From the eighteenth century and even more so in the nineteenth century, when instrumental or so-called *absolute* music (Dahlhaus 1978) gained its autonomy, the idea of music as a language spread. In 1854 Eduard Hanslick acknowledged that “[music] is a language we speak and understand, but which we are unable to translate” (Hanslick 1957: 50; the same theme, obviously on different theoretical bases, will also be proposed by Lévi-Strauss 1964). Later on, the rejection of tonal language in the twentieth century did not affect, at least at the beginning, the general idea of a logic intrinsic to musical discourse (Schönberg 1995), endowed with its own articulation. Only afterwards, serial, post-serial and electroacoustic music have questioned the traditional parallelism between music and language, concentrating their works on the constitutive material aspects of sound.

To clarify the different theoretical perspectives in the field, one can refer to the opposition between formalism and metaphysics of music which arose in the nineteenth century and whose further

developments, although with considerable modifications, are largely traceable in the twentieth century. If formalism excludes that music vehicles any extra-musical content, the metaphysics of music admits the possibility of a reference that goes beyond the sound form.

However, even formalists did not question the idea that music requires a specific kind of *understanding*. It is precisely the question of understanding that allows Wittgenstein (1953: § 527) to establish a comparison between musical theme and linguistic proposition. In Wittgenstein's reflection, however, there is an original inversion, so that it is not music that is assimilated to verbal language, but musical understanding that is proposed as a model for linguistic understanding (Oliva 2016).

In a different direction, the claim of inexpressiveness or transcendence with respect to the sphere of meanings has often been translated in the affirmation of a more subtle capacity of music to convey higher, utopian and spiritual contents (Bloch 1918; Jankélévitch 1961). Following Adorno, the very fact that musical expressiveness is perceived as an enigma puts music in relation to the sphere of meaning and therefore forces a comparison with verbal language, although similarity does not mean identity or reducibility of one to the other (Adorno 1978).

#### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

The linguistic turn of a large part of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy shed new light on the relationship between music and language and made it possible to consider the similarities between the two forms of expression in a technical and not only a metaphorical sense. The linguistics of de Saussure, the semiotics of Peirce, the analytical philosophy inspired by Russell and Wittgenstein's reflections, and the biolinguistic program of Chomsky have given rise to original lines of study and have found application in research around musical language. Semiology and semiotics of music (Ruwet 1972; Nattiez 1987; Tarasti 1994), analytical philosophy of music (Langer 1942; Meyer 1956; Cook 1959), and generative musical grammar (Lerdahl, Jakendoff 1983) are just some of the most representative lines of research that testify to the productivity of the encounter between philosophy of language and music theory.

A separate discourse deserves the analytical development of the debate on musical expressiveness (see the related entry in ILAe), which has progressively moved away from a linguistic model, while retaining the reference to emotional content as musical meaning (Coker 1972; Davies 1994). The idea that the musical form has a symbolic power connected to the inner life and that it can "mean" specific emotional contents easily lead to the comparison between musical expressiveness and linguistic expression. Such a comparison can highlight similarities and differences: on the one hand, music and language both call into question an effort of understanding (Scruton 2009) and are therefore aimed at grasping a meaning, but on the other hand, in the case of music, it is difficult to identify it in a stable and univocal way.

The comparison between music and verbal language is due to the fact that both codes have common characteristics, such as a grammar, a syntax, a pragmatics, and even the requirement of double articulation (according to Lévi-Strauss 1964 limited to tonal music). Much more difficult to determine is whether music has a semantics in the proper sense of the word. In this regard Peter Kivy (2002) took up

formalist theses – albeit in an “enhanced” perspective, through reference to the sphere of emotions – and denied that music is a representative art, i.e. that it has any referential meaning.

The project of a musical semantics is instead carried on by some studies in the field of cognitive sciences. Entering into debate precisely with Kivy’s theory, which considers the term “meaning” in a specifically linguistic way, and embracing rather an “extended” conception of meaning, borrowed from Nattiez’s musical semiology (1987), neuroscientist Aniruddh D. Patel recognized that music is capable of suggesting “semantic concepts” even if missing specific “semantic contents”: “In this view, meaning exists when perception of an object/event brings something to mind other than the object/event itself” (Patel 2008: 350). In turn, Kivy responded to Patel’s observations and highlighted the stipulative nature of the concept of meaning he proposed, criticizing the distinction between content and semantic concept and the conception of a semantic gradualness: “being a semantic artifact is not – cannot be, as Patel *et alia* seem to think – a matter of degree” (Kivy 2012: 177).

#### MUSIC AND THE ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE

Studies on musical language have also had a remarkable development in the field of evolutionary psycholinguistics. Questioning the conception of music as “auditory cheesecake”, i.e. an evolutionary by-product of language for recreational purposes, proposed by Steven Pinker (1997), Steve Mithen (2005) has put forward the hypothesis of a common precursor to music and language, a communication system of the first hominids indicated by the acronym *Hmmm*: holistic, multimodal, manipulative, musical and mimetic. Rooted in human biology, music would thus share a common origin with language, followed by specialization and differentiation.

The idea that music is connected with the origin of verbal language is, on the other hand, already present in the Western philosophical tradition and debated by authors of different provenance. For example, the pioneering work of the musicologist Thrasybulos Georgiades, *Music and Language* (1954), underlined the original unity of linguistic and musical reality in the rhythm of *mousiké*, i.e. in the Greek verse. More recently, Giorgio Agamben has redefined in an original way the relationship between music and language referring to the unattainability of the origin of the word: “If we call music the experience of the Muse, that is, of the origins and the taking place of the word, then in a given society and at a given time music expresses and governs the relation humans have with the event of the word. [...] This impossibility of accessing the primordial place of the word is music” (Agamben 2018: 97). Although not reducible to a form of language, music, inscribed in the order of human phenomena, must be considered in connection with the anthropogenetic event of the origin of language.

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