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If a picture is worth 1000 words, and music is a language,
how many notes is a picture worth?

This paper explores the concept of 'music as the universal language' and identifies some of the problems that result from the often careless usage of the phrase. It is argued that not only are some of the parallels between music and language ill-defined, but also that characteristic attributes of music are not adequately addressed by the concept.

Preceding an examination of each individual term, we need to question whether or not the idea of language is being presented as a metaphor; although I argue that this is the most common interpretation, it is possible to use the term 'language' on a meta-level, as revealed by some textbook definitions. This is a crucial distinction, as many of the difficulties of the metaphor relate to attempts to find parallels with syllables, syntax, etc. However, in this broader sense, we arrive at another problem: why would music be termed 'the universal language' when painting, sculpture, dance, etc. seem equally able to qualify?

If we stay with the idea of metaphor – equating music with the way words are strung together to express some meaning - then we need to clarify to which form of verbal expression we are referring. To me, the single greatest flaw in Lerdahl &Jackendoff's famous approach was the fact that the linguistic model used was that of common prose. As a result, there was no room in their analyses for ambiguity of musical phrases.. It is easy to argue that a poetic model would have made a better starting point (though it would probably have meant abandoning the majority of the book's contents). Some music (as Cooper & Meyer had already illustrated) has patterns of accents and even rhyme which fit the traditional molds quite well, though the problems associated with expanding a poetic foot to the level of hypermeter have already been identified. Even more powerful than associating musical structures with traditional poetic form, however, is the analogy of free verse, where certain words and word combinations are chosen for their evocative qualities (often inextricably linked with their **sounds**) and arranged without regard for conventions of syntax.   Other possibly appropriate models are likewise found (not surprisingly) within the realm of art: the stream-of-consciousness style of Virginia Woolf, for example, or the lifelike representation of conversations in films where interruptions and half-uttered phrases are common.

Music as expressive of emotions is certainly considered by many (especially non-musicians) to be its *raison d'être*. I argue that this is a concept left over from the Romantic era, and gives no room to those who create compositions like abstract designs. Somewhere between the abstract design

and the tracing of the psychological state of the character in a Romantic opera, we could place music that portrays some natural phenomena. As electroacoustics is in the position to incorporate high-realism recordings of such phenomena, it becomes an apt context for reflection on this – especially in contrast to the idea of *écoute réduite*, which is shown to be a potential source of universal aspects, if we assume that anyone with the appropriate predisposition, regardless of cultural background, is capable of listening to sonic configurations for themselves.

The paper continues to explore what aspects contribute to the idea of music having 'universal' qualities.   Primarily, this is the categories of representation of ubiquitous aspects of our human bodies (including vocal expression), natural, and man-made environments, in both realistic and stylized forms – with reference to categories proposed by R.I. Godøy and by the Laboratoire Musique et Informatique de Marseille (*Unités Temporelles Sémiotiques).* The appreciation of sound qualities themselves is then compared to the appreciation of elements of an abstract painting – bringing us back to the difficulty of claiming more universality for music than for other artforms.

In addition, the issue of *écoute réduite* is shown to lead away from the 'language' component of the metaphor, as the compositional arrangement of such sonic objects is generally considered to be an invention of the composer for that specific piece. It is argued that any apparent 'meaning' in such sequences is in fact related to our understanding of behaviour of natural phenomena, including human motion and vocal expression, urban & rural soundscapes, and naturally-occurring processes. These become our familiar models for the organization of sounds in ways that seem familiar and able to be grouped for structured listening.

Much of the potential expressiveness of music can be considered its ability to present sounds in unexpected combinations that seem to create illusions of motion, change, atmosphere, etc. The linear narrative form in music, although relatively common during the Romantic epoch, is in no way the ttypical structure for teh abstract art form; increasingly, during the past century, composers have explored the possibilities for portraying multiple streams of sounds, each with differing densities of information and changing at different rates.   In electroacoustics, of course, this illusion of a counterpoint of layers corresponds neatly to the standard ways of creating a work, even digitally, where tracks can be individually shaped. However, different listeners will have differing abilities to recognize and retain a distinct image of one 'layer' or sonic 'gesture' so that subsequent occurrences and metamorphoses can be recognized as such. It is argued that these issues dealing with the temporality which is a fundamental aspect of all music - the ways in which each sound changes with time, and how the sequences, juxtapositions, and superpositions are organized - is the aspect that seems least addressed by the language metaphor.

In passing, the paper reflects on a few other aspects of language (such as dialects, translation, and clichés) which are suggested as providing interesting parallels for music - with, of course, reference to electroacoustics when appropriate.