

This essay is a distillation of research done for my M.A. at the Royal Conservatory in the Hague (2010). It also includes some much earlier work, done while I was briefly attending NYU in the early 90's. The composite can be read as a companion to my undergraduate paper (see above) as it continues a thread begun in the earlier essay, applied here to musical practice.

Musical Communication and Ambiguity

I have been interested for some time in what I have come to call “modes of musical experience”. This is based on the observation that there are several ways in which people listen to music, each of which involves a distinct type of engagement, or focus of attention. What these types have in common is the desire to construct *meaning*, which I would argue is not an incidental or unwanted quality of music, but actually an essential one, if we conceive the idea of meaning in its broadest sense. The modes differ from each other primarily in terms of what musical parameters are engaged to stimulate a sense of meaning. The formal elements of a musical score, which are often taken to represent the totality of a piece, indicate only one of several such sets of parameters, albeit the one for which analytic methods have been most rigorously developed. However, I believe that we can take steps toward filling the lacunae in the practice of musical analysis by considering broader, communication-based concepts that can be applied, by way of analogy, to different musical qualities. I find one of the most productive of such concepts to be ambiguity.

In general, meaning is constructed with the aid of mental *reference structures*, or complexes of experience, cognition and reasoning that are called up, both consciously and subconsciously, in order to evaluate and act in response to something that is presented. These reference structures can be invoked in any aspect of perception, their specific natures being defined by how and where they are used. In communication, each utterance is understood through the cooperation of what is heard, and how this perception is interpreted via reference structures. In this way, there exist at all times two levels of meaning, which may have varying degrees of coincidence with each other. In his study of poetic ambiguity, William Empson defines “atmosphere” as the “consciousness of what is implied by the meaning”, in other words, an awareness of the reference structures behind the lexical surface. Since we must assume some degree of non-coincidence between the poet’s reference and the reader’s reference, an important quality of these structures is the fact that they are not and cannot be stated objectively, and contain an aspect of indeterminacy. They are not expressed directly, but are nonetheless real and perceived. They come about in individual contexts as a result of processing experience, and through the workings of memory and education.

Due to their implicit and autonomous nature, an omnipresent feature of reference structures in communication is the potential for ambiguity. When the tension produced by a perceived non-coincidence of the actual (what is said) and the virtual (the perceived meaning) reaches a certain point, ambiguity tends to result. In poetry or narrative media, this is very often a desirable quality, as uncertainty as to the true meaning of something confronts the audience with a “mystery” to solve. These techniques, which are related to dramatic irony, stimulate an engagement that enriches the experience of art.

In the case of music, ambiguity is in a sense built-in, since any attempt to attach meaning to music will be clouded by music’s general lack of a strictly denotative aspect. This also makes it basically impossible for a composer to fix an objective, universally perceived meaning to any piece of music (this being particularly the case in the absence of accompanying words). Although such attempts to establish a specific meaning in a piece of music are sometimes made,

in a sense they can only have an impoverishing effect, since they are based on the premise that the listener can add nothing but a predetermined understanding to the experience. If, however, we view music as by its nature communicative, we are led to embrace the uncontrollable associations of the listener as an essential component in a creative exchange. Results of this engagement can take different forms, depending on where in the music one's attention is focused. By being aware of these "dominant" elements of focus (which in many cases may not be evident in a musical score), the artist can increase the effectiveness and communicative power of the music.

What follows are a few applications of these principles to musical analysis, based on a) identification of dominant elements of focus in the examples, with the modes of listening that result, and b) an examination of how ambiguity operates, via these elements, in the different contexts.

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In what I call the "physical" mode of experiencing music, my basic hypothesis is that engagement occurs through the *interaction* of musical elements, as embodied in the interaction of participants. Attention is focused on the musical gestures, which are generally organized with reference to a rhythmic phrase or impulse. The pulse, however, is created by the gestures themselves, and the subtle variations and shifting relations around this (implied) pulse can construct competing rhythmic reference structures in "real time". Ambiguity, then, applies here primarily to the parameter of rhythm, and in the ensuing points I am indebted to the work of musicologist Anne Danielsen and her work on funk and related music. We are dealing here with the productive confusion between two or more states, in this case deliberately created by the musicians' interaction and engaging the listener in a rhythmic "drama."

One could argue that the basic rhythmic element in most music is the underlying beat. Although there are many types of music where this beat may be constructed in an irregular or uneven way, the simplest type (and the most familiar in western music, both experientially and theoretically) is a regular, equal beat structure that can be accented and subdivided in various ways. However, there also exist cases within this tradition where ambiguity is deliberately created with regard to the relative temporal *location* of what are understood as "equal" beats. In Danielsen's analysis of the song "Left and Right" by D'Angelo, she elucidates how a compelling effect (and arguably the most distinctive element of the music) results from such an intentional confusion. After the introductory section of the song, where the guitar and percussion set up a syncopated but straightforward pulse, the rhythm section enters with a groove in which the beats are placed noticeably earlier. The effectiveness of the music, which is alternately described as presenting a "shifting" or "extended" beat, depends in large part on the listener's predisposition or ability to engage with this constant ambiguity at the micro-rhythmic level. The result of such an engagement, since it is involved with the physical element of *pulse* (which we instinctively mark with bodily movements—perhaps due to an analogy with our circulatory system), seems to result in a bodily response or stimulation. It is even possible that a listener's response could be wholly physical, and the technical situation with regard to rhythmic placement grasped only subconsciously¹.

¹ Related examples can be found in the sampler collages of David Shea, such as "Trio for Samplers", in which grooves of different tempi (as well as different cultural connotations) are layered, undermining the metronomic quality of each element while bringing to the surface unexpected points of connection. This reflects Shea's focus on the cultural function of rhythm, as opposed to an "abstract" conception of "centralized beats".

To a basic equal pulse structure, a counter- or cross-rhythm can often be opposed. Elsewhere, Danielsen points out how a generic trait of funk music is the suggestion, in varying degrees of explicitness, of a complementary alternate rhythm (also based on an equal durational structure) against the basic pulse. Generally the two rhythms are in a simple polyrhythmic relation: 4 against 3 (the familiar “dotted eighth note” rhythm). However, she argues that the rhythmic interest in funk is not primarily a result of ambiguity between competing divisions of the measure—the basic tempo is never really in question—but in the ambiguities, produced not by metric values but by rhythmic feel and articulation, between attacks which outline the basic pulse and those that define the counter-rhythm. In her analysis of the James Brown classic “Sex Machine” she hones in on the guitar pattern, which plays mostly on the beat (i.e., the basic pulse) except for the last attack of each measure, which seems to move to the “dotted eighth” counter-rhythm. However, due to the underlying swinging 16th note feel, the attack comes so late that it almost hits on the upcoming fourth beat. The interest here depends then on the listener’s understanding of the counter-rhythmic reference structure. The physical effect of this rhythmic ambiguity may come from the tension between how we “read” the last chord as counter-rhythmic, yet the physical experience of it approximates the feeling of a “pushed” basic pulse.

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Instances of ambiguity within another set of musical parameters can be found in what I have termed the “associative” mode of listening. Here the listener is engaged with music’s ability to evoke certain entities or environments, through culturally or otherwise determined socio-musical references (this can include “internal” references involving the functional elements of the music itself, the key factor then being a conditioned understanding of the musical structure on the part of the listener). A primary element in this evocation process is often the effect of conveying an unclear or conflicted context or function. In these cases the listener is pulled in to the music by the need to complete a partially defined situation, in which a reference has been merely suggested, or when two or more associations are simultaneously implied.

Many early examples of early 20th century European music can be analyzed in terms of “polychordal” or polytonal juxtapositions, where two or more harmonies, which in earlier music would generally have been kept separate in time and mediated by strict modulation techniques and formulae, are layered to create a rich coloristic effect. The appeal of such effects is in large part due to a pleasurable instability with regard to *harmonic* context and function. An emblematic example is the movement entitled “Farben” (Colors) from Schoenberg’s Five Pieces for Orchestra, whose striking initial chord can be analyzed as a combination of A minor and E dominant, making it difficult to determine if the chord is a “question” or an “answer”. In later examples, the expansion of tonal material into the spaces between the traditional 12 equal-tempered notes leads to even more fundamental ambiguities as to the actual presence or absence of identifiable chords. Discussing the music of Giacinto Scelsi, Tristan Murail speaks of the “almost-triads” created by Scelsi’s microtonal technique. These harmonies, created by the gradual distortion of unisons or octaves, tend to occur by continuous processes rather than sudden shifts, where it is unclear at what point a listener may begin to identify a familiar chord. Murail finds that this particular ambiguity leads to a “nostalgic” effect, an element of which we can assume to be the reference to the distant classical tradition.

The use of music in cinema use has greatly expanded and emphasized music’s associative and referential dimension. Certain elements of this phenomenon were again prefigured in European music of the late 19th and early 20th century. As an example, near the beginning of Bartók’s orchestral piece “In Full Flower”, we can see a structural ambiguity—namely, between the musical “foreground” and “background”—when certain musical figures oscillate between a

melodic and accompanying role. The same sort of *functional* ambiguity can be seen at work quite literally in certain cinematic contexts. In his analysis of Leith Stevens' score to the film "The Wild One", composer and theorist Fred Steiner describes the manipulation of musical "perspective". These examples hinge on the aesthetic and dramatic confusion between "source" music and soundtrack—for instance when a frantic jazz tune moves from a dramatically illustrative, "unrealistic" loud volume with no evident source, to a "realistic" background volume, when we see that it is issuing from a jukebox in a café. By exploiting music's ability to refer to both exterior and interior states or conditions, such examples (which are numerous and essential in film music) activate layered psychological associations in the listener, which I would argue operate in a similar way (in cooperation with the harmonic content) in the Bartok example.

The music of David Shea, which is very often based on the combination of live and sampled music, presents a further abstraction of the psychological ambiguity found in film music. He does this via a broad notion of *gesture*, which is common to both moving image and film. With regard to music in films, Adorno and Eisler state "the concrete factor of unity of music and pictures consists in the gestural element. This does not refer to the movement or 'rhythm' of the motion picture as such, but to the photographed motions and their function in the picture as a whole. The function of music, however, is not to 'express' this movement...but to release, or more accurately, to justify movement." Composer Jerry Fielding echoes this when he states the single most important function of film scoring is to "portend" the action. In Shea's music, where the live-versus-sampled relation replaces the image-versus-music relation, the explicitly gestural (and referential) musical language assumes a doubly ambiguous narrative aspect; he aims to create a "theater of gestures" that can be listened to as a kind of "sound film". The gestural quality of the musical elements, both sampled and live, and even more so the quasi-filmic interaction of the two, refer to an imagistic medium without concretizing it. Instead of the partial objectivity of a movie, the listener is confronted with two or more "layers" of subjectivity whose points of connection are determined by the musicians and listeners involved. The gestures "pull at memory, pull at emotion, at brain depth, at all of these different things, and layering them becomes a very intense psychological experience." As to the listeners themselves, Shea claims "there is no real sense of hierarchy, [it is not] that I have an intention that's realized and then if you get it as an audience member then you know, and if you didn't get it then you don't know." He is therefore using the universal principle of gesture to deal directly with individuals' personal reference structures, in this case centering on psycho-musical associations.

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An essential virtue of ambiguity in music is the ability to create a play of individual and shared reference structures between the music maker(s) and the listener. Music is thereby elevated from a utilitarian or background phenomenon to a fully engaging and interactive experience. By opening a space for the listener's imagination and memory to work and fill in, music can catalyze an alteration and transformation of consciousness. A common, if not essential, stage of this process is a sense of disorientation, seemingly brought about by a multiplicity of potential interpretations or opposing stimuli. The technological advances in the later part of the 20th century have inspired many musicians to cultivate this sense of disorientation as an aesthetic value. In reference to the cultural impact of electronics, John Cage stated that "There is no need to minimize the complexity of the situation, but rather a great need to make this complexity something we can all enjoy." He finds a model in the music of Charles Ives, where "everything is happening all the time". Similarly, Hank Shocklee, in discussing his sample-heavy approach to producing the Public Enemy albums of the late 1980s, said his intent was "to use [sampling] so much that you didn't know what anything was and where things was coming from. And there was this sonic resonance that I wanted to hear throughout the record, bringing in noise from

everywhere.” Both of these quotes reflect the modern listener’s ability (and often desire) to confront a denser and more heterogeneous fabric of musical material than previously, in an active rather than a passive way. Ambiguity in these cases is intensified to the point of an almost static state, which nonetheless offers the listener virtually endless potential points of entry. The disruption of understanding no longer manifests as such, but instead as a constant, open-ended atmosphere that aims to transcend rather than thwart a rational comprehension.

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