

# On the Semantic and Non-semantic Nature of Music

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**Abstract:** Is music semantic or non-semantic? For a long time, there have been different opinions, but most people hold the bias that music is non-semantic and neglect research on the semantic nature of music. This paper made an attempt to discuss the semantic and non-semantic nature of music. Music not only means its pure form, but conveys emotions through “sounds” and “tunes”, which always contains some meaning. As for the non-semantic nature of music, it lies in that musical material is not semantic and musical sounds play a decisive role. In the long history of music, semantic interpretations of music are commonly seen, but there are many vague “non-semantic” words in real life and literary works, and something non-semantic also exists in music.

## 1. The Semantic Nature of Music

Music conveys emotions with “sounds” and “tunes”, which always contains some meaning. It implies and conveys something, rather than simply refers to its pure form. In different art forms, meaning is conveyed and interpreted in various ways and with particularities. In the long history of mankind, people use music to express “sincerity, goodness, beauty, sounds and tunes” and innermost emotions, feel the emotions of others and arouse people’s love for nature, hometowns, nations and motherlands and so on. From this, it can be seen that music is semantic.

Compared with other art, music has its own characteristics, which is abstract. Other art is based on the subjective thoughts and emotions of authors, and then analyzed through the arrangement of plots, description of environment and action of characters, objective bases for which can be found in real life. However, music is different. For example, when we are enjoying music, no character comes on stage and no environment or scene comes into sight, but these will naturally appear in our minds with the progress of music. Though there is no narrated storyline, we can feel its existence and perceive some events as expected.

Music gives us a strong feeling, which we can comprehend and feel especially when finding a simple hint from the title or making an analysis: like literary works, music will conform to its title, to let us know “that’s the way it is”.

We usually have the following feelings in the psychological experience of the art of music: the continuous upward progress of musical series makes us feel positive, enthusiastic and optimistic; downward progress makes us relaxed, upset or see a gloomy future; melodies like waves are always connected with something lyrical and tender; parallel progress triggers motion with quietness, generating a strong desire for change (motivation); skips are lively and bouncing; leaps are full of passion and high-pitched... This requires us to use vivid and diversified musical language to lively reproduce various emotions expressed.

From this point, it can be seen that the semantic nature of music is as prominent as that of literature.

## 2. Particularity of Music

### 2.1 The particularity of the content of musical works

Musical works are so strongly appealing that the charm of beautiful music is sometimes irresistible. Even an audience uneducated in music could comprehend and recognize the beauty of music at some time. It is because of the special content represented in musical works.

There is no doubt that music can arouse our emotion. Once we are immersed in music, we will

feel the motion of emotion. What music conveys to us is certain emotions and activities, from which we perceive concrete emotional content and endow music with our own emotions according to our own experience...It is often said that music is something one feels but cannot express. Why? Music cannot be expressed like language, or directly shown like paintings. We comprehend it, but cannot find proper words to express its content. Nevertheless, the physical musical content contains many potential states and objects of life, and one's attitude reproduced by music can appear in such a state of life and point to the object of life.

When we say musical content is closely and directly correlated to emotion, we are not denying the role of music in cognition—the universally recognized role of art is to develop the ability of understanding emotion, attitude and aesthetics, so the emotional content of music is in no way contradictory to its role in cognition.

The content of musical works perhaps is not expressed directly, but in some indirect way—appear in the forms of “perceived thoughts” and thinking conclusions through logically organized torrents of audience's emotions and feelings. Works shall draw forth such a thinking conclusion, and anchor it in an audience's attitude to the world and himself or herself. It is in an indirect rather than direct way that music as well as all the other art forms (including literature) expresses the major wealth of thoughts. Even in literature, in addition to thoughts conveyed with language concepts, it is found that “perceived thoughts” all form in the whole trend of observation, feeling and thinking aroused by literature in the development of literary images.

## **2.2 The relationship between the content and form of music**

The form of music shows the representation of content, and concretized musical forms are the means by which music is expressed, which are interrelated in a certain way.

Expressive techniques of music can help us correctly experience the content shown by musical forms. Such techniques of music imitate the sounds of nature and make people associate these sounds with something in nature. Some other skills of musical expression directly use the music that often appears in company with certain scenes, thus making people think of relevant scenes in life.

In Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, against the background of vast tranquil fields created with concord and other supporting musical instruments, the twitter of nightingales and cuckoos imitated with woodwinds arouse people's association of beautiful rural landscape. The first movement of the piano concerto *The Yellow River* imitates torrents with the powerful flowing notes from the piano and the tutti of the orchestra, enabling the audience to imagine the great momentum of the Yellow River...

In music, the ways and means of constructing forms and the types of forms are developing, which are rather widely separated. There are complex connections between them and the change of life content contained in music. Some musicians or blind followers have the misunderstanding that it is unnecessary for musicians to grasp the increasingly wide experience in stable components, methods, means and forms of construction to improve their accomplishments and artistic skills, which is obviously wrong. Though this process is relatively independent, what's left by any method, component or means separated from the overall form will be just a “possibility” with potential content. In the process of constructing musical works, when analyzing a completed overall form, we cannot abandon the content shown by the form. In other words, we should not neglect the role that every component of the form plays in the expression. None of the components can be applied and comprehended successfully when separated from its content.

## **3. The Non-semantic Nature of Music**

Music is semantic, but it is surely non-semantic in some aspects. It is something invisible and intangible that one feels but cannot express. For example, from *Moon Reflected on Second Spring*, you cannot accurately determine whether it describes Ah Bing's unfortunate experience of being poor and vagabond all his life, irresistible pain in his heart, and hopes and sorrow for the future. Other art can directly reflect objective things, such as painting, sculpture and plastic art. Literature can give incisive and vivid descriptions with words. The language of music is composed of notes,

rhythms, melodies and concord, which stimulates the auditory organs of people to arouse association and imagination in people's minds and then create auditory images. For example, you cannot determine that Symphony of Fate praises the struggle of people for life. It is because the description of the same objective or the expression of a spiritual world in music can be composed of various kinds of musical language, which is mainly determined by the subjective emotions and intentions of composers. Thus, what is expressed in works is something existing in the minds of composers, as well as in their imagination. Therefore, when we are enjoying music, the auditory images acquired by us through association are obscure and show vague non-semantic characteristics. Such vague non-semantic characteristics are the same as many non-semantic words in life and literature.

The non-semantic nature of music also lies in that musical material is not semantic. This also explains why we cannot use words to interpret music, and musical sounds play a decisive role. Without audible language, the artistic value of literary works can still be appreciated by people capable of reading, while music can generate artistic effects only when it is played or sung. A musical work cannot exist to express objective things themselves, but is just certain subjective feelings, spiritual yearnings and aesthetic impulses of a composer. The only way to achieve this purpose is to integrate musical and acoustic technologies, to provide sounds similar to the objective and subjective worlds and express certain spirit and thoughts, emotions and feelings, and aesthetic pursuit in an obscure and abstract way. Moreover, music can only be comprehended by the audience through imagination and association. This is the most important non-semantic characteristic of music. Therefore, when interpreting music in the same way as we interpret literature, fine art, dramas and films, we will have the misunderstanding that music is as mysterious as "the Language of the God".

#### **4. The Conflict and Coordination between the Semantic and Non-semantic Nature of Music**

##### **4.1 Conflict**

For a long time, literati and theorists have unconsciously mixed the concept of "sound and voice" with that of "music". It is widely believed by literati that music contains no content of social emotions according to the theory of "no moods contained in music". For example, Ji Kang held that "sound is not equal to music". His idea of "no moods contained in music" is a theoretical paradox in a certain sense, for it has two meanings, namely "moods are not contained in music" and "moods can be expressed by music". In other words, Ji Kang denied the relation between instrumental "sounds" and the innermost feelings of people, but admitted the ability of "music" to express people's emotions in the comprehensive form of poetry, music and dance. Actually, the instrumental music, poems and dances created in musical activities in history can fuse with and interpret one another. In the long history of music, instrumental music has long been combined with poems and dances, which also gradually got rid of its subordinate role of accompaniment. Its sounds are intrinsically interrelated with human voice and expression. Such forms of sounds are just imitations of human voice and expression to some extent, thus forming abstraction. In this way, its own forms of sounds are generated and become a medium in connection with the inner emotions of people. In terms of instrumental "sound", the social property and subjectivity contained in it are generated and shown by composers and performers as social subjects through the creation of loud or low, soothing or intense, fierce or quiet, good or evil "sounds" in musical practice. From this, it can be seen that instrumental music is not something natural, but the result of composers' and performers' practice.

In his defense of "no moods contained in music", Ji Kang, who was a composer and performer instinctively using "music" as a tool for expressing his own emotions, discussed poems only based on the relation between "music" and the inner emotions of the audience, but neglected the relation between "music" and the inner emotions of composers and performers. As a result, the defense on the basis of one aspect could only achieve a partial and contradictory conclusion. It has also resulted in the increasingly exaggerated preconceived idea that "music is non-semantic" in the circles of literary theory and aesthetics...Even musicians are confused by the mixed concepts, and do not

know what they should follow.

The creation and performance of music become the process of operating skilled instruments for composing and making sounds. While music loses its “semantic nature”, its nature of “expression” actually does not exist either.

Due to such mixed concepts, most people tend to believe that music is non-semantic, which can not imitate the shapes and appearances of any static object except the sounds of objects such as the twitter of birds, neighs of horses or the murmur of streams. It perhaps is not as good at imitation as painting. It is widely believed that music can only be an art form for expressing emotions, but the semantic nature of music, what it means and conveys, is neglected. This is why there is conflict.

## **4.2 Coordination**

Though the sound of music is non-semantic to some extent, it is also closely related to our language and intonation in real life, such as the non-verbal emotional intonation of people for expressing pain, sorrows and joy in daily life. For example, when talking with others and listening to others, we can distinguish their angry, interrogatory, vicious, gentle, calm and fierce intonations and their attitude to us. It can be said that we judge the meaning of words and comprehend the content expressed by words according to intonations. The most important characteristic of intonation is the most direct and clear magnification of emotions. Why will we connect the sounds of music with some semantic content when appreciating music? It is because language and music share common tones of emotional expression. The elements of emotional expression such as the high and low pitch and firm or gentle voice show semantic meanings, and music also expresses its meanings through the loudness, fluctuation, firmness and tenderness of tones.

The semantic content of music can only be expressed through the combination of sounds, while literature achieves the goal of expression by means of language.

To sum up, music contains both semantic and non-semantic characteristics, neither of which should be exaggerated or denied.

## **5. Conclusions**

By giving the arbitrary judgment that “music is non-semantic”, literati and theorists mislead musicians and the audience. Through an exploration of how the semantic nature of music was formed, it can be seen that musical language and literary language are actually based on conventions and settings.

Of course, there are indeed many “non-semantic” elements in music, like many obscure “non-semantic” language elements in life and literature. Such “non-semantic” elements usually emerge when there is something unutterable in life and literature...

It is just the game between conflict and coordination dialectically existing in the semantic and non-semantic nature of music that creates the endless charm of music.

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