

Music, Subjects, Creativity

Emma Ruiz Martín del Campo

University of Guadalajara, Guadalajara, Jalisco, México

Abstract

Starting with several examples, I propose a reflection about music as a sort of language that makes feasible the expression of imagination, desires, and emotions, which exceed the communication possibilities of other codes like any verbal or pictorial.

Music puts different rhythms, tones, and melodies at an individual's disposal. These elements are flexible enough to refer to natural and corporal phenomena, to human feelings, fantasies, passions, to vivid realities that are complex and powerful.

Symbolically, we can express in music the flow of life, the constant human transformation. We could say that the musical language has a place in a space of creativity with no fixed limits. In such a hypothetical space, it is possible to move beyond the social musters and roles to allow for the spontaneous expression of an individual and the creation of new ways of expression and communication.

Occasionally and in certain contexts, the musical language can support and express rebellion, because it may become a form of fighting against the subordination of individuals and groups to restrictive and possibly intolerable social conditions, for example, the role of music in the communication of some groups of slaves. In some contexts, music can be a last resort to generate hope and strategies for survival

Introduction

Sound, Voice, Music

Humans need both internal and external sensorial stimuli. Sound stimuli are expressed in temporal succession and are received gradually. It is impossible to perceive a piece of music all at once, as it is with a painting. Chion (1998), in his book *Sound*, tells us:

Sound reveals itself to us starting from its gradual elaboration, not only through languages, but also through music, movies, the arts that use it, and of course, reflection and theory. Therefore, *there is so much sound yet to be created and it is never complete* (p. 93; Italics added).

Chion also makes us see the potential that sound has to arouse strong emotions in human beings, as well as the coinciding images and sensations of a different nature from sound. This has to do with the difficulty of listening to a particular sound due to the existence of a great number of auditory stimuli that every human being links with certain representational contents in his imagery. We associate sounds with fantasies or images that have a certain degree of ambiguity and that are, as Chion would say, "floating."

When a group of subjects who have had similar emotional experiences listen to a variation of sounds together, this proposes an intuitive interpretation of the same, a communication in

which personal experiences and the unconscious play a fundamental role. According to Milan Kundera (1985), a “semantic river” flows:

An object would evoke a different meaning each time, but together with this meaning all the former meanings would resonate (like an echo, like a group of echoes). Each one of the new personal experiences would ring with a more beautiful accompaniment every time (p. 94).

That explains why the communication between subjects who listen and produce certain sounds and try to decipher them in an effort to understand each other, hits on the foundation of a floating attention, of a perception in which sensibility, the understanding of slight indications as changes in the modulations of sound in its palpitation, are of great significance and tend to connect with other sensorial frames.

When we are in the presence of a collection of sounds that have tone, volume, duration, and timbre, we can speak about music. Given that these elements are all present in the human voice, it is fair to say that the voice is within the frame of musicality, and that is why we can refer to a voice as being melodious (or not), soprano, baritone, and other classifications that are related to singing. Music and the voice are privileged means of emotional communication between human subjects. The voice, like the articulation of human sounds that participates more directly in the creation of subjectivity and culture, will retain us in a couple of more detailed reflections.

Born with a certain degree of helplessness, which prevents us from surviving on our own for quite some time, humans need others in order to find their way in the world and to build their subjectivity. We have been able to compensate for the initial helplessness of our species with the development of our intelligence, symbolic potential, and cultural work. We can ask ourselves about the role that sound, music, and the human voice play for us from as early as our prenatal life in the womb. Tomatis (1977) in his work *L'Oreille et la Vie* (The Sound of Life) brings us to the conclusion that the human fetus can perceive the human voice from as early as the fourth month of pregnancy. At that stage, hearing is an acoustical bath that has yet to be registered in that which is symbolic, and in the presence of certain sounds, the child will exhibit bodily responses, not only in the ears, but in the skin and motor functions as well.

The voice is something that reveals itself from the earliest stages of life. With the voice, something very subjective is expressed and as infants are growing, the voice is related more and more with that which is symbolic – with culture. Widmer (2004) claims:

The voice is something incredibly existential...It is impossible to live in a world without the voice; it always pops up somewhere, and it testifies to the power of the symbolism that it bears...in it, a dimension that is especially important for humankind becomes perceivable – that of enjoyment. A tone...can travel through my body and can carry me to a state close to identity (p. 153).

Mann (1951) alludes to the same in the following manner:

“And your cousin, sir?” asked a voice from behind and over his head: It was a tender voice to ears which were predestined to find that dull and slightly hoarse timbre infinitely pleasant. It was the same idea as pleasure, carried to an extreme; it was the voice that had said a long time

ago, "With pleasure, but don't break it." It was an irresistible voice, a fatal voice...(p. 1474).

The timbre of the voice allows us to distinguish certain voices from others through harmonics. Thus, we are able to recognize voices that are metallic, muffled, dull, clear, and so on. For every subject there will be voices that are more seductive or tender than others, depending on one's life history. It is through the timbre – that residue in the voice that appears to be insignificant – that we link specific sounds with significant emotional experiences. The voice is able to operate like a catalyst for an abundance of feelings and a merging with others associated with different fantasies.

Sounds, the voice, music – they all arouse a multitude of possible emotions depending on the subjects that are listening to it and the conditions under which they are doing so. In some cases they are able to make us relive emotions linked to experiences bordering on life and death; they can cause a flow of creativity and activity, or can arouse the desire to surrender oneself to passiveness and even to death. Márai (1942) impressively describes the confusion of emotions that can be at play when playing or listening to music.

...One must also put up with music...they were playing Chopin's *Polonaise Fantasy*. It was as if everything had turned upside down in the room...It was as if the rebellion of the music had lifted the furniture; as if an invisible force had moved the heavy curtains from the other side of the windows; it was as if everything that had been buried in the human heart, everything corrupt and broken, were alive again; as if in the heart of each one, a mortal rhythm was hidden that began to beat with a relentless force at a given moment of life. Disciplined listeners understood that music could be dangerous. The other two, Konrád and his mother, seated at the piano, were not paying attention to the dangers. The *Polonaise Fantasy* was only a pretext for unleashing into the world forces that move it all, that make it all explode, everything that human discipline and order try to hide...As if the celestial chargers of music...had lifted the dust from the path of heaven that leads to destruction and nothingness (pp. 49-50).

The Presymbolic and Symbolic Level, the Subject of Language and Musical Art

The human infant, connected as he is to those who care for him and allow him to survive, starts converting them into objects of desire. Initially, he relates with them in a sort of recycling system in which he experiences satisfaction of his needs without being able to clearly differentiate between those who are helping him. He begins building an initial image of himself, an "ideal of the self," which he tends to experience as complete and as plenary as possible, but there is always something that upsets the harmony. The acquisition of language brings the child face to face with aspects of winning and losing. When speaking, in the symbolic and cultural order, the infant sets himself up as a subject, but he loses the immediacy of the type of relationships that small children have with others, as well as his own bodily signs. Later on, in order to satisfy his needs and to see his desires fulfilled by others, he will have to appeal to speech. Only the early infant in arms is sensually perceived and understood through intuition and gentleness in an attempt to care for, protect, and satisfy him. Through language, he alone

will be able to indicate the totality of his feelings, anxieties, expectations, and desires, and will begin to create a fantasy world.

Language cannot fully express that which is unconscious; something unable to be articulated remains – the enigma that creates the subject and raises questions about himself; it drives him to give it form, to imagine it, and it is also an incentive to speak it, even though the words may never be sufficient. This is what Lacan calls object “a:”

That which does not appear in the language but that nevertheless is effective in it...Object “a” is something more than an absence; it is something that does not allow itself to be represented. In other words, it is something belonging to the subject that cannot be reflected directly. That is why I spoke before about a blind spot...it is the nucleus of the unconscious (Widmer, 2004, p. 67).

If music or the timbre of the voice tend to be experienced as a obturator of deficiencies and differences, as a means of opening doors to others, we must see – in order to eventually reach sameness with them and attain the satisfactory immediacy which was lost – that this is a product of fantasy in moderation, even though the artistic understanding is invaluable because it is able to express the unspeakable (that which cannot be put into words), in another way:

And because it is so difficult to express something conceptually, here art has a privileged place, for example...music. It is not something that can be thought of pre-symbolically, rather it is more like that which is symbolic in a second force. That’s it – true artistic understanding assumes the borders of that which is symbolic and tries to find a means of representation different from the proven, across the borders of that which is symbolic (Widmer, 2004, p. 71).

Let’s give voice now to the artist:

...Music was like something adhesive. Music was probably telling you something, something impossible to express with actions or words, and more than likely, you said something to each other with music; and we – the odd ones, my father and I – could not understand this something, which for you was music perfectly expressed. That is why we felt isolated among you. Music spoke to you and also to Kristina, and that’s how the two of you spoke to each other...I hate music...I hate that harmonious language – incomprehensible for me – that some people use for chatting, for telling each other inexpressible things that do not follow to any rule nor law: yes, sometimes I think that everything that is expressed through music is rude and immoral. How faces are transformed while listening to music...And how music doesn’t have any meaning that can be expressed with words, it no doubt has another more dangerous meaning, since it can cause people to understand each other, people who belong to each other not only because of their musical preferences, but also because of their ancestry and their destiny (Márai, 1942, pp. 157-158).

Music as a Sort of Language that Makes the Expression of Imagination, Desires, and Emotions Feasible – Emotions that Exceed the Communication Possibilities of Other Codes Such as Verbal or Pictorial

Music, like other sensitive, bodily, and emotional expressions, is a tentative response to questions that cannot be formulated with words. In a way, musical language is more accessible for understanding – starting from that which is emotional and intuitive – by its readable, symbolic representations, than a language linked to the spoken word, whose vocabulary and syntax must be handled well in order to produce effective communication.

Emotions, which tend to flow more easily by listening and music-making, have a leading role in the formation of mental organizers. Non-verbal affective communication, which flows from the conscious to the unconscious, is also implied in the creation of intersubjective links. That is why, in certain contexts and starting with certain similarities between subjects, music arouses feelings of integration, collapsing the barriers between subjects and creating the illusion of a group as a whole. This fantasy or illusion, also susceptible to being aroused by music, is also important for survival.

The language of music carries with it an emotional connotation, which conceptually is impossible to exhaust. That which is communicated is an essential sentiment and a frame of mind. When two or more people communicate through music-making or singing, they are not transmitting significant rational contexts. Instead, variations of tone, timbre, volume, and duration are used in order to cause the flow of emotions (not necessarily conscious ones), which in turn brings one to interpret and sense the speakers' representations.

The rhythmic and harmonic factors are of special importance for the language of music because they are capable of generating feelings of belonging, protection, and hope in the concept of *us*.

Music as an Aid for Survival: Anxiety Management and Instilling a Sense of Hope

When human beings experience extreme situations where their life is in danger or when they feel that their integrity, form of community life, or freedom is threatened, there is an increase in sensitivity; the subject places herself in a state of alert that increases her perceptibility and the ability to interpret signs, which in other contexts would go unnoticed.

Unpleasant emotional states, like anguish (when it is not extreme) and more pleasant ones, such as those which are related to excitement and falling in love – are especially appropriate for feeling, perceiving, and expressing music. In such cases feelings and nonverbal communication are accentuated, as well as messages exchanged from conscious to unconscious. Powerful emotions are put into play in order to somehow achieve communication. The most distant and profound musical memory is attained, reactivated, and the range of potential creativity is increased, with its aim of bringing others closer together.

There are historical examples that show how – through the use of music – subjects involved in similar circumstances could work through and temporarily forget their suffering and the situation in which they felt trapped with no light at the end of the tunnel. They put themselves in a state of mind that allowed them to stay alive and feel worthy, united, and connected. In

such cases, music was fulfilling the role of a *reliever*; it offered help, support, and protection from that which seemed unbearable. During the times of slavery in the United States, for example, while at work in the fields, the black slaves improvised music – as much as they were permitted – experimenting with musical style and flow.

Improvisation is a key element when looking for communication through music, for musical *conversations* can be made, new themes can be introduced, and different variations made. In regards to singing, the content of the text can become less important than the sets of musical variations with which it is expressed. During improvisation – whether vocal or instrumental – the musician's emotional state of mind is reflected and she causes a semantic flow that makes the understanding of intrapersonal and interpersonal conditions possible, expressing nostalgia or a longing for other living conditions.

In certain extreme situations, the subject is, on the one hand, threatened in her existential security, anguished, but, on the other hand, an opening for hope is possible; for example, in the hands of possibly destructive tyrants. However, it is not known exactly what they will do with the subjects in the end; she will be exposed to an intensely uncertain and frightening situation that can also eventually lead to creativity in search of survival, and in some cases, music can help.

An Experience that Made History: “A Song of Hope”

A Song of Hope, a movie based on a true story, was produced by the Australian, Bruce Beresford. The film is moving and emotional, partly because the human voice acquires a directive sense. The historical context of the facts that support the plot of the movie are the outbursts of fascism in different places on the globe, with its veil of presumed superiority of some races in relation to others and the implicit explosive potential of such postures. The story takes place in 1942 during World War II, at which time Japan was violently expanding its dominion over Asia. The action begins in the British colony of Singapore, moving quickly to the Dutch colony of Sumatra. There, a group of British, Dutch, Australian, American, and a few Asian women are confined to a concentration camp run by the Japanese military.

The film is centred on the collective strength and endurance that these women develop when they decide to form an orchestra. In an emergency situation, they look for musical expression as a means of feeling alive and of generating hope. During their search, understanding of self and of the existential situation in which they found themselves, an environment of interaction and strength is created in which each one's sensitivity and musical aptitude are put into play. Since the women have no musical instruments, they sing in a very strange manner. What they create is not a chorus, but rather a vocal orchestra – manipulating their voices effortlessly in an attempt to resemble string, brass, and percussion instruments. The musical scores that the women used, preserved for over 50 years, were the same ones used for the movie's soundtrack.

The experience of bonding and solidarity among these women is seen as transforming. The fact that they knew that most of them would never again return to their native land definitely united them to the context in which their struggle – and their utilization of creative forms for survival – had developed.

Conclusions

We have approached music as an imaginary means of achieving a union with the desired object, with immediacy; but we have also spoken about the fact that full presumed satisfaction is not achievable; the lack of it pierces us, and we cannot free ourselves from the word – from culture.

We are coming and going between that which is presymbolic and symbolic (and we could also add artistic) as a form of mediation between the two. We fluctuate between the acceptance of the limits that life imposes on us – in order to walk as lightly as possible – appealing to illusions, dreams, and fantasy, which can all be a support, a road to creativity, but which can also give us the fullness that we long for.

Many times we sing to prevent ourselves from crying. Other times we do so as a form of nostalgia or longing for the imaginary lost paradise. There are those who run away from music because they lament the excessive noise that surrounds it (and oftentimes conceals it). "...[She] thinks about the time period during which Johann Sebastian Bach lived, when music was like a rose that grew in a huge snowy plain of silence (Kundera, 1985, p. 99)." There are others who long for music as a sedative, as a way of attaining the desired union with the other – the object of desire:

I longed to be in Sabina's arms for a long time, quiet, without ever saying a single sentence again and letting the pleasure merge with the orgasmic clamor of the music. In the midst of that happy, imaginary noise, she fell asleep (Kundera, 1985, p. 100).

Here we have treated music as a type of language, as a creative potential aid for survival and transformation. Music has its limits; it is not a magic formula, a solution to neither individual nor collective problems, but it can be a source of inspiration that propels us forward when all the roads toward happiness, fulfillment, and fellowship in our lives seem to be closed.

Author's Note

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