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Music, Meaning, and the Art of Elocution

ELIZABETH ANNE TROTT

Aestheticians most frequently treat the individual arts as separate subjects of investigation. Philosophers usually write about “art,” or about music, or dance, or literature, or painting, or whatever. Yet frequently these arts are experienced in combination. When combined, one can ask, Does one change the meaning of another, or do they merely coexist?

Music often accompanies other performance arts, and one wonders what effect its presence has. Such an inquiry must begin somewhere. So let it begin with the most basic tool of expression—the voice. Vocal expression was referred to by the Greeks as the art of managing vocal delivery. It is known to us as the art of elocution.

Hearing the emotion, for example, the expression of sadness in a voice, is the most basic and common skill of all animals. Manipulating the emotive expression in our voice is the first step toward communication. When one considers newborns, crying is the first sound for all expressed responses and needs. As more sounds are discovered, the effects these sounds have on others are discovered as well. Infants learn to manipulate the delivery of sound to serve their needs and interests. In doing so they are intentionally arranging pitch, timbre, and tone of sound. Words come much later. Often infants make sounds that don’t signal distress, sounds they can hear just for the sake of hearing. We do the same when we sing in the shower, whistle, or play an instrument. The voice could be considered to be the generic musical instrument of humans, perhaps of all animals.

In considering music and vocal expression, we need to make distinctions between voice (vocal sounds), speech, and words.

No one was more aware of the power of speech than Aristotle. Language, he observed in the *Politics* (1, 2, 1253a), is the deciding factor which makes man a political animal. Sound, a mere indication of pleasure or pain, is found in all animals, but speech “is intended to set forth the expedient

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and inexpedient, and likewise the just and unjust.”¹ Aristotle was not insensitive to the distinction between speech and words and voice. Voice was the sound of beings with soul.² “Voice then is the impact of the inbreathed air against the ‘windpipe,’ and the agent that produces the impact is the soul resident in these parts of the body” (*Politics*, II, 8, 420b). But not any sound, such as a cough, would be considered voice. “What produces the impact must have soul in it and must be accompanied by an act of imagination, for voice is *sound with a meaning*, and is not *merely* the result of any impact of the breath” (*ibid.*). Voice also has the power of producing a succession of notes which differ in length and pitch and timbre.

Is voice—sound with a meaning—strictly the domain of human animals? Aristotle doesn’t limit it thus, for he writes, “Voice is the sound made by an animal” (*ibid.*)—an animal with soul and imagination. If we note his comments that all animals can indicate pleasure and pain through sound, then voice, in its most primitive form, is the expression of emotions through differences in sounds of length, pitch, and timbre (*ibid.*). Surely sound that indicates pleasure and pain is sound with meaning. Aristotle doesn’t specify whether animals other than humans engage in acts of imagination. We know that they engage in making sounds for purposes far beyond the expression of pleasure and pain.

Voice, sound with meaning born of the soul expressing pleasure and pain, becomes a political tool when formed into spoken words. The voice loses none of its material cause and formal source in that transformation, it merely shapes sounds in complex ways. Written words retain their power only through the imagined meanings, but lack the power of expression from the soul. This doesn’t worry Aristotle. The power of tragedy, he suggested, can be felt even without a dramatic performance. The representation of the pitiable, the terrible, the significant, or the probable can be produced by both imitative actions and speech. Aristotle means by speech the written words presented by the dramatic poet. He claims that the art of elocution (knowing how to give a command, or utter a prayer, or ask a question) has little to do with the art of poetry.

Why should anyone accept as an error Protagoras’ censure of Homer on the grounds that when he said, “Sing, O goddess, of the wrath . . .,” he gave a command, although he really wished to utter a prayer.* For Protagoras says to order someone to do something or not is a command. Let us, therefore, disregard such a consideration as being a principle of some other art [by which he means the art of elocution], not the art of poetry. (*Poetics*, XIX, 1456b. *Golden’s translation [see note 4] uses a period. Butcher uses a question mark)

Aristotle suggests the form of poetry is independent of its presentation. And the voice of the soul which can express it doesn’t affect its meaning, for clear diction requires no medium. This is not to say that vocal expression is

irrelevant to the verbal arts. Aristotle does acknowledge that inflection cannot be ignored and that, for example, "Did he go?" involves an expression of the verb that is different from "Go" (*Poetics*, XX, 1457a). Questions and commands do not sound the same. In *The Rhetoric*, Book III, Aristotle notes the importance of the delivery of words.

The voice can be managed to convey character in a speech and to contribute to the moral purpose of it. Aristotle confines the art of acting to delivery, the most important features of which are "volume, modulation of pitch, and rhythm" (*The Rhetoric*, III, 1, 1403b).³ He observes that contestants aware of these points win prizes in poetry competitions. Aristotle is not enthusiastic about the effects of delivery. Although he notes that "success in delivery is of the utmost importance to the effect of a speech" (*ibid.*, 1403b), he adds that the significance of a speech should reside in the strength of the facts alone. It is the "sorry nature of an audience" (*ibid.*, 1404a) that inclines it to be persuaded by delivery. (Teaching mathematics requires none of the vocal devices, he dryly observes.) Audiences are always in sympathy with an emotional speaker, even when there is nothing in what he says (*The Rhetoric*, III, 7, 1408a).

Aristotle does acknowledge the musical factors of vocal delivery (rhythm, timbre, tone) and grants vocal delivery the status of an art. (The art of delivery is translated in modern-day texts as the art of elocution.)⁴ What makes elocution an art? Aristotle's theory of imitation may provide some help. If we keep in mind that, for Aristotle, the objects of the fine arts are the actions of persons, then everything that expresses and reveals a rational personality will fall within his sense of action. Art reproduces not just nature, or outward phenomena, but also "deeds, incidents, events, situations,"⁵ insofar as these spring from an inward act of will or elicit some activity of thought or feeling. All that constitutes the inward and essential activity of the soul is the common original of art. In fact, the external world is only a background to action, not the proper subject of art.

We have seen that the voice is closely associated with the soul. Therefore the voice as a means for expressing inner choices, disappointments, ideals is a human *response* and can itself be the *action* of artistic imitation. Elocution, then, presses artistic form upon words. Words expressed are not just symbols of mental states. The intent of the expression makes them objects of art. We may argue, then, that fine arts not only imitate men in action, as Aristotle would have it, they can also imitate words in action, the action of which may reveal character, thoughts, and responses more than the meaning of the words. The art of elocution can be understood as conveying with the voice intended meanings for words.

Aristotle grants us rhythm, harmony, diction as the components of vocal expression. (In the *De Anima* he includes tones.) Thus words expressed can be altered in all of the above ways—through rhythm of delivery, through

pitch and timbre, by means of the breath of life. The elocutionist trained in the art of delivery, the actor skilled in the creation of expressions of choices and aversions, or pleasures and pains, can alter and determine the meaning of any of that clear diction. The timbre, rhythm, pitch, and harmony of words expressed can alter their meanings. Deliberate delivery of voice sounds, varying tone, and rhythm and pitch have all the components of making music.

Let us consider further whether vocal expression qualifies as music. Francis Sparshott reminds us that for there to be

an art of sound it must be possible to identify sounds as pertaining to music: we must have a way of knowing that music is happening. This identification could be made contextually (we know it's music because all sounds made in these circumstances count as music); or because we have begun to recognize an order into which certain sounds are entering and thus constitute music; or simply because the sounds have a musical quality—we recognize from the first tone that someone is playing or singing. Let us call any sound that is recognized as musical a tone.⁶

The phrase “tone of voice,” then, is literal. He goes on to elaborate on tones as having a place in a system, being repeatable, having recognized sound properties, such as pitch—measurable mathematically by ratio. “What concerns us is that the whole system is artificial, resting on the deliberate production of sounds such as can be related to, and indeed derive their artistic identity from, that system” (ibid.). The voice, then, can convey music. The phrase “the music in our voices” is not metaphorical.

An objection could be made that tones, as deliberately ordered systems of mathematically measured sounds, exclude the spoken voice, that pure instrumental music is the only true candidate for tone making. I would respond by observing that music no longer has agreed-upon, recognizable sound properties. We know that many great classics have bangs, clicks, clatters, blasts, etc., as well as pure tones. All sounds are now musical candidates if they can be recorded, manipulated, systematized through synthesizers.⁷ The voice is by far the most versatile synthesizer.

The question remains, How does elocution affect the meaning of the speech? In what way does the voice—and the sounds of the soul with raw meaning of pleasure and pain shaped as words—determine the form and relay the imaginative intent? One possible way of thinking about music and vocal utterance is by reference to the Gestalt notion of figure and ground. Ground is that which determines the perceived figure. Vocal expression can be the ground for verbal meaning.

A shifting ground-figure relationship between words and vocal music makes possible ambiguous representations and requires interpretation and commitment. Figure and ground as perceptual tools enable us to decipher

meanings in what we hear. In the expression of words, confusions and ambiguities and misunderstandings can fill our conversations because too frequently the conventions of what is figure and ground in voice and speech are interpreted differently.⁸ The music deliberately accompanying the words, or unintentionally "misheard," can ruin the simplest discussion or shift the whole course of a conversation. More than that, often the voice of the soul conveys our meanings when we least suspect. Nothing is more emotionally devastating than sarcasm; nothing more emotionally therapeutic than soothing tones and murmurs. This, of course, is exactly what the great actor, news reader, sports broadcaster, stand-up comic, and politician must learn. The message is in the medium. The medium is the music of the voice. One of the main reasons we go to the theater rather than stay at home and read the play is to experience the power of vocal expression as a tool of interpretation.

Considering that music was held by the Greeks generally to be the most imitative or representative of the arts, one might suggest that the music in a voice can be a direct representation or copy of the character. Aristotle would agree. Music expresses moral character. In the *Politics*, Aristotle comments on music and morals and education. "Rhythm and melody supply imitations of anger and gentleness, and also of courage and temperance and of virtues and vices in general" (*Politics*, VIII, 5, 1340a). When we are listening to such strains, Aristotle remarks, "our souls undergo a change" (*ibid.*). Anyone who has been transfixed by great orators, actors, and speakers or who has been moved by the power of vocal delivery has been subject to the power of music. But such abilities, though practised and perfected by artists, are not restricted to them.

The music of a language is learned by association and through culture. The innuendos of sarcasm, the ambiguities of expression and utterance become trademarks, weapons, signals of trust or betrayal, and conveyances of the inner character. Because we hear the vocal music, we judge the intent, not just the words. For example, vocal musical intent operates when I intend to say "A," and I use the music in my voice to convey the meaning "A," while the words say "Not A." The vocal artist, in learning the trade of the elocutionist, hides his own character. We may bring aesthetic attitudes to vocal performances and judge the skill of the performer.⁹ Yet in our own conversations we often employ the same skill knowingly to persuade and deceive. The comment "I know that is what she said, but I don't think that is what she meant" subtly acknowledges music as the ground of vocal sounds to be the most powerful determinant of meaning and a direct link to character. Shakespeare wisely noted that the whole world was a stage.

Does one have a way of combining the arts? E. Hanslick has reminded us of the difficulty of ascribing as specific content feelings in music. He writes: "Yet it is not the tones which are represented in a song, but the text.

The drawing, not the colouring, determines the represented content."¹⁰ But he adds in a footnote that music is to provide more than mere color:

If music does not interact with the poem in a much more splendid sense than as mere colouring, if it (being itself a synthesis of design and colour) does not bring in something new which recreates the words as a mere trellis upon which to climb and spread its own beautiful foliage, then it has achieved at best the status of an academic exercise or a dilettante's delight but not by any means the heights of art. (Ibid.)

Hanslick doesn't tell us how music will achieve what he wants, rather he suggests that each art complements the other, words providing a form for the music, the music providing a glorious showcase for the text. But he suggests that they are not required by each other for the meaning conveyed. "The same melody might just as effectively render words expressing the exact opposite" of a particular emotion.¹¹ Hanslick's example is familiar. Some of Handel's arias (composed in 1711 and 1712) were used both for passages in the *Messiah* and for secular erotic duets for Princess Caroline of Hanover. One might remark that Handel's music was transferable in spite of dissimilar topics, because expressing passionate or religious love is a human way of experiencing the world.

Love as intense, anguished, or awe-inspiring is conveyed through the voice of the soul—itself the very ground and condition of feeling. Handel's music may be structurally analyzable as a dash of compositional color on the trellis of an emotion, but when it is combined with text and encountered as an expression of Aristotelian aesthetic imitation, the listener hears of the inner actions of the human animal and whatever passions the actions elicit. The combination of music and speech or dance or gesture can convey new meanings. In examining the close relation between music and poetry Lawrence Kramer refers to a song as "a form of synthesis."¹² Any synthesis, of course, is not just a combination of elements, but a new entity born of them.¹³ Music and speech combined can provide as rich a new artistic conveyance as the imagination allows. Aristotle's clear diction can be mere ground for soaring emotions; Mozart's music can be ground for both religious passion and frivolous operatic plots.

The arts unified imitate human life; separated they exalt only the glories of our imagination.

Are these observations a rewording of Susanne Langer's notion that art does not express actual feeling but ideas of feeling?¹⁴ Perhaps the difference is in her associated theory that the expressed idea of feeling is art because we "uncouple" it from practical life and "abstract" it as a "fine conceptual figment."¹⁵ For Langer ideas of feelings are separated, uncoupled from the composer's state, but still represent what she or he knows or can imagine

about those feelings. The art of elocution is one in which we are all performers. Some of us are paid to express feelings in circumstances of artifice that invite the uncoupling of the effect of such expressing on our daily affairs, and a suspension of belief on the part of the audience, accompanied by a willingness to be deceived. Others of us are skilled at employing the art in practical affairs, and still others remain unaware of their expressive style but reveal their character nonetheless. This vocal art is not the expression of ideas of feeling; it uses the sounds inspired by feelings themselves, not what the speaker knows of feelings in some theoretical sense or imaginary way, but the outward expression of inner actions. What differentiates the professional artist from the amateur is the success he or she proclaims in masking his or her intent, a difference in degree not kind. Every time an individual switches social roles, he switches vocal melodies. The professional actor, at least, benefits from a consistent character and theatrical cues to inform the listener when and where to start or stop taking him seriously. Would that we all were so lucky!

NOTES

1. B. Jowett, trans., *Aristotle's Politics* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1916).
2. In chap. 6 of *De Anima* Aristotle reminds us that every living thing has a soul.
3. L. Cooper, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1932). See also E. M. Cope, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, with a "Commentary," vol. 3, rev. and ed. J. E. Sandys (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1877).
4. L. Golden, trans., and O. B. Hardison, Jr., "Commentary," *Aristotle's Poetics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 36.
5. S. H. Butcher, trans., *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Dover Publications, 1951), p. 123.
6. Francis Sparshott, "Aesthetics of Music—Limits and Grounds," in *What Is Music?*, ed. P. Alperson (New York: Haven Publications, 1987), pt. 1, p. 45.
7. One of my students submitted an interesting musical composition composed of washing machine sounds as part of his final essay.
8. In Oriental languages the inflection can totally alter the meaning of the sound uttered.
9. The drama critic evaluates the presentation of the play, not the script. According to Aristotle, if Shakespeare were the perfect poet, there would be little debate over a director's or performer's interpretation.
10. Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey Payzant (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1986), p. 16.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 17. John McClelland explored the challenge of setting music to words in "The Semiotics of Setting Music to Ronsard's Words," in *Crossroads and Perspectives* (Geneva, Switzerland: Droz, 1986), pp. 161-79. It is an essay assessing the structural properties of Ronsard's poetry and madrigal compositions, studiously avoiding all talk of human feeling.
12. L. Kramer, *Music and Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 125.
13. Sparshott in "Aesthetics of Music," pt. 2, pp. 62-63 writes: "First, what we said of the musics of movement and expression shows how in setting a text or accompanying a dance the musical movement may be experienced as supporting,

as going against, as related in all sorts of ways to the poem or dance. The result affects the meaning of each and of the ensemble of the two."

14. S. Langer, "The Work of Art as a Symbol," in *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics*, ed. J. Hospers (New York: The Free Press, 1969), pp. 171-84.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 175. This distancing also occurs when one attends to the tonal qualities and rhythms of voice for their own sake. "Such sound patterns, by-products of necessary communication, become melodic when isolated and deliberately re-produced, and the transition from the speaking voice to this or that sort of singing voice only clarifies and extends pitch relations such as were already present." Sparshott, "Aesthetics of Music," pt. 2, p. 54.