

**Music as Language?***a critique of structuralism and semiotics in the study of music*

The intention of this paper is to discuss issues involved with 'music' as a system of communication; particularly those issues that suggest that music is a type language or that musical symbols can in some way be equated with linguistic symbols. The intention is ultimately to demonstrate that this fixed approach to musicality is flawed in many ways, and that this is demonstrated consistently particularly by writings in the field of ethnomusicology. Music may indeed "serve a symbolic function in human cultures on the level of affective or cultural meaning" as Merriam so aptly puts it (Merriam, 246), but ultimately in this paper I will demonstrate by referring both to musicological and ethnomusicological writings involving musical communication and music semiotics that some of the unquestioned assumptions our culture makes about musical communication need to be revised and consistently reintroduced into the musicological world to create an open forum on musicality that considers the field from both an intertextual and an intercultural perspective.

The structure of this paper revolves around music as a communication system; it takes this as a basic given, and all the works we will be making use of and/or criticising accept this as a given. Bright makes a significant observation in this regard: "Language and music are the two most important ways in which man uses sound" (Bright, 26). There is reason to suggest that some forms of music are not, in fact, communicative in the semiotic sense in that there is both a sender and a receiver of a 'message'. Examples include music that an individual performs for him or herself or for religious purposes, but we won't be dealing with these forms of extra-communicative functions because they are beyond the scope of this paper. We begin discussing common points musicologists and ethnomusicologists have demonstrated between music and language. After this, we present some problems that are brought about when trying to make an allusion between linguistic and musical communication. We then move on to discussing the whole field of music semiotics and the problematic structuralist theoretical background and somewhat elitist ideology supporting it. This is followed by a criticism of certain major aspects of musical structuralism, semiology and semiotics, which leads to the conclusion and the end of the paper. Although I've tried to provide the reader with a broad perspective of music, communication and semiotics, there has been an enormous amount written in this field so I've had to select work I consider the most problematic and/or significant, and I apologise on the beforehand to those who feel that I have left out the work of theoreticians they may consider significant.

So what do music and language have in common and how are they different? In his work on music aesthetics, Coker provides us with a list of characteristics particular to language, suggesting in some senses comparisons between the two. This list is interesting if only because it demonstrates the complexity of the issue; very few on his list characterise both language and music. His list is as follows:

1. A language consists of a complex set of symbols.
  2. The set of significations for each symbol is shared in common, at least to some extent, by the members of the linguistic community.
  3. The symbols can be interpreted and usually produced by the normal members of a community.
  4. The set of significations for each symbol is conventionally fixed, *i.e.*, it is relatively constant with respect to appropriate spatiotemporal contexts of use.
  5. A language has, or in principle is capable of having, a dictionary listing each symbol and its synonyms or the set of its significations.
  6. A language has a syntax: it has structural rules for the kinds, the ordering, and the connection of symbols into permissible combinations.
- (Coker, 7)

Coker's attempt to define common points joining language and music is a representation of important developments in the linguistics of the twentieth century particular to which we apply the blanket term 'structuralism'. The *phoneme* and the *morpheme*, single linguistic structural units of language and grammar, are particularly important in this regard; they provided linguists with a set of units which could be codified and classified. An attempt to find a comparable form of codification similar to the linguistic system of phonetics for the syntax of music was inevitable. As Bright comments,

“musicology has perhaps been slower in defining its formal units, but some of the most interesting advances in this task specifically explore parallels between music and language, and suggest musical analogies to the linguist’s phoneme and morpheme” (Bright, 29). As we will discuss further, music is not really divisible into a complex set of symbols in the way that language is. The set of significations within a given culture may be in many situations ‘shared’, but in the case of music, individual interpretation and the way people make musical works their own by realising them in their own lives makes it hard to suggest that there is a regimented set of symbolic significations connected to musical symbols, even if we can consider musical works to be ‘symbols’ at all (as will be brought up in our discussion of music and semiotics). In addition, this individualisation of musical works makes it impossible to say that their signification is conventionally fixed or in any way constant. The whole notion of a ‘musical dictionary’ is possible to envisage, but you can only use *language* to talk about music, not music to talk about music, so it is hardly comparable to a dictionary in a linguistic sense. Blacking is particularly verbal in this regard:

“For instance, even if musical intervals are divorced from the specific meanings that they have in different cultures and it is accepted that a major second is always a major second and a fourth is a fourth the repertoires of intervals used in musical systems are not like the phonemic sets of different languages ... In language, code and message can be distinguished analytically without the need to invoke facts that are not linguistic.”  
(Blacking, 185)

If there are any common points it would have to be involved with the sixth category on Coker’s list; music does have ‘syntax’ in the sense that there are agreed upon rules to structure musical works; just as one follows a set of discursive guidelines when writing a novel in order to get it published, composer’s usually follow guidelines set by previous composers and generally accepted by their culture.

An area where music and language do coincide is poetry. It is perhaps universally common for cultures to use their language in their music, or to structure their music according to linguistics which is impossible to doubt. Our system of musical notation, interestingly, originates initially from punctuation used to demonstrate specific ‘melodic’ inflections of the Gregorian chants in Latin; punctuation and musical notation are in fact related. In the middle ages musical communication revolved around singing the liturgy; the music was in fact the language itself, and the symbols used to direct the reader to ‘sing’ (or ‘recite’; the two terms then were more closely related) in the right way became the system of musical notation and the system of syntactical punctuation we use today. Further, poetry itself is often ‘musical’; it has rhythm and is often designed to sound beautiful aesthetically as well as to communicate its linguistic message. There are even some poems that have no ‘linguistic’ meaning at all; sound poems that communicate musically have been popular throughout history, and rhyme has brought joy to generations of readers. The association between music and language through song can be traced back to pre-history, as Bright notes “all peoples sometimes use their language in song and from this there results a universal association of words and music” (Bright, 28). Barthes does mention, however, that immediately when words are set to music, they are reduced in signification (Barthes, 1972); it is not the language anymore which is communicating but the sound, or a combination of both which cannot be reduced to either of the two.

Another interesting area concerned with language and music many theoreticians have commented upon involves the (often supposed) ‘musical’ nature of some of the world’s languages such as Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese, where intonation and contrasting ‘tones’ changes the potential signification of given phonemes. Bright, for example, comments on the fact that some such languages “fit words to music in such a way that linguistic pitch and melodic pattern more or less coincide” (Bright, 26). In other words, the ‘musical’ nature of these languages becomes reflected in how the language is realised as melodies. Unfortunately, especially visible in the Chinese pop music of today, any ideas about melodic and linguistic crossovers are quickly rendered as fantasies. The melodic contours are clearly not based on linguistic parameters, and we realise that even without the ‘intonations’ or ‘tones’ the texts of such songs can still be easily understood by the youth of today, or in fact by any native speaker who is able to derive signification from context.

There are however some interesting crossovers which will always remain unique to language and music, some of which are not generally considered. In Bali, for example, they use a unique system for recording melodies where vowel sounds become associated with particular notes of the scales. It is believed that the vowel sounds taken from particularly sacred Hindu texts in Sanskrit or Old Javanese have been used to form melodies in Balinese music. Bright also comments on a unique co-occurrence of language and music in South India where “instrumental music is largely based on vocal music, so that we find patterns of speech reflected in the music of the flute or violin” (Bright, 27). Melody and recitation crossover in a unique fashion because they consider language recitation to be a type of melody in itself. Again, we can find this attitude to language in the Gregorian chant of medieval music where the intonation of sacred litany developed into an intricately complex musical tradition. Nettl also comments on some unique musical and linguistic liminal moments, referring particularly to “certain forms of communication which cannot easily be classed as either speech or music, but which seem to occupy a sort of middle ground, containing elements of both” (Nettl: 1964, 291). Here he is referring to human utterances which include “wailing, shouting and grunting according to the degree of stability in pitch, the degree to which intonation is relevant, and to which intonation is relevant, and to which scalar structure of intonation is used” (ibid.). He comments on the fact that a sort of ‘artificial speech’ is reached where the direction of pitch is exaggerated to the extent that it becomes a song; the boundary between language and music is truly blurred. The next step from here is the spontaneous but meaningless utterances of ‘glossolalia’<sup>1</sup> or the more contemporary forms of sound and performance poetry which transcend linguistic meaning in a traditional sense. Very often adoption of texts has little or nothing to do with their ‘linguistic’ meaning at all, which also has to be considered if the two are to be put on the same plane. The examples are numerous of this phenomenon; from Gaelic songs still sung by a generation of people who have lost the language to the Roman mass which is in some places still sung in Latin, or the common use of Sanskrit where the sound of the language is considered to have spiritual iconic meaning in and of itself. Another common expression of ‘meaningless’ musical texts are nonsense nursery rhymes or folk song texts which consist of sequences of syllables which are simply a joy to make and are therefore popular among children.

Language and music, then, coincide in a wide variety of ways; the primary one being that they both use sound and that they both communicate. At the same time, however, there are dramatic contrasts. As Bright himself puts it, ‘meaning’ and ‘communication’ may have clear applications and significations with language, in a musical sense they “are of more uncertain application” although “the dichotomy between form and content seems important for music as well as language” (Bright, 28) however difficult it is to define that something in a musical sense. Coker attempts to make sense of the tools a composer uses by making divisions of messages comparable to linguistics. He notes the following:

“Among the uses a composer may make of a given musical phrase he composes is to inform us about the character of the phrase itself or what it points to. He may use the musical phrase to exhibit a set of qualities, perhaps those of a tensing action, or an impulsion and stressing, or a place of repose and relaxing. And similarly he may use that phrase to call attention to another phrase’s characteristics—its contour, way of moving, or such. Inasmuch as the given phrase is used evaluatively the composer strives to entice the listener to adopt an appraisive attitude toward the phrase so as to like it and be attracted or to be repulsed by it, say. In an incitive use of that phrase, the composer seeks to call out a specific response pattern from us. Through this shaping of that phrase the composer asks us to do something—say, to find a similarity between this phrase and another or between the phrase and an extramusical object.”  
(Coker, 5-6)

Such comparisons, although enticing, reveal themselves to be ultimately problematic and do not resolve any of the issues at hand. In the sense intended by Coker, a comparison could be made linguistically to the work of Austin, an important figure in contemporary linguistic philosophy. His theory of ‘speech acts’, with particular reference to his *locutionary*, *Illocutionary* and *Perlocutionary* acts, seems similar to what Coker is trying to communicate about music. Austin suggested that language was far more than a set of symbols; given ‘speech acts’ could actually bring about real changes in the world. His set of concepts stated the fact that ‘locutionary’ acts were supported by

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<sup>1</sup> Textual utterances in ‘unknown’ and thus potentially meaningless languages which occur during periods of heightened ritual behaviour. Also known as ‘speaking in tongues’.

'illocutionary' intended content. Standing against the structural approach of Chomsky prevalent at the time, Austin and his colleagues suggested that it was not the individual collection of semantic units, but the entire meaning behind a message that could bring about change. Further, he suggested a contrast between intended and realised signification with his *illocutionary* and *perlocutionary* acts respectively; what one may intend to say, in other words, may not actually be taken on by the person being spoken to (the *perlocutionary* result). This makes more sense of what Coker is attempting to communicate above; although the composer may *intend* to impress or repulse, the actual 'perlocutionary' realisation of musical acts is entirely dependent on context. Austin, without realising it perhaps, opened another source for musical and linguistic comparison.

Molino, in turn, provided an interesting theory for artistic creation which was to be very influential to the development of the field of musical semiotics. He developed upon work initiated by Paul Valéry who was the first to confront the dynamic processes undergone in the realisation of art, seeing the experience of the participants to consist of two contrasting processes. Molino developed upon this, and threw three major terms into the theoretical arena. These terms were to provide a means to understand art, the objects of which he referred to as 'symbolic forms', and which he defined as "un signe ou un ensemble de signes auquel est rattaché un complexe infini d'interprétants" (Nattiez: 1987, 8). *Poietic* and *esthetic* processes are intended to refer to creative processes in art. *Poietic* processes are those which actively result in the creation of symbolic forms. *Esthetic* processes are those undergone by individuals who are confronted by a symbolic form, processes which may result in significations of an entirely different symbolic entity to those intended by the artist. This is an interesting variation on Austin's concept of *illocutionary* and *perlocutionary* act for linguistic events. Molino, however, was to introduce on top of these two modalities a level of analysis which has been taken to the heart of contemporary music semiotics: he referred to this third level as the *niveau nître*, or neutral level. This views the object as a work of art, objectified from the processes of creation or interpretation. It assumes that the symbolic form is analysable as an object *in itself*, and was pounced upon by Nattiez who adopted it as *the trace* ['la trace'] in his major thesis on musical semiotics (ibid.). Outside the process of musical creation (in composition) and interpretation (by a musician in performance) [in terms of the *poietic* dimension], and individual interpretation (by the audience) [in terms of the *esthetic* dimension], there exists an audible *trace* which can be analysed as an aural, scientific and entirely objectifiable object. The problematic dimension and the clear evocation of ever-present scientific fears are clearly present in Nattiez's model.

*"La trace : la forme symbolique se manifeste physiquement et matériellement sous l'aspect d'une trace accessible aux sens. Une trace, puisque le processus poïétique n'est pas immédiatement lisible en elle, puisque le processus esthétique, s'il est en partie déterminé par elle, doit beaucoup au vécu du récepteur. Pour cette trace, Molino propose le terme de « niveau nître » ou de « niveau matériel ». Il est possible de proposer de ce niveau nître une description objective, c'est-à-dire une analyse de ses propriétés et de ses configurations immanentes et récurrentes. On l'appellera ici « analyse du niveau nître »"*  
(Nattiez: 1987, 8)

Nattiez has been criticised for his structural tendencies and ethnomusicologists are continuing to propose methods for viewing musical understanding in terms of embedded rather than 'neutral' forms of analysis. John Blacking, perhaps the most important of the new wave of ethnomusicologists who adopted self-reflexive techniques in his research<sup>2</sup> stated categorically that "in the analysis of oral traditions the *musical product* cannot be isolated as a *niveau nître*" (Blacking: 1979: 189). Here the *poietic* dimension (the making) and the *esthetic* dimensions (the perception) reign supreme. Nattiez as such has been labelled both an empiricist and a positivist (Monelle, 29), although his work has continued to form the paradigmatic basis for practically all new developments within the field of musical semiotics.

Musical semiotics as we know it today has at its basis, as represented in the work of Nattiez and his colleagues, an unquestioned belief in certain structural notions introduced in the field of linguistics such as Chomsky's universal grammar and the existence of essential deep structures uniting all forms of music. Perhaps the greatest problem with this approach is not the theory itself, but the source of its application, on Western classical music which is considered to be valid as a source for creating a

<sup>2</sup> See Blacking 1979 and 1987 in the bibliography at the end of this work.

complete set of 'musical phonemes', even though ethnomusicology continually demonstrates that such assumptions are dangerously elitist and flawed. As Merriam notes: "This problem of whether the theory of signs and symbols is truly applicable to music is a serious one, and it is further emphasized when application is sought on a cross-cultural basis" (Merriam, 234). Coker demonstrates some of these problematic 'universal' assumptions behind the field:

"To be comprehended at all adequately, the whole concept of meaning as a property of signs must be understood as being of the most fundamental—the biological—order of things... Stimulus-response, the physiological level of existence and experience: this is the essence of sign functioning and meaning."  
(Coker, 3)

Developments in the field of ethnomusicology have been particularly useful in the questioning of this problematic approach to music. Examples from Blacking and Nettl which discuss the essential multimedial nature of musical experience are included below:

"One of the first lessons that ethnomusicologists learn is that music is both a social fact and multi-media communication: there are many societies that have no word for 'music' and do not isolate it conceptually from dance, drama, ritual, or costume; and even when music is identified as a specific category of thought and action, there are many different ways in which it is defined and in which different characteristics are regarded as significant."  
(Blacking: 1987, 3)

"...the Hausa of Nigeria have no term for music; there is a word, *musical* which is used for a very restricted body of music... The same seems to be true of many American Indian societies that have no word to tie together all musical activities. Each culture seems to have its own configuration of concepts."  
(Nettl: 1983, 20)

This describes the confusing totality which Nattiez refers to as the *total musical fact* ['le fait musical total'] (Nattiez: 1987, 70) an entirety which is simplified within musicology to its minimal condition. Strong messages from ethnomusicology and other fields involving interdisciplinary research are gradually chipping away at the edifice or bridging the epistemological moat which the field of musicology has created around itself. During the period in which structuralism reigned, however, there were some interesting developments which provided a healthy alternative to the strict confines of structural theory. For our purposes the Parisian *Tel Quel* provided us with some particularly unique insights.

The *Tel Quel* school of Paris included intellectual collaboration between important theoreticians such as Kristeva and Barthes. The point of comparison which is most interesting in a musical sense, is their work in relation to defining texts and textuality. The work of Barthes is particularly significant in this regard. He referred to a process entitled *jouissance* to empower the role of the individual in the experience of a 'text'; a 'text' in itself did not have any meaning until the 'reader' provided it with that meaning; he referred to this as a state of joy, suggesting that textual processes involve one's access to an existential 'state of realisation' at given moments. Musical texts, in a similar fashion, provide *jouissance* in a Barthesian sense, but it is the dynamic power of the listener who provides that joy; Barthes basically suggests that the textual participant (as reader or listener) is empowered in a creative sense. Discussing the 'grain' of the voice, Barthes made a similar analogy to the musical experience as an active and dynamic one, directly involved with an individual's sensuous contact with music, what he refers to as an 'aesthetics' of musical pleasure (Barthes: 1972). Here it's not the words you sing, but the way you sing them; this aligns more with Austinian speech acts or Molino's esthetic/poiesic processes than the stasis of more conservative musical semiotics.

Music semiotics in itself has provided us with insights into the communicative process. Charles Peirce, the father of the American semiotics school, is well-remembered for his tripartite vision for the sign. Peirce developed three major terms to refer to his sign: *icon*, *index* and *symbol*. An *icon* is a sign that "conveys an idea by virtue of its very close reproduction of the actual object or event" (Gottdiener, 12). Here the icon makes direct unmediated contact with human cognition. An example of a 'pure' icon is a canvas painted red which only communicates the colour red directly to the cognition of the living party involved in the semiosis. An *index* "is established as a sign in the mind of

the interpreter through experience or pragmatic understanding of the material world” (ibid.). The deictical pointing finger is considered to be a common ‘index’, examples of which could include a spire on a church showing the wind direction, or a dramatic musical cadence directing the attention of the audience to a conclusion. In comparison to our first example, the red painted canvas signalling ‘danger’ to a given individual through an indexical relationship between *red* and *blood* could be said to be communicating using an ‘indexical’ sign. The *symbol* involves the connection between a sign and its signification. In comparison to the first two levels it is perhaps the most familiar kind of sign which we relate to language: abstract sounds become connected with specific meanings. Words are of course perfect examples, although human beings communicate with thousands of non-verbal symbols daily through gestures and other bodily signs. Our red canvas could be ‘symbolically’ evoking to the individual viewing it the Russian Constructivist school of art or the work of Malevich. These three types of signs have been used by theoreticians in many different ways to create a semiotic theory for music, with varying levels of success. Coker considers, for example, that the *iconic sign* to be centrally important for ‘artistic’ communication (Coker, 30), which is some way pure and therefore communicates directly to consciousness without mediation. This is and will always remain a fantasy, but it is nonetheless one of the major applications of Peircian semiotic theory. As Coker states, “the iconic sign causes an immediate and instinctual apprehension of relevant properties” (Coker, 31).

Indexical signs have more potential. This is where music ‘points’ deictically in some way to some other object or act. The presence of musicality in rituals often plays an *indexical* role, one where the ritual points indexically to itself, letting the participants know that the ritual has begun, that they are no longer experiencing ‘normal’ time, and that the space the ritual occurs on is no more simply ‘space’, but ritually ordained space (where a totally different set of activities can occur). Langer, herself a music philosopher, notes that the kind of information communicated in ritual has completely different goals than spoken language, being “transformation of experience in the human minds [cognition] that have quite different overt endings.” She goes on to mention that although these cognitive states do not communicate ‘messages’ as one searches for in linguistics, but they do carry important information which is ‘effective and communal’, equally important to the perpetuation of human culture (Langer: 1980, 45). This *reflexive* function of musicality is not only a characteristic of ritual; it enters into many different levels of human existence. Advertising, for example, often makes use of the ability of human cognitive processes to point indexically to a particular product. Poetry, as well, with its rhymes and its rhythmic nature, points to “the structure of the linguistic sign,” (Parmentier: 1995, 129-130) and Parmentier, himself an anthropological semiotician, considers great poetry to be about the *structure of language*. Music as we know it, as well, is often constantly sending signs within itself reflexively (such as ‘this is the first theme’, ‘we are in the second movement’ etc.), reminding the listener that they are listening to music, and not, for example, to the news. This sort of reflexive communication inherent in music is an essential part of the human condition, constantly reminding the participants of the sort of processes they are involved in.

Here I would like to comment on the fact that music plays an ‘indexical’ role in some significant functions: it points at itself and guides the listener to the type of situation involved in the *musical event* in question. Sometimes this ‘reflexive’ information is contextual, so the main message of music in a disco is ‘now you can dance’ rather than ‘listen to me’. Culture plays a big role in educating us about how these signs signify; this is therefore part of the *structural* and *behavioural* aspect of music and its pedagogy. Music often plays a more specific role, however, when it is embodied in a non-musical context. A typical example is in poetry: when we read a line of text which rhymes, we know that there is another structure which we have to make sense of through our musical perception skills as human beings. This kind of musical sign is also highly enactive; we may know that a poem rhymes, but it is only when we *read* the poem and experience the rhyme that it really ‘signifies’ in any real way. Ritual is also an enactive process of signification; Parkin refers to it as “hyperstructured social action” where musical aspects call attention “to the structuredness of the action” (Parkin, 26). The initial pointing function of music to itself is a simple but no less important signalling act of musical processes in action.

Finally, Peirce’s *Symbol* has also had many different applications in music. *Symbols* are totally mediated signs which are only recognised thanks to prior experience; they have no meaning implicit in their nature – they are abstract signs like words which are taught have to be learnt from experience. In

musical semiotics it has been one of the most popular expressions because it is easy to consider it linguistically; symbols such as the *Leitmotif* in Wagner's operas which become connected symbolically during the work to individual characters and/or events are highly popular subjects of music semiotic writing. The actual application of symbolic signs to music is, unfortunately, superficial and does not ultimately reveal anything about the music itself.

Blacking has many problems with the musical semiotics system as it is used today. His basic problem is which the attempt of musicologists to take from structural linguistics the whole concept of the phoneme; he doesn't believe that there is any possibility for music to be broken up in this way into a set series of signs, or even that specific musical sounds can have some kind of general signification that can be analysed in a structural fashion. His two major issues are as follows: "(1) the musicologist's perception of a musical structure is only one of a number of perceptions that must be taken into account in arriving at an explanation of the musical product; and (2) the focus of analysis in written as well as in unwritten music, must be on the creative process, and in particular on performance" (Blacking, 184). He demonstrates the problematic nature of a 'phonemic' approach to music by using as an example Western performances of the music of Beethoven and the whole concept of a 'sonata'.

"If the same performance or the same score can be understood differently, *all* perceptions must be treated as valid data in finding out more about the musical process. If Serkin, Solomon, Arrau, Ashkenazy, Barenboim, Kemp, and Pollini can perform Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* differently, even to the point of producing different minimal units with their phrasing, is there really such a phenomenon as "the *Hammerklavier*" which can be subjected to semiotic analysis? And which, if any, of these interpretations is Beethoven's? What did he mean when he wrote the music? May not a comparison of the different perceptions of the work tell us more about Beethoven and the musical process than the score itself? After all, the acceptance of a valid grammar depends ultimately on the universal recognition that it is used and carries a message as well as being a code."

(Blacking: 1979, 186-187)

In his influential article of the same name Blacking goes on to demonstrate the impossibility of defining what parts are really 'musical' at all by demonstrating that another culture finds one aspect more musical than another, contradicting the western tendency; he uses the way the Venda consider certain readings of their poetry more musical the more they are removed from speech sound, even if they may not sound 'melodic' to us (sounding more like a kind of monodony), whereas sung speech is considered less musical because it resembles speech. This questions again the relationship between music and language; by different cultures the whole notion of whether something is 'musical' or not can change dramatically. Presupposed assumptions about what 'music' actually is can sometimes only lead to misunderstandings and misrepresentations.

Furthermore, recent studies into the multimedial nature of musical experience has brought the whole Western endeavour to structuralise or provide a complete system of semiotics to explain musical communication. This has been assisted, of course, by the unique new form of representation available thanks to interactive multimedia technology so that we are now able to 'see' as well as 'hear' how other cultures represent their music. This aside, however, ethnomusicological writings have through the last decade demonstrated how important the other senses are in understanding aesthetic experience in general, which includes 'music' as difficult as that concept may now be to define. Kauffman, for example, demonstrates the importance of tactility in understanding how the 'mbira' (African thumb piano) communicates its meaning; it cannot be heard above the other instruments but is in fact 'heard' through vibrations felt through the skin, just as the Jew's harp communicates through the mouth as much as the ears.

"The personal quality of mbira playing is especially apparent in ritual situations where it is played together with gourd rattles for the purpose of inducing a trance. In such cases, the mbira is rarely heard, since its sound is so strongly dominated by the percussive sound of the accompanying gourd rattles.... at least a large proportion of the enjoyment of playing the mbira must come from its tactility rather than from its sound-producing characteristics, in other words, the vibration complex of the mbira keys can be enjoyed as a pleasant sensation... the personal aspect of music-making is not difficult to understand in our current way of assessing musical significance, but tactile aspects of music making have been ignored, particularly in

Western studies of aesthetics, even though tactility is probably one of the most important aspects of artistic consciousness in Africa."  
(Kauffman)

Kubik also comments on the fact that the western distinction between music and dance doesn't help, but instead hinders our understanding of African music; he says that it is simply irrelevant: "The same movement patterns are to be found both in the dance and in the musical aspects of the phenomenon which is African music" (Kubik). Other writers have pointed to the importance of smell and taste in understanding aesthetic experience in both Western and non-Western culture. Although in many of our forms of traditional or formal musical performance the whole process of olfaction is generally never considered to be an important part of the process of musical signification, it sometimes plays a role in other cultures. In Balinese ritual performance, for example, incense and other means of colouring the olfactory environment certainly plays a role in the significative process. Classen, Howes and Synnott's important work on this subject demonstrates how powerful this aspect of communication can be in colouring many sorts of significative acts.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Stoller demonstrates the important aspect of taste in understanding certain types of ethnographical information.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper we've looked at a wide range of issues concerning language and music. The intention has been to question some of the traditional structural assumptions which are taken up by western theoreticians by using as examples the work of ethnomusicologists who contradict these theories with clear reference to other ways of conceiving of musicality. The intention, however, has also been to demonstrate that there are many interesting ways music and language coincide and that by questioning some of the assumptions we can only gain further insights into musical experience. There is no question that music communicates *something* to those who experience it, but the continuing problem of what *is* communicated remains a difficult point of discussion. Music is difficult to theorise about because it is involved with the communication of information which is inexpressible in language. Although we are able to 'verbalise' about language, we are unable to 'musicise' about musical experience. We can, however, describe the dynamic contexts in which the information is communicated to gain a greater insight into what the music is communicating, and the intention of this discussion has been to try to conceive of the parameters of this somewhat difficult task. Many consider language to be the basis from which we can understand the origins of human thought. Others, such as Blacking the ethnomusicologist and Langer the music philosopher, consider music to reach far further back and to provide a greater insight into the way the human consciousness has developed. As Blacking points out "in seeking to understand the elementary structures of human thought, music is in fact more appropriate than verbal language for revealing the purely structural requirements for a symbol *system*" (Blacking: 1979: 186). This is an interesting starting point for further research in this fascinating field.

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<sup>3</sup> See reference to this work in the bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> See reference to this work in the bibliography.



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