

Music as Symbol for the Creative Advance:  
A Whiteheadian Analysis of Musical Metaphysics

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*Time occupied by the same nature in mind,  
symbolism or a thing, a radiance of observation,  
synthesis succeed one thing and makes them of the soul,  
a dark room also occupied by thinking itself  
~Akira Rabelais<sup>1</sup>*

There is something ineffable and numinous about the human drive towards music making. Our species' tendencies in both the production of language and our urge to represent our experience in the form of visual art – painting, sculpture, architecture, photography – have received the treatment of possibly hundreds of scholarly publications; but in the field of music there are few. One may balk and gesture to the shelves brimming with books on music history, music theory, jazz, blues, ethnomusicology, orchestration techniques, composers of the Renaissance, the Baroque, the Twentieth Century and accuse this author of being thoroughly delusional. But upon closer examination, one will find that all of those treatments of music are coming from a somewhat singular perspective: modern rational analysis of technique or, at the most esoteric, the mystical tradition of music from the Pythagoreans to Hazrat Inayat Khan. True, there are now a number of studies and publications dealing with the *effects* of music upon consciousness; but again, these are empirical studies from the scientific perspective. We have answered (or at least offered plausible propositions) for any number of exoteric problems facing music

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<sup>1</sup> From the liner notes to Rabelais' CD, *Caduceus*, Samadhisound Records, 2010

theorists, aestheticians, anthropologists, and music/sound healers; but the more esoteric question - *why do humans make music?* - has been woefully avoided.

I believe, however, that there is ample reason for the neglect of this highly charged topic. In order to even begin a treatment of the question we are forced to examine the very nature of being and existence itself, in other words we have to begin with an examination of the metaphysical nature of our experience and its relationship to the ubiquitousness of human music making. In order to do this, we are required to look *behind and through* our experiences of both making music and listening to music. This act also requires of us to set aside the more banal aspects of our aesthetics – whether or not we like or dislike – and move into a deeper appreciation for the various approaches to music making as they have emerged over our historical epoch. An examination of this sort also puts us into the position of thinking about the very nature of sound and the human capacity of creating *meaning*; hence, my treatment of music as a *symbolic form*. Though I realize that there will be obstacles along the road requiring further analysis, I see this as a viable place from which to begin, as I hope will become apparent in the following pages. I also recognize that a study of this sort, to be treated thoroughly, would fill volumes; therefore I hope only to act as a metaphysical cartographer of sorts – creating a map of the terrain from which further study is not only feasible, but an exciting possibility that opens a window to our enjoyment of this most mysterious act of the human mind – music making.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A further hope for this paper is that it begins to fill in the vexing questions arising from my study of music as it relates to Gebser's mutations of consciousness. It seems clear to me that the mutations have happened and are in the process of happening again (a move toward integrality and a more

Before embarking upon this journey I feel it necessary to sketch out a template of my thinking on the subject. The idea here is to give the reader a platform or, perhaps, a storyboard, from which we may begin to draw in details, add color, flesh out nuance, and embody the relationships contained herein. Since this paper is primarily about music, it seems prudent to begin our discussion with an exploration of the actual *experience* of listening to music<sup>3</sup>. Required of us will be a more active approach – in that we will, of necessity, have to pay attention, not just to the music itself, but also to the very act of *listening*. Once a firm foundation has been established in regards to the raw sensory experience of music, we will begin our analysis of the relationships of this raw experience to A.N. Whitehead’s explication of the creative advance. Critical to this analysis will be the proposition that the very essence of music for the human, as a high-grade society of actual occasions, is that of a *symbolic form*. As a foundation for this aspect of the discussion I will turn to the work of Susanne Langer. But where Langer leaves us with the notion of music as a symbol for emotive experience, I wish to go a bit deeper. My feeling is that Langer was limited, as we all are, by her time and place, and, especially, her focus on the European Romantic Classical tradition. While I would absolutely agree that music has the ability to represent highly complex emotional worlds with an accuracy and integrity denied to language (except perhaps for poetry), I would argue that music also has the power to bring us into direct contact with the very essence of the

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temporal perspective). But the question Gebser fails to answer regards the process by which the mutations occur. My feeling is that the answer lies within the inherent freedom within propositional nature of the creative advance.

<sup>3</sup> It will be vital to also explore the acts of composition and improvisation, but a thorough examination is not suitable to a paper this size.

*process* of our existence; the moment to moment coming into being and perishing – the immediate past now the ground from which the next moment is conformally present. It is this process, I believe, to which music holds a mirror, of which music is a symbol.

### **The Act of Listening**

I often attempt to imagine the musical experience of humanity prior to the visual domination of the sensory matrix. What must it have been like to experience pure sonic awareness; awareness without the intervention of visual imagery? In order to feel in to an experience of this sort – a raw aurality – we must begin to unravel the complex act of perception involved in the creation of meaning from the medium of sound. This act of attention is antithetical to our primary motive of “losing ourselves” in a piece of music. The activity is akin to Whitehead’s encouragement to try and divorce ourselves from any meaning or even form in our visual field – to perceive it as mere *sensa* – patches of color from which we extrapolate formal properties. We might begin to notice the tendency of the mind to create stories based upon the emotional responses evoked in the music. We may recognize the tendency to create landscapes or spaces within which the music unfolds. Further, we might realize that we are merely attempting to identify the source of the sound – to visualize it, as it were. People who are more musically “trained” may begin to analyze the rhythms employed, the structure of the melody, the particulars of the harmonic structure, the overall form, or the textures evoked in the details of instrumentation. I would contend that all of these responses, though valid in their own right, are typical of modern rational thought. In order to move to

a more “primitive” awareness of sound we must move behind and through both visual representation and theoretical analysis to a deeper mode of experience. In other words, we need to *unlisten* in order to truly *listen*.

“Unlistening means clearing sounds from their associations, which are often unconscious. Make them conscious. If bird song means replenishment, know that. If the sound of traffic makes you shrivel inside, know that. Somewhere along the line I got the idea that the garbage man was going to come inside my house and beat me up, so fear is my association with the sound of the early morning garbage truck. Maybe it is not possible to strip all the layers of meaning away from sounds, but at least you can evaporate the surface thoughts. The more completely you do this, the more deeply sound will enter you and reveal its true nature. The act of identifying your psychological response is a ticket to an even deeper response.” (Mathieu, 22)

We could perhaps begin with a question: how is it that I am creating *unity* from this stream of occasions, this succession of musical notes? Where might we begin in order to intelligently construct a valid metaphysical framework within which we could come to some understanding of our perception of musical forms? I believe that we must first address the very nature of sound, and its role as a *sense-object* occurring within a *percipient event*. This concept will be of critical importance as we begin to examine music’s causal nature in our experience, and its reflection of root metaphysical notions (notions submerged beneath layers of associations and meanings – associations reflecting the vast shifts in consciousness during the millennia of human evolution).

In Whitehead’s words, “Perception is an awareness of events, or happenings, forming a partially discerned complex within the background of a simultaneous whole of nature. This awareness is definitely related to one event, or group of events, within the discerned complex. This event is called the percipient event. The

simultaneity of the whole of nature comprising the discerned events is the special relation of that background of nature to the percipient event. This background is that complete event which is the whole of nature simultaneous with the percipient event, which is itself part of that whole. Such a complete whole of nature is called a 'duration'." (Whitehead, 1982, 69) Our perception of a *duration* can never be clearly determined apart from the events with which it is concurrent. An event will always be the connecting link between a percipient and nature. Newtonian science would have us believe that durations, and therefore our experience, can be broken down into a series of disconnected parts; each part studied objectively from some definite external position. But in reality, the percipient and the event, are embedded in a duration that "is in a sense unbounded; for it is, within certain limitations, all that there is. It has the property of completeness, limited by the condition 'now-present'; it is a temporal slab of nature." (ibid)

To illustrate: as I perceive a particular sound, the sound and I (the percipient), are *cogredient* in this event; an event upon which I impose the limiting factors constructed by the spatio-temporal laws of my current epoch (i.e. three dimensional space, the speed of sound, etc.). So, though the *sound as an entity in and of itself* may inhabit a space-time system different from my own, I can say with a fair degree of certainty that, for me, 'the sound I perceive is here-present', it has endured over the span of a particular event within a defined duration, and now it has perished. One could argue that from the perspective of the sound itself, it has never perished – it is continuing its journey through an ever-broadening nexus of space and time – it is infinite! I would enthusiastically encourage this person to pursue this line of

thought elsewhere. Within these pages, I will be restricting the discussion to the here and now – our perception of events as they occur in the world we commonly experience. My intention is certainly not to attempt some oversimplification of experience; quite the opposite is true in fact. By limiting ourselves to the phenomenon of how we experience the real world and the subsequent process of then creating *meaning* from that experience is a subject with infinite richness and wonder. There is no need to move into scientific speculation for a more exciting journey.

### **Sound as an Object**

An *object*, according to Whitehead, is intimately linked to an event in that objects are the *recognita* amid events. “Events are named after the objects involved in them and according to how they are involved.” (Whitehead, 1982, 81) A thorough explication of the complex process by which an object is perceived is far beyond the scope of this paper<sup>4</sup>. A couple of points on the subject are, however, necessary for a better understanding of our relationship to sound and, eventually, music. We must accept, first of all, as a given, that perception of an object relies upon the process of *recognition*, whether on a primitive level, as in permanence (primary recognition) or on more complex levels, found in high-grade societies of actual occasions, involving recollection (indefinite recognition) and memory (definite recognition). As I look out into the world, what is it that I ‘really see’? If I were able to go behind all of my *recognitions*; if I were able to remove myself from all meaning collectively applied to the field of sensation, I would be confronted with, simply, *sensa* – the transmissions

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter VII “Objects” from Whitehead’s “An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge” (1982) for a more detailed explication.



of light, shadow and color, disembodied sound and smells, and the undifferentiated tactile sensations resulting in my attraction or revulsion to what is 'outside of me'. But this is (thankfully) not my experience of being an embodied entity in this universe. I see trees, plants, birds and structures. I hear the sounds of music from my computer, construction next door. I smell and taste the coffee I just made for myself in order to think more clearly about the coffee I just made for myself. All of these things are objects for me. They are all imbued with meaning and significance and, as we will discuss later on, symbolic resonance. The process by which this takes place, what Whitehead refers to as *concrecence*, is the mode through which each duration, each event within that duration, each object within that event, obtains and retains a sense of *unity* and a sense of coherence.

At the base of this model is what Whitehead refers to as *sense-objects*. "The sense-object is the simplest permanence which we trace as self-identical in external events. It is some definite *sense-datum*, such as the color red of a definite shade. We see redness here and the same redness there, redness then and the same redness now. In other words, we perceive redness in the same relation to various definite events and it is the same redness which we perceive. Tastes, colors, sounds, and every variety of sensation are objects of this sort." (Whitehead, 1982, 83) For instance, we might look at the process by which I see and recognize my cup. What I *see* are patches of color of a definite size and shape, but what I *perceive* is a cup – a familiar cup that has endured not only throughout the day but also into my past occasions. So my cup is not merely a sense-object but, due to many conditioning events, including my memory of it, it now takes on the character of a *perceptual*

*object*. I must reiterate, the aim of this paper is to begin a discussion of *music*. Music blurs the defining edges of what we understand to be perceptual objects and sense-objects, but it is important to lay the groundwork and establish a certain nomenclature from which we may draw some understanding. To begin, I'd like to hone in on how we may begin to define sound as an object.

“Perceptual objects are the ordinary objects of common experience – chairs, tables, stones, trees. They have been termed ‘permanent possibilities of sensation’. These objects are – at least for human beings – the most insistent of all natural objects. They are the ‘things’ which we see, touch, taste, and hear. The fact of the existence of such objects is among the greatest of all laws of nature, ranking with those from which space and time emerge.

A perceptual object is recognized as an association of sense-objects in the same situation. The permanence of the association is the object which is recognized. It is not the case however that sense-objects are only perceived as associated in perceptual objects. There is always a perception of sense-objects – some sounds, for instance- not so associated.” (Whitehead, 1982, 88)

It is the unassociated sense objects to which I'd like to draw attention; for it is within this phenomena, I believe, that the most vexing and mysterious (numinous) qualities of sound arise – the disembodied sound from which there is no apparent physical object from which to attribute its conveyance. I had an experience once, while practicing my banjo. It was one of those coveted moments of complete flow, oneness with the instrument. There was a certain perfection of sound achieved that so rarely occurs. I heard, emanating from somewhere in the room an angelic ‘singing’. From my rational, scientific mind, I constructed a series of events that must have provided a cause for the unearthly sound – there must have been some confluence of resonance within the space and the other objects in the space that produced an anomaly that I perceived as singing. This story obviously did not ring

perfectly true as I still hold this event with a certain reverence that I might cast into the realm of *holy*. For Whitehead this would be placed into the category of *delusive perceptual judgments*, in other words the situation generating or transmitting the perceptual object of ‘angelic singing’ was unclear. The banjo would be termed the *physical object* from which the stream of notes (the *sense objects*) emanated; the instrument’s situation as an object being played by me was the transmitting condition for the sounds. The angelic singing however was caused by something outside of those particular conditions. David Toop refers to this quality of sound as *sinister resonance*, “In this sense, sound is a sinister resonance – an association with irrationality and inexplicability, that which we both desire and dread. Listening, then, is a specimen of mediumship, a question of discerning and engaging with what lies beyond the world of forms.” (Toop, 2010, viii) My argument is that, inherent in music lay this ineffability of sound form – that deep within the very act of perceiving sound are hints toward our archaic roots – a primordial consciousness. Sound has the ability to trigger deep psychological responses which emanate from someplace outside of our current epoch. In order to unravel this mystery (which may forever remain unsolvable) I think it prudent to examine Whitehead’s process of concrescence and begin to feel into the ground of what he calls *the duality of nature* – that *coincidentia oppositorum* of the essential becomingness of things versus their perceived permanence. That “nature is always a newness relating objects which are neither new nor old.” (Whitehead, 1982, 98)

## The Creative Advance

*“We need to recognize that the defect in most interpretations of experience is not that our ideas are too complex, but rather that they are too simple. Our understanding of things tends to ignore the immense complexity of the world and of the ways in which we participate in it. Our conscious awareness of things does seem to be so simple. Yet in this way we are like swimmers on the surface of the ocean, aware of a very small area in our immediate vicinity, but unaware of the immense depths beneath us.” (Hosinski, 1993, 117)*

At this moment, I sit at my desk gazing out of the window at the rain puddling onto the cloth-covered deck table. It is a gentle rain, so the droplets are distinguishable as individual entities – each one the cause of a circular ripple that comes into being and quickly perishes, but not before becoming an integral part of the pool’s wholeness. Each drop is like a drop of experience, an experience that changes the ultimate nature of the pool whilst retaining its essential unity. It is still a pool, yet with each drop of experience its patterns change – it is never the same pool. At some point in the future, the sun will appear and the water molecules will change into gas. They will rise up and, again, be a part of the clouds, and the pool will cease to exist as such. But when will the pool actually cease to be a pool?

I gaze out of the window at the series of events occurring; but eluding me, unless my gaze fixes there too, is the fact that I too am an event. In each actual occasion of experience I am at the center of an ever-changing *mandala*<sup>5</sup> having meaning and duration. Each event unifies the universe into a new experience that then becomes the ground of possibilities from which the next event arises. Creativity is the process that generates events – the process by which the many become one and are increased by one. The Universe is, in its essence, like a perfect

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<sup>5</sup> A term introduced to me by Professor Eric Weiss.

jazz improvisation: Each event in the music is generated from, not just the immediate past of the musician as he interacts and fuses with the sounds surrounding him, but also from the whole history of music as it has led to that moment. The notes and rhythms he chooses are drawn, yes, from that past, but more importantly from a palette of infinite possibility – a palette organized, according to Whitehead, by the primordial nature of God. The musician reaches toward, and grasps from an ordered set of possibilities – a set of eternal objects that may have been defined by Pythagoras and his ilk as the *harmonic series*. However we choose to define these sonic possibilities (and we will need a broader definition if we begin to include modern forms of music), it is clear that with each passing note, the unity of the music is retained.

Let us now go a bit deeper into Whitehead's theory of concrescence and begin to pull out the basic elements as they might relate to the complex process of our perception of music. For Whitehead "awareness" or "feeling" goes all the way down to the most basic subatomic particle. The simplest actual occasions, therefore, follow the same basic trajectory in their *creative advance* as do the most high-grade societies of actual occasions. The major difference is in the levels of freedom involved and in the complexity of the propositions performed in higher-grade occasions.<sup>6</sup> For a low grade occasion the process has three phases:

“(T)he initial phase of conformal prehensions, receiving into the concrescence the past actual world (which is the objective datum of the occasion); the second phase of conceptual prehensions, grasping and

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<sup>6</sup> As I am not attempting a survey or even a summation of Whitehead's thought, I will avoid the time consuming task of defining every term. My purpose is to explore how his metaphysical notions apply to the field of music. The interested reader should refer to the text sources themselves for a more thorough understanding of this complex philosophy.

valuating the possible forms of definiteness or 'eternal objects' which define the various ways in which the concreting occasion might form its energy); and the third phase, integrating the conceptual and the physical prehensions into one integral feeling (which is the occasion's 'satisfaction' of its subjective aim and its 'decision' as to what it will be). In the simplest case, this integral feeling of the third phase terminates the concrecence; 'becoming' issues in 'being' and the subjectivity of the occasion, its living immediacy in the present, 'perishes' into the past. The actual entity is now an 'object to be prehended by future occasions.'" (Hosinski, 1993, 99)

In other words, the occasion *feels* its past – which is limited by both the spatio-temporal structure of its epoch and its interest or value – its *subjective aim*. Each actual occasion has a purpose; that purpose may be to simply retain what has gone before it – like the occasions forming what we see as a rock, or the purpose may be more complex and decide to move into a direction of utter novelty. But that novelty is still conditioned by a certain nexus of possibility. (I cannot, for instance, reach through my window and splash around in the pool of water on my aforementioned table. Due to the molecular structure of glass, my hand can't go through without severe injury and due to the structure of space-time in my reality I would have to travel a short distance in order to even get to the table. What is perhaps most important, though, is that my subjective aim at this moment is to write this paper!)

If we were able to extract just a moment of John Coltrane's "Blue Train" without destroying its integrity, which is of course impossible, and focus our attention upon just two occasions, we might draw an illustration of this process: We can now perceive this one occasion, perhaps one note, frozen in time, which has been conditioned by the notes surrounding it in its immediate past and *all* of the notes that have ever been played in the history of sound in a cone-like

extension into the distant past. Before it, the note sees an infinite palette of sound from which to choose, but in order to satisfy its subjective aim – which is to create beauty – it chooses *that* sound, *that* particular note which is now the past for another occasion.<sup>7</sup> It is here, at this moment, in that particular choice that we witness the Creative Advance. That contrast between what is ‘here-present’ and what is possible is the basis for all novelty in the Universe. It is clear that music, its creation and performance, is embedded within the process of “stubborn fact and creative advance”. All of these occasions together now form “Blue Train” – a piece of music as unique and individual as any other manifestation of this miraculous universe. Listening to it, we might consider keeping this passage in mind:

“The individual immediacy of an occasion is the final unity of subjective form, which is the occasion as an absolute reality. This immediacy is its moment of sheer individuality, bounded on either side by essential relativity. The occasion arises from relevant objects, and perishes into the status of an object for other occasions. But it enjoys its decisive moment of absolute self-attainment as emotional unity. [...] The creativity of the world is the throbbing emotion of the past hurling itself into a new transcendent fact. It is the flying dart, of which Lucretius speaks, hurled beyond the bounds of the world.” (Whitehead, 1967, 177)

Though this metaphysical framework might provide a rational standpoint from which to begin an examination of the endless creative variety of musical forms, and its obvious participation in the creative advance of the universe, it does not do justice to music’s deep psychological and spiritual significance; nor does it address

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<sup>7</sup> The problematic terminology is not lost on me with this illustration. I realize that it is Coltrane, as a high-grade society of occasions, who is creating the notes (sense objects) through manipulating his saxophone (physical object); and that it is Coltrane’s subjective aim that is driving the creative advance. I am simply attempting to provide the reader with a perspective from which to listen more deeply.

music's *hauntological* (to use Derrida's term describing "the paradoxical state of the spectre, which is neither being nor non-being") qualities alluded to above as *sinister resonance*. We must begin to scratch away at the question, how do we create meaning and, therefore, emotional response to the organized tones and forms in music? How might music be not just an aspect of creative advance but also a *symbol* for our primitive experience of Being in the darkling forest of past consciousness?

### **Humans as Symbol Makers**

I recall distinctly from my childhood, the experience of waking up on a winter's morning and hearing that certain muffled quality to the outside world. I would bound up in my bed, pull the rough brown canvas blinds and confirm what I already knew: snow. My day was now no longer predetermined – the variable was simply the depth of the snowfall. That sound – distinct from the usual hardness of the outside world – was a *sign* for me. There was a direct correspondence between muffled-ness and snow. "A sign indicates the existence – past, present, or future – of a thing, event, or a condition. Wet streets are a sign that it has rained. A patter on the roof is a sign that it is raining. A fall of the barometer or a ring around the moon is a sign that it is going to rain." (Langer, 1979, 57) A sign is a *symptom* of a state of affairs. The sign and its object stand in a one to one correlation. The use of signs are not peculiar to human beings. A bird sees me move quickly at the window and it darts away – my movement was a sign of possible danger. My dog sees me grab her collar and leash and immediately starts leaping madly in the air anticipating her walk; she hears my car come rumbling up the road and stands whining at the door



ready to greet me. Even a fish might see a familiar form approaching its tank and begin nibbling at the surface of the water in the search for food.

What my dog does *not* do, and what *does* seem to be peculiar to human beings, is the ability to *think*; and *thinking* by its very nature is a symbolic process. Human beings seem to be basically *symbol-making creatures*. Langer says, “if the material of thought is symbolism, then the thinking organism must be forever furnishing symbolic versions of its experiences, in order to let thinking proceed. As a matter of fact, it is not the essential act of thought that is symbolization, but an act *essential to thought*, and prior to it.” (Langer, 1979, 41) This becomes no more apparent than in the process of the acquisition of language in early childhood. Certain educational theorists have posited that the use of language is simply a brilliant tool created by humans in order to communicate and therefore more easily survive and adapt to the different environments in which they find themselves. But even casual observation of a young child during this extraordinary phase of maturation (just before age 2) casts doubt on this utilitarian explanation. If we held to this theory, then we would expect that when the child was alone, when there was no one there to communicate *with*, they would be silent. This could not be further from the truth. A child of this age chatters incessantly to herself, apprehending her world in the form of words; creating a *key* or a *legend* of sorts with which to navigate the complex experience of making sense of the terrain that is her reality, her universe. When the child says the word “tree” and associates that word with the maple in the front yard, she is then able to turn away, go out of the room, and later in the day say or hear the word “tree” and, like magic, the tree’s image appears in

her mind. The word allows her to *conceive* of the image of the tree. Unlike signs, “symbols are not proxy for their objects, but are *vehicles for the conception of objects*. To conceive a thing or a situation is not the same thing as to ‘react toward it’ overtly, or to be aware of its presence. In talking *about* things we have conceptions of them, not the things themselves; and *it is the conceptions, not the things, that symbols directly ‘mean’.*” (Langer, 1979, 61) And from Whitehead, “Language, written or spoken, is such a symbolism. The mere sound of a word, or its shape on paper, is indifferent. The word is a symbol, and its meaning is constituted by the ideas, images, and emotions, which it raises in the mind of the hearer.” (Whitehead, 1958, 2)

Words, though, are certainly not the only kind of symbolism. They fall into a special category termed *discursive symbolism*. We can see words themselves as having a certain level of immediacy – as representing facts or things in and of themselves. These are the very facts or things or *objects* of our living experience – the forms or societies of actual occasions that we *prehend* from the raw sensory data that makes up our reality, our world. However, in order to more faithfully represent our experience of process or flow from one event to another, we cannot merely string together a series of *names*. We must begin to convey *relationship* – relationship that obeys the rules of the spatio-temporal order within which we exist. To accomplish this we string words together in a certain order so that the names of the things or objects find their proper relation to one another. The linear relationship of words and language symbolize for us the embedded nature of the things or objects intimately connected within the world of forms.

“All language has a form which requires us to string out our ideas even though their objects rest one within the other; as pieces of clothing that are actually worn one over the other have to be strung side by side on the clothesline. This property of verbal symbolism is known as *discursiveness*; by reason of it, only thoughts which can be arranged in this peculiar order can be spoken at all; any idea which does not lend itself to this ‘projection’ is ineffable, incommunicable by means of words. That is why the laws of reasoning, our clearest formulation of exact expression, are sometimes known as the ‘laws of discursive thought.’” (Langer, 1979, 81)

So the power of language is its ability to create *propositions* – or a picture of a structure - a structure of a state of affairs. Whitehead, too, uses the term *proposition* in his explication of the metaphysical process through which we create unity and meaning from the diverse sensual stimuli of our past/present and the eternal objects from which we may choose according to our subjective aim. By making more and more elaborate propositions, we bring everything we perceive into unity. If pondered for only a moment, it is uncanny that language reflects this process so naturally. The sentence - “The table on the deck is pooling with water from the rain.” - is an elaborate construction of a multitude of sense-objects into a coherent idea that exists in space and time. It conveys a single thought or idea that also has a sense of duration, causality, and objectification. What this string of words does not do, however, is convey how I *feel* as I watch the process of water pooling on the table. At most I may be able create an expression of my feeling which would manifest as a list of symptoms – melancholy, longing, contemplative, or I might make note of a certain heaviness of heart, a tightness in the throat, a welling of the eyes. I could move into the realm of poetry and allow the pool and the table to elicit words and phrases and rhythms and rhymes that may evoke a *relationship* to my inner life, but aside from these symptoms I have no words to convey precisely the

sensation in my heart. For this, I rely upon a different type of symbolism – *presentational symbolism*.

Whitehead uses a similar term in his explanation of the assimilation of sense data – he calls it *presentational immediacy*. “Presentational Immediacy is our immediate perception of the contemporary external world, appearing as an element constitutive of our own experience. In this appearance the world discloses itself to be a community of actual things, which are actual in the same sense as we are.”

(Whitehead, 1958, 21) In our act of synthesis, we not only abstract and objectify, but also synthesize our experience into the realm of functional activity, or *causal efficacy*. It is the blending of this objectification and the functional relationships therein that Whitehead refers to as *symbolic reference*. “The human mind is functioning symbolically when some components of its experience elicit consciousness, beliefs, emotions, and usages, respecting other components of its experience. The former set of components are the ‘symbols’, and the latter set constitute the ‘meaning’ of the symbols. The organic functioning whereby there is transition from the symbol to the meaning will be called ‘symbolic reference’.”

(Whitehead, 1958, 7) This realm of human experience may best be understood and expressed within the visual and sonic arts. (Music being a slightly more complex combination of both discursive and presentational symbolism, as will be addressed below.) On this subject, Susanne Langer asks some critical questions:

“The symbolic materials given to our senses, the *Gestalten* or fundamental perceptual forms which invite us to construe the pandemonium of sheer impression into a world of things and occasions, belong to the ‘presentational’ order. They furnish the elementary abstractions in terms of which ordinary sense-experience is understood. This kind of understanding is directly reflected in the pattern of *physical reaction*, impulse and instinct.

May not the order of perceptual forms, then, be a possible principle for symbolization, and hence the conception, expression, and apprehension, of impulsive, instinctive, and sentient life? May not a non-discursive symbolism of light and color, or of tone, be formulative of that life? And is it not possible that the sort of 'intuitive' knowledge which Bergson extols above all rational knowledge because it is supposedly not mediated by any formulating (and hence deforming) symbol is itself perfectly rational, but not to be conceived through language – a product of that presentational symbolism which the mind reads in a flash, and preserves in a disposition or an attitude?" (Langer, 1979, 98)

As we proceed I hope to shed some light on these very important questions and I hope that the reader will keep them close to consciousness as we proceed.

### **Music as Symbolic Form**

Humans have, from time immemorial, sought expression of their inner life. Through painting, architecture, sculpture; drama, poetry, literature; music and dance, our species has created a vast symbolic record of what it means to be a human being. The impulse to create these symbols seems to have sprung from a deep spiritual need – a need as vital to our survival as food and shelter. (If we were to judge by the sheer ubiquitousness of music in culture.) Though it is outside the scope of this paper, we might speculate that the need arose contemporaneous with a consciousness realizing that it possessed an *inside somehow hidden from the outside*.<sup>8</sup> We may begin to feel into the urgency of this moment in the evolution of consciousness by imagining that we were once whole, but now fragmented, cut off, distanced, alienated from an intimate part of our *self* – that which we now refer to as *other*. We, of course, feel the distant echo of this moment of separation in poetry

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<sup>8</sup> For Jean Gebser this could perhaps have occurred during the deficient Magical phase. Topic for another paper...

and song portraying the unrequited love or loss of one dear to our heart. We perhaps know it more intimately in our experience of death. Each artistic mode expresses a different aspect of our unique experience of being a human being in this vast sea of forms, feelings, thoughts, impressions, memories, transient fantasy, and unutterable emotions.

Music, I believe, holds a mysterious place amongst the various modes of expression. “Four and a half months after conception we begin to hear. This is the first of our senses to function: hearing dominates amniotic life and yet after birth its importance is overtaken by vision.”(Toop, 2010, ix) Our first experience of sound is absolute and causeless, so it makes sense that aspects of sound would return us, at some level, to our pre-birth state. If that is the case there is reason to believe that sound/music may remind us of a more archaic level of consciousness at the very base of awareness; perhaps something even akin to *touch*. Alfred Tomatis, the great researcher of the human ear, said that we normally think of the ear as undifferentiated skin; but it is quite the opposite – the skin is actually undifferentiated ear. A testament to the intimate link between hearing and the even more primordial sense of touch can be found in the words of Evelyn Glennie, a profoundly deaf musician: “Hearing is basically a specialized form of touch. [...] For some reason we tend to make a distinction between hearing a sound and feeling a vibration, in reality they are the same thing. It is interesting to note that in the Italian language this distinction does not exist. The verb ‘sentire’ means to hear and the same verb in the reflexive form ‘sentirsi’ means to feel. [...] Even someone who is

totally deaf can still hear/feel sounds.”<sup>9</sup> I have made note of the close tie between hearing and touch in order to reify the deep evolutionary roots of this sensory experience.

Moving away from pure sound for a moment, we can see that music displays the peculiar quality of both presentational *and* discursive symbolism. We look at a painting, photograph, or sculpture and we are confronted with a sense of meaning that comes *all at once*. Of course, we may discover nuance and deeper meaning upon closer examination, or through learning the artist’s intention or theory; but a painting does not build upon itself in the way that a poem might or a story. Music, on the other hand, gains meaning through its relationship to successive or contemporaneous notes; notes that, in and of themselves, contain no denotative or connotative meaning. A musical note has no designative meaning other than itself. Yet, when arranged in a chord or a melody, musical notes begin to take on a character of complex relationship that carries with it deep emotional resonance. Hence, we generate the common interpretation of music as a symbol for the complex underpinnings of our rich emotional experience; but we generate the even more common *mistake* of referring to the *language* of music. “Music is not, logically speaking a language, for it has no vocabulary. To call the tones of a scale its ‘words,’ harmony its ‘grammar,’ and thematic development its ‘syntax,’ is a useless allegory, for tones lack the very thing that distinguishes a word from a mere vocable: fixed connotation, or ‘dictionary meaning.’” (Langer, 1979, 229) This error, though, is a perfectly natural product of a primarily linguistic/mental consciousness – due to

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<sup>9</sup> [HTTP://WWW.EVELYN.CO.UK/EVELYN\\_OLD/LIVE/HEARING\\_ESSAY.HTM](http://www.evelyn.co.uk/evelyn_old/live/hearing_essay.htm)

music's elusive, somewhat discursive nature (in that it takes on significance through time), and especially due to the fact that language (in the form of poetry) has been intimately intertwined with it, music has taken on the character of 'story'. (This was fully exploited in the programme music of the mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> century in works by Wagner, for instance.) But if taken from the standpoint as an emotional symbol, music does not represent the various static, verbal representations of the emotional life – sad, happy, angry, etc – it comes closer to representing or reflecting the *morphology* of feeling – or the process of change in our emotional landscape. For Langer, "Music has all the earmarks of a true symbolism, except one; the existence of an *assigned connotation*.<sup>10</sup> It is a form that is capable of connotation, and the meanings to which it is amenable are articulations of emotive, vital, sentient experiences. But its import is never fixed. In music we work essentially with free forms, following inherent psychological laws of 'rightness,' and take interest in possible articulations suggested by the musical material." (Langer, 1979, 240) At the end of her chapter *On Significance in Music*, Langer quotes Ernst Cassirer: "It is typical of the first naïve, unreflective manifestations of linguistic thinking as well as the mythical consciousness, that its content is not sharply divided into symbol and object, but both tend to unite in a perfectly undifferentiated fusion." She goes on to say, "This principle marks the line between the 'mythical consciousness' and the 'scientific consciousness,' or between implicit and explicit conception of reality. Music is our myth of the inner life – a young, vital, and meaningful myth, of recent inspiration and still in its 'vegetative' growth."

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<sup>10</sup> The abstract meaning or intension (internal content of a concept) of a term, which forms a principle determining which objects or concepts it applies to.



What conclusion might we come to were we to stop here? It would certainly be a rich contemplation of the deep significance of music making as a symbolic act – the art of music as a representation of the forms and flux of our rich emotional experience, and our unique inner landscape. This would most certainly be a valid and thought provoking philosophy of music – one that begins to address music’s uncanny ability to articulate forms which language cannot set forth. My feeling, though, is that we might go much deeper, especially in lieu of more modern approaches to music to which Langer, Whitehead, et al had not been exposed. Our whole discussion thus far has been that of music referring to *something else*, and that *something else* being somehow related to the very process of concrescence or the creative advance of actual occasions. Our conclusion being that music is a symbolic form representing our vital, sentient, emotive response to existence.

Here at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, we have new evidence at our disposal – music that defies any move toward the traditional aesthetics governing music making for the past 2000 years (at least). Here at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century a new consciousness is bursting into being (according to scholars from Gebser and Teilhard, to Aurobindo and Eric Weiss), one that may be integrating the magical and mythical mind with the dominant mental mind. Our stories and philosophies, even our science, reflect the rationalism through which we make sense of the world; but the music that is being created at this time in history points to something beyond/deeper than our mentality, beyond/deeper than even our mythic mind. Modern astronomers are now claiming to be able to view some of the oldest galaxies in the universe; they claim to be looking toward the very creation of space

and time – the beginning of Being. Whether the “science” behind these observations holds up to philosophic scrutiny is beside the point. What matters here is the idea that art has always at least reflected the consciousness of the times; at its best it has acted as signposts to whither consciousness is bound. It seems that music points to, symbolizes, represents, expresses the mystery and ineffability of our most primitive experience of apprehending our world – that of complex societies of actual occasions experiencing the very movement of the creative advance. E.David Martin put it beautifully, “Music more than any other art forces us to feel causal efficacy; the compulsion of process, the dominating control of the physically given over possibilities throughout the concrescence of an experience. The form of music binds the past and future and the present so tightly that as we listen we are thrust out of the ordinary modes of experience, in which time rather than temporality dominates. Ecstatic temporality, the rhythmic unity of past-present-future, is the most essential manifestation of the Being of human beings.” (Martin, 1978, 94) Only music contains both abstraction and successive unfolding. It is in the unique position of communicating ideas elusive to the rational mind, elusive to a mind that bases its reality upon discursive reasoning. I firmly believe that the answer to the question – *why do humans make music* – is that *we must*. We are driven by a deep, evolutionary, spiritual need to understand our relationship to the *fact* of our Beingness.

As music rediscovers its Pythagorean roots; as it comes to terms with the paradigm of machine culture, industrialism, and computers; as it comes to grips with chaos, chance, and indeterminacy; as it explores the subtle realms of silence,

and the shifting harmonic textures of the drone; as it begins to redefine the very fabric of space and time and encourages us to move more fully into the realms of the *aperspectival* and *temporicity* as opposed to temporality – the *achronon* which stands beyond the Chronos; we must then *know* that music is reaching far beyond our mere emotional responsiveness – that it is a symbol, or perhaps a passageway, into the next stage of our understanding of ourselves in relation to the ever expanding mystery of the cosmos in which we live. Perhaps, with a more evolved consciousness, we will not make the same mistake as Ulysses. Perhaps we will have the wisdom to listen carefully to the siren’s song and still retain all the gifts of reason from past centuries; not losing ourselves into the deep recesses of magic, myth, and archaic unity; but integrating them into something new:

*“Then I stopped the ears of all my men, and they bound me hands and feet to the mast as I stood upright on the crosspiece; but they went on rowing themselves. When we had got within earshot of the land, and the ship was going at a good rate, the Sirens saw that we were getting in shore and began with their singing.*

*“‘Come here,’ they sang, ‘renowned Ulysses, honor to the Achaean name, and listen to our two voices. No one ever sailed past us without staying to hear the enchanting sweetness of our song- and he who listens will go on his way not only charmed, but wiser, for we know all the ills that the gods laid upon the Argives and the Trojans before Troy, and can tell you everything that is going to happen over the whole world.’*

*“They sang these words most musically, and as I longed to hear them further I made by frowning to my men that they should set me free; but they quickened their stroke, and Eurylochus and Perimedes bound me with still stronger bonds till we had got out of hearing of the Sirens’ voices. Then my men took the wax from their ears and unbound me.”*

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