What is Music Trying to Express?*

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Language fulfills so many needs for us: We can be mundane or lofty, can speak factually or philosophically, make specific observations or generalizations. We can describe our interior thoughts as well as the outside world. We can speak of events long gone or yet to be.

Music is often called the "universal language." But if music is a language, what can it express?

Music is singularly capable of exploring how the future arises out of the past. How dependent is the future on the past? How much is remembered, how much forgotten? Are initial ideas self-sustaining, or do they require an influx of new elements? How fast does progress or transformation take place? What is the ultimate outcome?

We compose our lives with these questions: How strongly are we bound by our upbringing or heritage? How easy is it to break our habits? How far and fast can we stretch our personality while still maintaining a sense of identity? How much transformation can we tolerate? On a social level, we ponder whether the Constitution and religious texts are "time-independent" documents or living ones that evolve. We question the pace of reforms and the consequences of unexpected events.

Words may describe time's passing but music enacts it for us. For instance, the greater the amount of repetition, the more the future is conditioned by what has already happened. If an idea returns literally, it speaks to its transcendence; if it is perpetually transformed, then it changes with the times. A-type forms project continuity, A/B-forms disruption and change.

When this level of musical discourse becomes accessible to you, there is always so much to hear. Because music is performed unstoppably in time, it will always invoke these questions—no matter what the style or era. The answers will sometimes be clear, sometimes grey and subtle; but the pathway to exploring them is concrete and can be done by anyone.

These abstract issues can be palpably emotional. The boundary between waking and sleeping is a vague one. Therefore, a lullaby should not be a strongly rhetorically reinforced A/B-form: "Now you're awake;" "OK, now you're asleep." Instead, the fact that a lullaby is an A-form contributes to its tranquility; a preponderance of exposition, with time gradually weakening the material, helps hypnotize us into sleep. These formal features are not separate from the emotional content—they help to **create** it.

Time's passing is apparent to all of us: We measure it constantly; we see ourselves age, we suffer loss and celebrate renewal, we remember and predict. Yet physicists labor over a definition. Is time a fundamental property of the universe? Or is it just a by-product of the interaction of more basic laws? Does it even exist? Thanks to the limitless possibilities of music, composers bend and stretch time into sculptures for us to contemplate. As music is passed down and continues to be created all over the world, it becomes apparent what a rich and resilient material time is, and how much there is to say about its incorporeal flow.

In a recent article in the "New Yorker" magazine, author Milan Kundera quotes Marcel Proust: "Every reader, as he reads, is actually the reader of himself. The writer's work is only a kind of optical instrument he provides the reader so he can discern what he might never have seen in himself without this book." Proust's

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remark applies equally well to music. That is why it is so important to grasp, respect and articulate our own musical observations. Ultimately, attentive listening leads us to the music inside ourselves. How much of it there is.