Rhetorical Aesthetic of Electro-Acoustic Music

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INTRODUCTION

Appreciation of music is a universal sentiment enjoyed by most cultures.

However, “understanding” of music is a much more of a nebulous notion, which itself contends the more immediate purpose of any aesthetic: entertainment and pleasure. When art promises nothing more than positive sensory stimulation, such as a wall in the house painted to “look good”, then the analysis of its role in the beholder’s life is fairly simple; it pleases the ocular sense and appeals to the mind’s desire for sensed beauty. Yet the paintings of artists such as Picasso or Dali are not celebrated only on the basis of their visual enjoyment, and neither are poets praised solely for arranging words in a visually or aurally pleasing manner. The missing quality explaining a non-sensory capacity for beauty is reflective contemplation. The ability to evoke certain judgments can be considered the persuasive power of an aesthetic piece, which is quite similar to the literary skill of rhetoric.

Aristotle proposed the fundamental function of rhetoric and its role as an antithesis to dialectic (truth-searching). Rhetoric is a capacity for discourse (spoken or written language) to persuade (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/#agenda). A painted wall may simply please the eye, but the mind may appreciate the image for more than its simple visual beauty. This additional consideration creates subjective perspectives that differ from person to person. For example, the wall may be a particularly dark shade to accentuate a halloween-themed room, which may or may not be enjoyable based on the perceiver.

Thus a device must be in place to persuade each person to have one opinion or another on a piece of art. This device is highly analogous to rhetoric and all the sub-devices under it (metaphor, allusion, juxtaposition, etc) because its main role is persuasion. The rhetoric characteristic exudes strongest in the literary arts (writing, poetry, and drama) because language is the primary form of communication and discourse. However, drama mixes the linguistic, aural, and visual mode in order to achieve a peculiar aesthetic-discourse hybrid; the drama itself is rhetoric performed through multiple modes. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* would not say nearly as powerful a message to star-crossed and starry-eyed lovers with mediocre actors.

Researches at Ohio State University found that language and audio-visual sensation are also linked through shared processing domains in the brain (Jungers et al., 2015), allowing hybrid lingual-sensory texts to employ especially effective persuasion on the mind. Many modern music songs utilize human vocals as a language-music hybrid instrument. Furthermore,

the lyrics of songs are predominately structured in a poem-like form, with stanzas corresponding to verse and chorus units. Thus, vocals and composition provide a large rhetorical capacity of aesthetic music. A listener, performer, or producer can then theoretically create a rhetorical understanding of a song beyond direct sensory appreciation.

In recent times, the means of producing and *experiencing* (hearing, seeing, dancing to) music is continuously shifting towards the digital plane. Electronic production involves using computers, synthesizers, and other electronic devices to create electronic sounds, manipulate acoustic sounds, and transform these sounds in systematic ways. The means of experiencing music has expanded from live performance (the origin of music) to digital capture and replication of sound. With an exceptional command over the human voice and instrumentation, electronically-produced music has high potential to hybridize language and sound and achieve a rhetorical understanding of musical aesthetics. The nature of this rhetoric depends greatly on the relationship between language and music, which we therefore explore.

LANGUAGE, SOUND, AND RHETORIC

> "Understanding music is a manifestation of human life. How could it be described to someone? …Now, teaching him to understand would be teaching him what understanding is in *another* sense than a theory that does not do this. And again, teaching him to understand poetry or painting can be part of an explanation of what understanding music is" (Wittgenstein*, Culture and Value* 80-81)

By following the philosophies of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Paulo Chagas's essay "Musical Understanding: Wittgenstein, Ethics, and Aesthetics" in his book *Unsayable Music* extends the conversation of understanding music to understanding language. In the above quote, Wittgenstein illustrates the paradox of understanding music. Music can only be explained in concrete terms by comparison to other arts. Following this ideology in his own writing, Chagas promptly places language and music on the same plane and identifies the functional similarities and differences between the two. Wittgenstein's analogy between music and language compares language to "a labyrinth of paths… You approach from *one* side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about" (*Philosophical Investigations* 203). Directly after using this quote, Chagas comments "music has a more transparent grammar and therefore can help to elucidate the grammar of language, which is more opaque" (Chagas 28). Both writers emphasize the use of visual metaphor. Not only does Wittgenstein construct a visual metaphor to explain language, but Chagas follows by using the notion of light to cast music as a visually "elucidating" object and language as an "opaque" object. Furthermore, Chagas juxtaposes the "transparent music" with the "opaque language" by proximity of the two objects in his sentences and by adjacency to Wittgenstein's own metaphor. The mix of juxtaposition and metaphor, two primary tools in

rhetoric, allow Chagas to exemplify how both language and music are heavily reliant on semblance to a third realm: visualization.

When exploring the idea of the "correctness" or "grammar" of music, Chagas identifies how Mozart "indirectly calls for the rule and, at the same time, causes surprise by not following it" (34) in the overture to *Le Nozze di Figaro:*

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YYQFbDuT9k)

Note the periods of harmonic peace and then the jarring, sudden outbursts. The concurrence of the rule and the defiance against the rule suggests that music employs juxtaposition between "correct" and "incorrect" in order to create an element of surprise. While literature and art are known to do this frequently, language itself can only break the rules for the purpose of rhetoric or art. For example, the poem "lightght" by Adam Saroyan seems like a simple typo at first:

lightght

Certain writers such as Ian Daly (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/features/articles/detail/68913) would argue that the poem is meant to be seen rather than read. In particular, the juxtaposition of the single inked word on a large, blank white page puts the one-word poem closer to a painting than a collection of words. Accordingly, music is not independent of the visual senses and is highly analogous to language because its "grammar" (the rules of music, i.e. music theory) and the grammar of language can only be broken in similar cases: when they rely on visual metaphor, juxtaposition, or other purposeful rhetorical devices to convey meaning.

The extent of music's similarity to language in rhetorical function is deeply rooted in the classical forms of language art, i.e. poetry and drama. Many definitions of poetry rely on its rhythmic and phonaesthetical qualities, which parallels music's dependence on rhythm, sound, and vocalized language. Aristotle defines poetry by tragedy and comedy; he states tragedy is the mimicry of a moral event, by using "language made pleasing" to provoke catharsis. He specifies that "'language made pleasing' means language which has rhythm, melody, and music" (*Poetics* 12). The functional ability of music and poetry to purge the emotions (catharsis) is tied to the ability to create these emotions (through mimesis). In particular, Aristotle postulates that music is employed for both *katharsis* and *diagoge* (leisure or relaxation from exertion) because "melodies…excite [people's] spirit to mystic frenzy, [and] are brought into a stable condition by the religious melodies, as if they had obtained medical treatment and *katharsis*" (Golden 6). By constructing a hasty and agitated phrase with the choppy terms "mystic" and "frenzy" and then creating relief with the therapeutically long, "stable", and "medical" statement about the catharsis, Aristotle parallels the rushing meter of a crescendoing musical phrase and the falling action after the phrase reaches its climax. This use of language exemplifies that musical performance can create emotion and relieve it concurrently much like poetry, with its natural rhythm and differences in phonetical sounds.

Furthermore, Aristotle exerts “representations, in rhythm and melody, of anger and gentleness, of courage and temperance…are especially effective” (Golden 10) in altering the psychological responses of the spectator. Thus music, in an ultimate effort to create mimesis of good character, first provokes the emotional instability of the spectator in order to purge the emotions and achieve stability. By juxtaposition of opposing characteristics (anger and gentleness, courage and temperance), music is able to artificially create the conflict between good character and faulty character within the spectator. This emotional response is produced by the most ostensible elements of music: rhythm and melody. Unlike composition, theme, and harmony, melodies and rhythm are the main driving force in “exciting the spirit” because they are immediately felt. Aristotle expands on the notion of representing character through music by observing “if a person takes pleasure in viewing the image of someone…it is also necessary for that person to find the sight of the actual person…pleasant” (Golden 10). He explains the representational function of music using an analogy to the visual arts; although the music can only serve as a mere representation of a certain emotion or character, the music is pleasurable only if the depicted emotion or character is ideal. Thus, a need to purge the negative emotions within the spectator is created through the mimetic musical representation of such emotions *and their counterparts*, and so catharsis results. The *katharsis* performs only when the mimesis succeeds in representing the positive emotions, and therefore juxtaposition of “correct” character and “incorrect” character is not only required in poetry and drama but also music itself. As noted before, Mozart could only break the rules because he established them, and both Chagas and Wittgenstein could only explain the transparency of music in relation to the strictness of language.

How the actual form of sound and perception by the human ear contribute to the rules of music and its boundaries can be understood in terms of music theory and composition. The sound we hear can be categorized into noise (unwanted sound) and music (desired sound). Isolated cacophonies (dissonant sounds) may be considered unwanted noise, yet cacophony can play a huge role in music when accompanied by euphony (consonance). Rather than treating noise as the antithesis to music, the concept can be integrated into music to recognize the complexity of music’s “grammar”. In “Communication and Meaning: Music as a Social System”, Paulo Chagas extends his study of musical understanding to the context of music as a lens to observe the imperfect, harsh reality of the world rather than the beauty and order of art. He observes the philosophies of Jacques Attali, who brutally states “Noise is a weapon and music, primordially, is the formation, domestication and ritualization of that weapon as a simulacrum of ritual murder” (24). Much like Wittgenstein, Attali describes music by its relationship to another concept rather than by its inherent qualities. This concept, noise, is similarly portrayed as a symbol like language as a labyrinth, except the symbol is quite gruesome. Furthermore, like Aristotle’s portrayal of musical melodies as representations of character, Attali depicts noise first as a mimetic representation of violence and murder in reality. The violence created by noise is similar to the pity and fear in tragedy; it becomes purged through the mimetic action of music and the weapon transforms into a tool. After imitating the

process of "*sacrificing*—the simulacrum of ritual death— the music went over to the category of *representing*—the simulacrum of exchange and harmony" (Chagas 92), again demonstrating the mimetic capability of music and its relation to real-world characteristics (e.g. cooperation and tranquillity). The transformation of noise into music parallels the transition between war and peace in real life, and since Aristotle showed that music represents reality through mimesis of both good and bad emotions, it requires the juxtaposition of unpleasant noise with harmonious euphony in order to effectively convey meaning. Integration of music and noise becomes music itself, and therefore music constantly evolves and new noises are involved. Considering that "the interval of third, which was considered a 'dissonance' in early polyphony, becomes a meaningful tool in the music of the Renaissance" (Chagas 90), it would be easy to postulate that some electronic "noises" prevalent in music today will become part of musical canon, and music will doubtfully cease to evolve new styles of sound and instrumentation.

AESTHETICS, ELECTRONICS AND ACOUSTICS

> "While *musique concrète* catered to the myth of listening to the sound of the world, *elektronische Musik* concerned itself with the creation of synthetic sounds, whose models are neither found in nature nor possess the qualities of instrumental and vocal sounds" (Chagas, *Unsayable Music* 107).

In this comment about electronic music, Paulo Chagas makes immediately apparent two dichotomies. First, the dichotomy between synthesized sounds and instrumental/vocal (acoustic) sounds. Second, the dichotomy between instrumental sounds and vocal sounds. Why does Chagas suggest that instruments and vocals draw primary inspiration from the natural sound of the world, unlike synthetic sounds? What differentiates human-vocalized tones apart from instruments?

Considering Aristotle's reflection on musical mimesis and catharsis to replicate character, as well as Attali's battle of noise and music as opposing forces to represent realities, the use of dichotomy in music is particularly powerful when highlighting the opposites of the world. Electronic sounds oppose acoustic (instrumentally or vocally produced) sounds just as technology opposes nature. By setting them apart, musicians gain access to the rhetorical instrument of juxtaposition. The scope of this argument is not contending what makes instruments technically different from synthesizers. Rather, the fact that musicians and society consider them different broadens the spectrum of timbres (tone qualities) and range of musical potential, much like differences in frequency bands (treble vs. bass) give dynamic diversity to tonal aesthetics.

By widening aesthetic potential, these instrumental dichotomies gain emotional and rhetorical power from the art. Vernon H. Minor's *The Death of the Baroque and the Rhetoric of Good Taste* explores the potential of Baroque art to both persuade and engage the viewer in

rhetorical ways. He expresses how “metaphors compare objects, experiences, and sensations so distant from one another — and yet always connected by a slender if tenacious thread — that they create a sense of surprise and intellectual excitement” (Minor 9). By using the visual metaphor of a thin yet strong thread himself, connecting the first and last clauses of his sentence with thread-like long dashes (—), Minor exemplifies that opposites in art first prompt a purely emotional response (surprise) and then an intellectual emotion (excitement). The rhetoric (intellectual consideration) is therefore dependent on the aesthetic capability of evoking surprise, yet Minor categorizes them both as emotions. As if these two concepts are the opposing sensations he mentions, the aesthetic precariously attaches itself, the purely emotional response, to rhetoric in a metaphorical tension that involves both the intellect and the emotions. Minor then considers the painting *Crucifixion of St. Peter* by Michelangelo Marisa da Caravaggio on the basis of its polarizing metaphor.

Caravaggio “creates that intuitive sense of likeness in unlikeness favored by Aristotle” by illustrating the heroic Saint Peter as “an unidealized…godforsaken man in meager, brutal, and

desperate circumstances" (Minor 12-13). Again, the extremes of good character and unlikable character apparent in Aristotle's discourse demonstrate how the emotional power in aesthetics is intuitively sensed. The senses are especially critical to the emotional reception of the painting because the painter "subverts the viewer's expectations by providing an oblique point of view" and promotes "a sense that the observer, workers, and condemned man share a metaphorical (or better yet, existential) space" (13). Juxtaposition of good and bad character is further complicated when the painting's central character is juxtaposed with the viewer, and the viewer is compelled to involve themselves in the scene on both the sensory plane and the ethical plane. The surprise in this immersion is the emotional response initially triggered when an observer experiences the aesthetic. Thus, art's most powerful tool is metaphor and juxtaposition of opposite objects, in which the senses give rise to a (surprising) response to the aesthetics, and by considering the extremes on an emotional level, the brain is primed to consider the intellectual reasons for an artist's rhetoric.

Music follows suit in its ability to utilize dichotomies and extremes in the temporal and aural dimensions. Because the feedback of surprise indicates an abruptness rather than a gradual development of emotional, the tempo and compositional pace are paramount to the execution of astonishing musical phrases. However, Minor's "subversion of expectation" requires establishment of expectation in the first place. Preparation for the execution of a particularly loud, staccato musical idea begins with establishment of a contrastively quiet and legato mood. Antonin Dvorak exemplifies the extremities of loudness and meter in *Symphony No.9 in E minor, Op. 95*, commonly known as "From The New World":

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETNoPqYAIPI)

The first movement *Adagio* begins with a flute softly speaking the melody in synchronization with slow and relaxed strings. The reliance on wind instruments and a dreamy tempo emulate the scene on a peaceful, airy plain. After a brief relapse into silence, brass horns brashly announce the arrival of a new motif. This motif is loud and rushed; at about 1:05 the phrases start running into each other, and the pace increases. Then, the piece falls back to a quiet but much more tense atmosphere. At 1:41 the fretful motif returns, repeating in short bursts. Each phrase begins in a single staccato note, then followed immediately by brief silence. Dvorak juxtaposes muted themes with staccato and forte motifs in order to repeatedly establish the expectation of peace and subvert it with impromptu, violent loudness. Like the themes and motifs in literature, these musical thoughts are metaphorically suggestive; they allude to the peacefulness of life and the sudden arrival of war. While the composer repeats this pattern, he reconstructs it so the listener's expectations are continuously subverted. The minute period following 3:45 is filled with pleasant string motifs in the major key (while before the piece was predominately in minor). Then, instead of priming the listener with silence, an abrupt loudness is interjected within the peace at 5:02, but without including the same motif as before. However, the second movement *Largo* mostly makes little use of these sudden surprises. The extremely slow tempo lends itself better to drawn out development, and marks the whole movement as the

"peaceful time before war" in contrast to the other movements. Because the control of tempo is so important in executing aesthetics and eliciting emotional responses from the listener, the definition of each movement by its tempo (i.e. adagio, largo, scherzo, and allegro) becomes paramount to the following "intellectual excitement" that Minor proposes. Attali would appropriately represent each movement as different periods of peace and wartime. Even if Dvorak does not intend to employ these representations, the composer engages the listener into some sort of scene, which must have models in reality. He states that his influence for the symphony comes from African American melodies, exclaiming that the "beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil" (Gutmann, "Dvorak's '*New World*' Symphony"). By being grounded in "the soil" of the earth, his musical themes draw primary influence from nature. Furthermore, the choice of strings, brass, and woodwind instruments is reminiscent of the earth because they predominately use the phenomena of air to make sound. Such instruments are modeled after the acoustic phenomena naturally found in the world, and thus serve as the basis upon which music has been founded.

Therefore, establishment and subversion of listener expectations can be exploited not only by composition, but by the representative nature of instrumentation. The orchestral instruments in Dvorak's symphony contrast with the electronic sounds of synthesizers not because they fundamentally sound different (synthesizers can even emulate acoustic sounds), but because they *represent* opposing modes of reality. Aristotle and Minor demonstrated that by imitating and juxtaposing opposite characteristics of people, music first generates emotional response, which in turn causes intellectual or cathartic transformation. Some music may not ostensibly represent the human being, but they invariably involve the listener and create response to the aesthetic. As Chagas illustrated through Mozart's overture to *Le Nozze di Figaro*, the implication of "the rules" and then subversion of them generates surprise, similarly to how Dvorak's New World Symphony calls for order and then disrupts it.

Electro-acoustic music has a substantial capacity to reference the rules and overthrow them. Porter Robinson's "Fellow Feeling" absorbs the reader in an orchestrated atmosphere:

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ardc3nrQMxw)

In the beginning theme, the use of piano and strings with heavy reverb produces an illusion of a large space. By imitating an orchestra and progressively adding voices, Robinson gradually introduces the listener into the space. However, the listener soon finds themselves in the scene at a strange angle, as Minor would observe. A verse begins around the two-minute mark. The words immediately surround the ears, and it appears that a girl is speaking casually and right beside the listener. The immediate conflict between the imaginary, spatial position of the listener in regards to the illusionary objects of the speaking girl and the orchestra causes disorientation and surprise. By being able to electronically overlay vocals with acoustic instrumentation and create the sense of two different spaces, Robinson juxtaposes not only the senses of peace (before the verse) and anxiety (from the girl's desperate tone) but the senses of nature (orderly

soundscape) and machine (displaced soundscapes). Further observing that electronic effects become gradually prevalent over the acoustic sounds, the disintegration of order is hinted. At 2:30, the orchestral theme ends with a brief silence. Suddenly, the soundscape space is entirely filled with entirely electronic sounds, each lacking in tone color, but not all quite percussive. The girl returns to remark:

> Let me explain
> This ugliness [noise]
> This cruelty [noise]
> This repulsiveness [noise]
> It will all die out
> And now, I cry for all that is beautiful

Robinson suggests that these sounds, which come immediately after each descriptive word in a burst of electronic noise, represent some “ugliness”, “cruelty”, and “repulsiveness” that “will all die out”. The desire to purge these emotions, which are each represented by an uncomfortable noise, parallels Aristotle’s belief that catharsis comes after imitation of unwanted traits. Following Attali’s depiction of noise as a weapon, the girl becomes the mediator between noise and music and transforms the weapon into a tool. After she cries “for all that is beautiful”, the music returns with the orchestral motif of the beginning. The juxtaposition of “beauty” and “crying” suggests that this transformation is the catharsis of the emotions. The song’s final theme incorporates the electronic noise into the music by boasting predominately electronic instruments while utilizing the musical motif and theme of the opening orchestra. Thus, the successful transformation of electronic noise into music becomes the catharsis of the musician’s disgust with noise, and he even extends beyond catharsis by making the ugly noises… beautiful.

The entire process of simulation, transformation, and catharsis is conducted by the voice of the girl. Because she uses a prose-like and invariant tone, her voice represents the language that connects aesthetic and rhetoric. The human voice becomes the missing link between noise and music, poetry and lyric, visuals and metaphor, nature and the unnatural, order and disorder, emotions and intellect, and electronics and acoustics.

CONCLUSION

Attali, Wittgenstein, and Chagas each demonstrated how visual metaphor and rhetoric juxtaposition give music mimetic power; by being representative of distinctly contrastive characters or objects of reality, the music transcends its timelessness and becomes a part of the real world. Furthermore, Aristotle and Minor explained the emotional connection between aesthetics and rhetoric. However, the connection between enjoying music aesthetically and

understanding its rhetoric purpose is thin and almost invisible. Yet, the surprise and delight in juxtaposing opposites connected by a thread is the driving motivation behind the electronic music revolution. Sampled instruments and synthesizers can mimic acoustic instruments in precise but not completely accurate ways, and acoustic instruments themselves can be recorded and manipulated electronically. Because of the wide range of techniques available to juxtapose contrasting elements on a variety of planes, electro-acoustic music is highly able to engage not only the emotional attention of the listener but also the rhetorical capacity to comment on the relationships between art and thought. The human voice, which is the primary instrument of language, becomes the link between the aesthetic, emotional response to music and the rhetorical, intellectual understanding of its themes. Through a continuous cycle of examining noise, adopting noise as musical sound, and adapting it to the musical culture of the times, electronic music is not only a powerful instrument for cathartic expression, but also the primary vehicle for rapid development of musical styles in the future.

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