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“As if a little bird is sitting on your finger...”

Metaphor as a key instrument in teaching and learning music

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Abstract

Various researchers over the past decades have established that verbal behaviour constitutes a substantial portion of total instruction time in music. The use of metaphor in these educational practices and the supporting music literature is rich and frequent. Numerous scholars support the view that metaphor in learning and teaching music touches the essence of making music, and cannot be dismissed as “impressionistic twaddle.” However, in the formal training of musicians, teaching strategies revolving around metaphor are rarely made explicit. Taking examples from various practices across the world, this paper explores the use of metaphor and its potential for communicating greater understanding of technique, structure, and musical meaning. The conclusions from this exercise support the argument that there is great potential in fully acknowledging the role of this teaching tool towards competent, sensitive and creative musicianship.

Introduction

Across the world, musicianship is anchored in a number of core skills and qualities, including technical mastery over voice or instrument, thorough knowledge of repertoire, and an ability to compose, improvise, inspire and/or interpret prior or during performance. Formal systems of music education, particularly in the West, have developed the art of analysing the various components of musicianship in detail, translating these into course components addressing particular skills, and making each of these skills assessable. This approach is based upon a specific vision of music and its transmission, which translates into the actual delivery of music tuition. As Jorgensen argues, “curriculum is grounded on philosophical assumptions about the purposes and methods of education [...], as a practical entity, it expresses the philosophical assumptions of its maker(s) much as an art work expresses the ideas and feelings of its creator(s) and performer(s) [...] embodying the assumptions that comprise it” (2002, p. 49).

As an example of such assumptions, Sloboda somewhat unkindly summarises the characteristics of “classical conservatoire culture” as:

a) concern with accurate and faithful reproduction of a printed score, rather than with improvisation or composition; b) the existence of a central repertoire of extreme technical difficulty; c) definitions of mastery in terms of ability to perform items from a rather small common core set of compositions within a culture; and d) explicit or implicit competitive events in which performers are compared with one another by expert judges on their ability to perform identical or closely similar pieces ... (1996, p. 110)

However harsh this description, the question arises whether conservatoire curricula, with their emphasis on skill development and cognitive understanding of music, really reflect ideas of excellence in music making? Surely they promote competency in music. Yet the qualities that distinguish competent musicians from excellent ones appear to lie largely beyond cognition and technique, in the intangible realm of expression. Indeed, as Juslin confirms, research indicates that most musicians and music teachers regard expression as the most important aspect of a performer's skills (2003, p. 274).

Many musical genres make reference to elusive qualities of expression found in master musicians: in jazz it may be called swing, in flamenco *duende*, in Brazilian music *saudade*, in Arab music *taraab*, in Indian classical music *rasa*. In western classical music, there appears to be no single term to refer to this quality. However, it is easy to establish that for instance Pablo Casals and Arthur Rubinstein had competitors who displayed greater technical perfection. Close listening to Casals's 1930s interpretation of Bach's *Suites for Violoncello Solo* (Casals, 1997) reveals major aberrations from what many would consider correct intonation, and many reports on Rubinstein's playing highlight the number of notes missed. Yet both were undisputed top-ranking classical musicians. Many musicians and music lovers will attest that there is something 'beyond the notes'. As Sloboda (1996) argues, "mere technical prowess does not make an effective performer" (p.115).

Using the parameters of traditional musicology and quantitative indicators, there appears to be little to account for this anomaly. If however, we make an excursion to music criticism, a different picture emerges. Much maligned as music critics are, they tend to be well informed and sensitised to good music making. However, their language is very different from that of

academia. Music criticism, which aims to communicate the essence of a performance to a non-academic, but well-informed audience, frequently uses metaphor in trying to meaningfully describe musical events. Scandinavian critic Elmer Diktonius (considered the Finnish George Bernard Shaw by some) described Sibelius's *Spring Song* thus:

The melody, taking its own sweet time, lumbers along like a bear just emerged from its winter lair – it rises up on its haunches, it stretches, it sniffs the air in every direction...” (quoted in Haskell 1996, p. 292).

Practicing musicians and composers will also extensively use imagery to communicate what they wish to express about music beyond logic and cognition. Metaphor (a term under which I include simile and other closely related figures of speech) appears to be an integral part of their musical thinking and action.

If this is so, how do we find this reflected in teaching strategies for professional musicians, from basic imagery for beginners to esoteric references during master classes? And, bringing the discussion back to cognitive justifications for curriculum, how does this relate to recent insights in music and cognition?

Metaphor in teaching

Various researchers over the past decade have established that the proportion of verbal behaviour during music lessons is at least one-third of total instruction time (Tait, 1992, pp. 526-527). This includes straightforward explanation and instruction, but also the use of imagery. Barten argues that the occurrence of the use of metaphor in educational practices and literature is frequent, and cannot be dismissed as “impressionistic twaddle.” Instead it should be seen to “get at the essence of the aesthetic experience of music” (1998, p. 89-90).

Over the past few decades, the discourse on metaphor in music across various disciplines has broadened the meaning of the term considerably (see, for example, Spitzer, 2004, pp. 7-53). It is potentially philosophically challenging and intellectually rewarding to consider music as a whole as a metaphor, or the score, or rhythm, or particular melodic movements. For the purposes of this paper, however, I am concerned primarily with the application of metaphor as a pedagogical tool to elucidate approaches and concepts that are difficult to explain in cognitive terms to musicians learning to be performers or teachers. On this basis I will also not address real or imagined programmatic aspects of music, the stories – told or suggested – behind the music. This paper deals with more abstract indications of musical meaning.

The language of music is replete with this type of imagery, much of it culturally defined. Many instances we take for granted. Referring to notes as high or low may appear quite straightforward, while in fact, this is a European convention. In Africa and Indonesia, for instance, musicians refer to small and big in this context (cf. Tracey, 1948, p. 6; Zbikowski, 1998, p. 4). Other metaphorical musical terms abound: “We call passages of music exuberant, agitated, serene, timid, calm, determined, nervous. We speak of rising and falling melodies, of wistful melodies and hurried rhythms, of motion and rest ...” (Walton, 1994, p. 50).

A particular area of metaphorical use addresses purely technical instruction: telling vocalists to pretend they are taking a bite from a big apple has been demonstrated (by cameras inserted through the nose of the subjects) to result in the deconstriction needed to produce

the desired sound for western classical singing. An advanced version of this exercise includes sticky caramel on the apple; another imagining the upper and lower jaws represent a magnet and nails being forced apart (Estill, 1995, p. 120).

More commonly, metaphor is used in a manner that combines technical instruction with aesthetic intention. This can lead to fanciful flights of rhetoric, and has done so for centuries across cultures. In a Chinese text from the third century AD, the correct approach to fingering on the *qin* is described:

The fingers of the musician evoke the movement of waves.

Lightly, they float over the strings, with elegant and precise strokes.

(Quoted in Goormaghtigh, 1990, p. 30; my translation from French)

Other metaphors reported by Goormaghtigh include “how a dragonfly touches the water in his flight,” “like a carp beats its supple and heavy tail,” and “the dragon grabbing a cloud in his flight” (1988, p. 153). The thirteenth century Indian treatise *Sangita Ratnakara* speaks of treating notes “as milk gets transformed into curd” and “as a lamp manifests by its light the objects already existing in darkness” (Sarngadeva, 1978, p. 131).

Closer to the present and to actual instruction, an example from an advanced class in Indian classical music comes to mind. Displeased with the lack of subtlety in a certain tone, Ali Akbar Khan told his students to play “as if there is a small bird sitting on your finger, and you don’t want it to fly away” (personal communication, Summer 1990). In his guitar classes at the Rotterdam Conservatoire, *flamenco* virtuoso Paco Peña commented to an advanced student that a certain passage sounded like he was marching, and that he had to

open up the rhythm, make it sound less mechanical (personal observation, Spring 2001). In both cases, there was direct and distinctly audible evidence that these concepts influenced the musical sound produced.

This type of language is also quite common in the training of professional musicians in Western classical music, in the studio, but perhaps most visibly in public master classes. During a 2004 master class in Carnegie Hall, Leon Fleischer admonished a student to “play like a cat, but with sheathed claws”; another to “clothe the bass line in summer linen, not wool” (Ross, 2004). Many composers are also masters of metaphor: Xenakis likened the process of composing his *Continuum* for harpsichord to “letting a crystal form in a supersaturated solution” (Mountain, 2001, p. 283). Schoenberg “imagined the tonic as a sovereign who rules over the harmonies and the dominant as his vassal, going before his liege to announce and prepare for his arrival” (Hyer, 2005, §2).

A third category refers to expression, aesthetics or musical meaning alone. Jamaluddin Bhartiya (personal communication, Spring 1984) explained to me how it was possible that sometimes, great musicians can deliberately use a phrase that does not seem to fit in the prescribed movements of the *raga*: “It is like when you see the moon, and a cloud covers it up temporarily. Once the cloud has passed, you see the moon more clearly. This is called *avir bhav – tiru bhav* (out of mood, into mood).” Once explained, this aesthetic technique becomes easily recognisable and ultimately applicable by the student of Indian music.

In addition to positive metaphors stimulating the right behaviour, there are also negative metaphors trying to keep musicians from exploring unfruitful avenues. This is a type of rhetoric that we know all too well from negative reviews, but can also be found in instruction: Fleischer corrected a student by saying: “Your plaintive, yearning creature, your nymph or naiad, is turning into some horrible, saliva-dripping alien” (Ross, 2004). A famous violinist likened the inexpressive playing of a student to “unravelling a complex knitting pattern” (Persson, 1996, p. 10). The Kaluli of Papua New Guinea may correct an unbalanced phrase with one of the water-based metaphors that pervade their musical language: “The waterfall ledge is too long before the fall” (Feld, 1981, p. 42). When Ali Akbar Khan perceived a lack of crispness and clarity (metaphors in themselves) in the sounds produced by his Indian music students, he likened the sound to what emanates from the backside of a donkey (personal observation, Summer 1990).

Then there are metaphors that explain the (importance of) human relations in music making. When I asked African drum *guru* Ponda O’Bryan why he did not want to teach individually, he emphasised the communal essence of music making in Africa by saying: “It just doesn’t work: one monkey, no show” (Schippers, 1997, video interview). A category of metaphors referring to the learning process per se could also be considered. When one questions Japanese musicians why they are not pushing their students to practice harder, they are likely to respond that the farmer who pulls at his young rice shoots to make them grow faster is more likely to uproot and kill them than have a bountiful harvest (Gutzwiller, 1992, p. 73).

Success and failure

Considering the examples above we can see imagery being applied at various levels. While at first appearance technique may seem the most tangible aspect of learning music, it appears to be a matter of degree: although the emphasis lies on relatively unambiguous, physical instruction, it extends to imaginative use of language, evocative of the right attitude needed to play the right technique. From there it moves to references to the interpersonal and abstractly aesthetic. Many master musicians across the world are aware of these aspects and often have found creative ways of communicating to specific students what they consider important mechanisms to achieve expression. It is not uncommon to encounter specific mention in biographies or anecdotes of a teacher's expertise in creative use of metaphor.

However, we have to acknowledge that metaphor can be unsuccessful as well. It may not communicate at all because the frame of reference or *schemata* to interpret them do not exist in the receiver. "Play this phrase emulating the gait of a wombat" may not call forth vivid images in Inuit Eskimos or Bayaka pygmies. Closer to home, unsuccessful examples of metaphor can be identified from classical experience. Persson relates a story of the disappointment of one accomplished performer/teacher at the lack of comprehension in her students when she paints the atmosphere of Kabalevsky's *Violin Concerto* in impressionistic terms, including "snow, fur coats, sledges, disappointments" (1996, p.7). Only a select student body would directly feel inspired by such idiosyncratic imagery.

Another pitfall in the use of imagery is that it may be too simple and uninspiring (e.g. Woody, 2002, pp. 220-221). Overcomplication and obscurity appear to be more common,

however. To assist in a phrasing dilemma, Pay first introduces a wave and then a leaf metaphor, before deciding that the solution may be to combine the two pictures, leading to an almost incomprehensible “wave whose profile is like one side of a simple leaf, occurring on a sea whose depth may vary” (1996, p. 303). The art of effective metaphor (that is a metaphor that increases the understanding of a relevant aspect of music making in the learner), aims at the middle area of the graph below. It avoids the cliché, because that does not aid the learning process, and also steers clear of the excessively obscure.

Figure 1. Metaphor in learning and teaching music

Cliché	The metaphor is so worn and familiar that no new learning takes place; e.g. “Play this ascending phrase”
Creative metaphor	An image is evoked that creates ‘cognitive Dissonance’ in the learner, which can be resolved by applying a broad frame of reference
Obscure imagery or reference	An image is evoked that also creates ‘cognitive dissonance’, but the reference is too obscure for it to be resolved by the learner

Successful metaphor, then, moves in the area where it creates the resolvable ‘cognitive dissonance’ advocated by Neighbour (1992) and others, which Harsdörffer described *avant la lettre* as early as the 1640s: “that which we cannot name we can find and describe by coupling it with that which is similar; and our mind gains pleasure when, through this process, it grasps what it could previously not understand” (quoted in Spitzer, 2004, p. 163). It also resonates with the educational philosophies and concepts that have gained ground during the second half of the twentieth century, such as Piaget’s ‘accommodation’, forcing the mind to develop or change existing ideas to deal with new realities, and Bruner’s

concept of intuition as “the intellectual technique of arriving at plausible but tentative formulations without going through the analytical steps ...” (1960, p. 13). In constructivist terms, metaphor aids a process in which “learning is facilitated by the teacher by creating ‘cognitive dissonance’ in order to give opportunities for the learners to reorganize their cognitive maps” (Paul & Ballantine, 2002, p. 571).

Cognition and confusion

In the fields of music psychology and cognition, there is a growing interest in musical imagery. According to Godøy and Jørgensen (2001), musical imagery refers in the first place to “our mental capacity for imagining musical sound in the absence of a directly audible sound source, meaning that we can recall and re-experience or even invent a new musical sound through our ‘inner ear’” (preface ix). Yet on closer examination it also involves schemata (mental structures) that go beyond the auditive:

musical sound ‘in itself’ may be considered ‘impure’ in the sense that musical imagery seems in many situations to be accompanied by, or even inseparable from, images of source, of sound generation, or the environment, as well as various images of ‘meaning’, such as emotional content or highly extra musical associations...(Godøy & Jørgensen, p. x)

This interest is pursued with the purpose of gaining “a better understanding of what triggers images of musical sound in our minds, or what is the ‘engine’ of musical imagery” (Godøy, & Jørgensen, 2001, p 4), with ultimately an expressed interest in “a broader scope for considering musical imagery, including metaphorical images and concepts in different

modalities” (ibid. p. 138). This is where creativity and cognition meet: in imagery as a key factor in musical learning, understanding and creativity.

However, there is a considerable distance to cover. Apart from metaphors that have a singular technical purpose, metaphors point in a direction: of a mode of expression, an aesthetic concept, even a spiritual connection. None of these are concrete. They show the student that something beyond the tangible is needed, but do not give a clearly defined answer, or clearly defined way to get there. In fact, a visionary teacher may deliberately send a student into an area of aesthetic exploration where there is no single truth.

In this way, advanced musical training can be likened to the guidance given by a Zen master. At the appropriate moment, the master poses questions to his disciples that cannot be resolved by logical thinking: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” The search for the answer, the desperation at not being able to find it, and finally the insight that comes from deeply understanding the essence of the question are a key part of the learning experience of a Zen novice.

Similarly, I would argue that the beauty of a piece of music will never be fully explained by an analysis of its structure, or by carefully pulling apart pitch, pulse, amplitude and timbre, just like human beauty can only be partially explained by looking at a skeleton, and probing skin, muscle texture and organs, spread out on an dissection table. A partially unmapped path of discovery is necessary; one that leaves room for lateral connections and even confusion. However much curricula suggest a definable, controlled

development towards musical excellence, no musician should be led to believe that music is an art that can be learned and performed without confusion in pride of place.

Musicians over centuries and cultures have celebrated the intangibles in music. Music is beautiful, enigmatic, complex, and confusing. Training of professional musicians across cultures and recent research demonstrates that while metaphor will not make these realities tangible, at least it points in the right direction. Spitzer argues “the pedagogical pathway from simple to complex, or concrete to abstract, unfolds a pathway from literal to metaphorical musical knowledge” (2004, p. 16). In the formal organisation of music learning and teaching, however, we barely acknowledge this. We have too little understanding of the present use of metaphorical language, the importance of receptivity to metaphor in learners, and the skills of teachers in finding the right metaphor for the right student at the right time in the right situation.

There can be little doubt that these aspects are underrepresented in the curricula underlying the formal training of most music teachers in conservatoires and music education departments. However, they proliferate in the teaching studios, in the corridors, the canteen, waiting to be more fully explored, acknowledged, and applied with confidence to settings ranging from community music activities to master classes. There is much research and practical work to be done in this area, bringing closer music psychology and cognition, curriculum development and pedagogy, and facilitating creative and expressive practice in music learners across cultures and settings.

Huib Schippers has a long and varied experience in music education. Coming from a family steeped in Western classical music, he studied, performed and taught Indian classical music for over 30 years. From the early 1990s, Schippers focused on music education, initiating a number of major projects, including World Music Schools across the Netherlands (1990-1997); the Cultural Diversity in Music Education network (1992 - present); and the World Music and Dance Centre in Rotterdam (1996-2006). In addition, he has served in a variety of capacities on numerous forums, boards and commissions, including the Netherlands National Arts Council, the Music Council of Australia, and the International Society for Music Education. Over the past fifteen years, he has lectured and published extensively on various aspects of teaching and learning music. At present, he is the Director of the innovative Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre at Griffith University in Brisbane.

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