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Music, Language and Emotion

Estelle Barrett

Deakin University

This paper attempts to demonstrate the link between art and pain, or more specifically between music, forms of poetic language and emotion – a link that for me is often emphasised in times of grief and sadness.

Juxtaposition rather than interweaving of theoretical components with the fiction writing – through the use of a prologue and epilogue – became a necessity as I found unfolding of the two forms to be incommensurable in this instance.

The link between psychological states and music has long been recognised. Plato warned against the use of certain melodic modes – the Lydian mode because it was expressive of sorrow and the Ionian because of its softness, which may induce indolence (Bunt, 1994: 69). It has been suggested that the strong association between melody and interval in music and emotional states relates to notions of expectancy and violation of expectancy. Various musical patterns create expectations and suspense; the greater the build-up of suspense and tension the greater the emotional release on resolution (Meyer, 1961). Though complex and undifferentiated, tendencies related to the arousal of affect in experiencing music may subsequently assume specific or referential significance.

Theories that elaborate the relationship between art, pain and reparation suggest that the encounter with all of the expressive arts is linked to processes of homeostasis. At a simple level this relates to the human organism's striving to maintain equilibrium between internal and external processes required for balance, growth directed activity and volition (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1979). The arousal and release of tension in aesthetic experience is related to libidinal drives and the desire for physiological pleasure and psychological well-being. Susanne Langer extends these ideas more specifically to music and emotion:

The tonal structures we call "music" bear a close logical similarity to the forms of human feeling – forms of growth and attenuation, flowing and stowing, conflict and resolution, speed, arrest, terrific excitement, calm or subtle activation and dreamy lapses – not joy and sorrow perhaps, but the poignancy of either and both... Such is the pattern or logical form of sentience ... Music is a tonal analogue of emotive life. (Langer, 1953:27)

Langer (1969) suggests that music is not a cause or cure of feelings, but their logical expression. Julia Kristeva goes beyond this in her assertion that creative textual practice is a means of assuaging grief and melancholia. She attributes this reparative dimension of language to its material or sound base, a "musicality" that is particularly characteristic of poetic language (Kristeva, 1984). Kristeva's descriptions of the chora and its implication in language is useful for understanding the effects of music. Her account of the chora as the motility or kinetic rhythms derived from biological drives, posits an integral and fundamental relationship between sounds and the human body.

Auditory space has been described as the first psychic space. From this and an understanding of early auditory perceptions, the link between music and language, the body and affect may be explained. Kristeva's work advances a clearer understanding of the synaesthetic operation of the senses underpinning the reparative capacity of the arts. Sounds together with rhythms, gestures and colours are some of the means through which energy drives linking the bodies of mother and child are channelled and directed (Shepherd & Wicke, 1997: 85). The mother's voice is regarded as the first model of auditory pleasure – and by extrapolation, when it is withdrawn or negatively perceived by the newborn infant – of displeasure. Kinetic impulses of rhythm and intonation of the chora are thus understood as being imprinted with a semiological potential, or forms of awareness that are pre-linguistic and not purely cognitive. It is this "non-discursive" register of awareness that links art, pain and pleasure.

An examination of many literary genres suggests correspondence between language and music that extends beyond the shared material base of sound to more complex parallels of style and form. For example, the essence of the major form in western music, the symphony, is dramatic contrast and development. Joseph Machlis (1984) suggests that though there are countless exceptions, the four movements in the symphony generally follow the pattern: fast – slow – moderately fast – fast, a sequence that relates to the intrinsically narrative dimension of the form.

The development of the symphony is marked by an increase in tension as themes are fragmented and recombined into new patterns through which conflict and drama emerge. In contrast to the first movement, the second movement of the symphony is generally slow and lyrical in nature, however it may vary in mood from the whimsical and playful to the tragic and passionate (Machlis, 1984:118). The third and fourth movements may include a variation of themes and motifs from previous movements. Like works of literature, the symphony can close in a note of triumph or, as Machlis has noted of Tchaikovsky's sixth symphony, it may descend to the dark abyss whence it issued (Machlis, 1984:132).

First Love ... in four movements

1. When We Were Very Young

There's a rough prickly patch between the flower garden and the place under the frangipani trees where we build our dens and make dolls' jam from the Kai-apples that grow on the hedge between our yard and the big pink house next door.

We're peeping at girls in saris stringing garlands of thick milky flowers for another wedding that will last for three, four or even five days – and giggle because we know – small trays of jilabis dripping syrup or maybe creamy burfi will soon be pushed through the hole in the fence. We hear the sound of bangled arms and rush to the to see what's there.

Today we're wearing new sandals around our necks because we mustn't break them or bring dirt into the house. But after the rains the fallow vegetable patch is thick with raggedy-edge weeds, their razor spines glistening. You are more than halfway across. I'm still jumping up and down at the edge crying and raging at my stinging feet. The old kikuyu *shamba* woman chortles, spits on her hands through the gap in her teeth and pushing the weeds aside with her bare feet, gets ready to hoe and pull.

You hobble back and crouch in front of me so that I can stretch my arms around your neck. With your sandals now slung over one wrist, you piggy me across the weed patch and let me slide down onto the cool hard ground under the frangipanis. Smudging beads of blood from the soles of your feet with the back of your hand, you set to work putting fresh banana leaves on the floor of our lean-to cubby.

I'm sitting under the shade grimacing at my feet – you stretch amongst the long hedge thorns picking Kai-apples for the jam-making. You set a fire between three stones with

red and orange hibiscus for flames – and place a small tin saucepan on it and let me stir the jam for the doll's party. We're sipping water from tiny china teacups. Sour-yellow kai-apple juice drips over the dolls' mouths and onto their dresses.

I lie on my back and screw my eyes at the sky through the slit in the banana leaf roof and wonder if God can see us. You're trying to teach me the alphabet – scratching letters on my leg with a twig. I don't get it because I'm lost in the pleasure of the sharp stinging sensation against my skin. I'm feigning sleep and when I think you're not looking I scan your face through fluttering eyelids.

The big jacaranda tree begins to stretch chilly shadows over us. It's time to go in. I want a piggyback again – even though most of the weeds have gone. You buckle my sandals, pat down my thin flaxen hair – catch my hand to stop me falling up the tall stone steps to the kitchen. I am nearly four years old and you are eight.

2. Parting

We're not allowed to go out and play. Grandma smells of 4711 Eau de Cologne and is wearing her town clothes. She's packing your things into a trunk – knickers, shoes, tunics – marked with your school number 111 – two new writing-in books, prayer book, rosary beads, six twirled sticks of barley sugar.

Grandma and Auntie and Uncle are talking loudly in Creole so that we can't hear what they're saying – the government authorities won't let you go to the European schools – too dark they said – thank God for Father Farrell – he persuaded the nuns at Mungu, a school for Goan girls near Nanuyki to take you in. The nuns' said your baptism certificate was enough. It's far away in the bush, but never mind – at least Goans are Christians and you will be able to make your First Holy Communion – and learn something.

Grandma says that that when the headmaster at one of the schools saw you, he asked see your birth certificate.

"*Mais*, I don't have," she told him.

Who is the father of the child?

George Reginald Taylor.

Where is he?

He came... and then – he went back to *Angleterre*.

Where is the Mother?

After the baby – she was weeping everyday for one month – *après* – she went somewhere – – there to find him.

Where is the child's birth certificate?

We are waiting for him to come back to make this.

Birth not registered! Maternal Grandfather?

He has passed above.

Place of birth of grandfather?

Seychelles, Mahé, Monsieur.

"That won't do at all – could have been as black as an Ace of Spades," the English headmaster told her.

After two years the nuns let you come home for a holiday – when you spoke, you sounded like the girls from India next door – and when you said – yes – you didn't nod your head, but moved it from side to side in that funny way – as if dancing to music

The hole in the hedge grew over while you were gone

3 When We Were Older

When you were fifteen you left Mungu, but no one would let you go to high school. You got a job in the haberdashery department at the Emporium in Government Road and Wilomina Pereira's mother let you rent a room at the back of her house – close to work – because you and her daughter had made your first Holy Communion together

I haven't seen you for almost five years. My mother says that I shouldn't visit because you have another life now – and I should mix with my own type – concentrate on getting my A Levels – besides – she says – no one would be seen dead in the Asian quarter. But I'm sixteen now – I can go anywhere. Even to see you – without her knowing

One afternoon when hockey practice was cancelled because of heavy rain, I rode into town on my new Lambretta and walked into the Emporium dripping wet. I stood at the counter and asked you for a card of press-studs. You pushed back a squeal of recognition with one hand – dragged me into the storeroom with the other – and kissed me from cheek to cheek a hundred times – mopped me dry – and hid me from the shop manager until closing time. We went to the new Italian Cafe in Delamere Avenue – I had my first frothy coffee and you bought me the biggest cake in the shop

We'd do this often after that – and before waving me off on my scooter, you'd always squeeze a five-shilling note in my hand so I could go the pictures with the crowd from school on Saturday mornings. Sometimes you asked me to bring my friends for coffee but I never did – and one day when I was walking down Delamere Avenue with some of them, I caught sight of you at a distance and quickly pulled my companions down a side street

Another year passed before I saw you again – I heard you were pregnant. A British soldier promised to marry you, but didn't turn up at the D.C.'s office before closing time. Weeks later, you found out that he'd caught a boat to Southampton on your wedding day

They're packing you off to England as well – to the mother who left you behind when you were four weeks old. Grandma is crying and wiping your face with a sodden handkerchief. You're wearing a candy-stripped cotton skirt. It's gathered at the waist and I'm trying not to look at the roundness underneath. My mother thinks it's a good thing all round that you're going away and that we are going to Australia

4 Departure

I heard you changed your name after they took your second baby away. I haven't seen you for twelve years

Twickenham. I've found you. Now you live in a grey-brick housing estate with three more children

I should have warned you that I was coming

I knock on the door – 'Can I see Patricia please?'

Your face is the same. Your body is bloated and your eyes won't settle on anything – they dance nervously from side to side under heavy lids

I'm Erica. What can I do for you?

I want to see Pat

I'm Erica – you say

And I say – Can I have a card of press-studs please?

You let out a scream and drag me into a narrow corridor – and kiss me from cheek to cheek – again and again

We cry and laugh all afternoon and have cups of tea – but I can smell gin on your breath

The last time I saw you it was a week later – at Heathrow airport – you caught two buses and two trains to get there I was running late – gave you a hug – and said you shouldn't have come You were wearing a knitted skirt – too tight – and in the middle of it – there was a small patch that had been darned Your eye make-up was streaming and I couldn't find a tissue Then I was being hurried across the barrier I looked back You were standing there perfectly still – staring at me – and I couldn't get back across to you Through the crowd I could see the raggedy – edge patch on your knitted skirt

Six months later I heard you were dead

Sometimes in the middle of a blinding Perth summer – when the clouds blacken and drop low over the Indian Ocean – pretending rain – and the wind pelts my legs with sand – and the air – thickens with earth and fills my lungs – you float back into memory – and I find myself listening over and over again to second movements – Beethoven mostly – and I sit and weep because second movements are like that – and because I know again – that the first crushing love I felt for you came too late for words

Epilogue

*Health is a condition of perfect rhythm and tone And what is music?
Music is rhythm and tone When the health is out of order, it means the
music is out of order In all the occupations of life where beauty has been
the inspiration, where the divine wine has been poured out, there is music*
(Kenny quotes Khan, 1996 64)

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