

MEANING AND MUSIC: SOME REFLECTIONS*

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Edmund Husserl in his *Logical Investigations* (volume one)¹, presents interesting ideas on ‘meaning’. He distinguishes sign from expression. To be a sign is to be sign for some thing. Signs always point to something. Sign has wider extension than expression. The main feature of sign is indication and the essence of indication is motivation. Motivation is purely subjective and it really gives us a clue as to how the subject is carried from one thought to another. The communication between speaker and hearer is possible only when a speaker has some intention of ‘expressing himself about something’ and the speaker not only does utter some sound (physical phenomenon), but he also attaches some sense which he wants to share. This desire for sharing is called *meaning-conferring act*. Now the meaning that is attached to a physical phenomenon may or may not be confirmed by the actual world. If the meaning-conferring-act is confirmed by the actual world, then what we have is a *meaning-fulfilling act*.²

When we consider expression in general and we go for the meaning through expression, we really move from the subjective act of making a sound towards the ideal meaning. It is a psychological fact that I am trying to say something, but what is intimated and what is asserted in the judgment involves nothing subjective. This leads us to the objective meaning. This unity between subjective expression and objective meaning is called by Husserl the ideal unity and we do not arbitrarily attribute this ideal unity through our assertions, instead we discover it. Vagaries of meaning can be found in the psychological aspect of the meaning which is called ‘act of meaning’ but the content of meaning or the meaning itself which is the essence of meaning is constant and pure logic is concerned with this meaning.³

Jacques Derrida regards Husserl to have greatly influenced his (Derrida’s) philosophy. In fact Derrida’s early philosophical programme seems to arise out of his tussle with phenomenology. Derrida through his close reading and thread bear analysis of Husserl’s text brings out the tension, the anomalies and doctrinal inconsistencies in Husserlian phenomenology. It is the phenomenological attempt to ground knowledge on evidence and self-presence and its apparent failure that leads Derrida to conclude that such an attempt itself is fundamentally ill-conceived.

One of the major tensions in Husserl’s phenomenology, according to Derrida, arises out of an initial failure to reconcile the demands of structure with those of genesis.

*Some portions of this paper is taken from my Ph.D Dissertation entitled “Meaning, Music and Communication: A Phenomenological Analysis”.

¹ Edmund Husserl *Logical Investigations* (vol.I), Tr. J. N. Findlay, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.

² *Ibid.*, P.281

³ For detail see *Ibid.*, P.282- P.295

This is manifest in Husserl's attempt to analyse the concept of number in terms of subjective act, though later in face of Frege's criticism Husserl abandons his earlier leaning toward psychologism.

One of the key criticisms Derrida levels against Husserl is that the basic premises of phenomenology viz., original evidence and the unmediated presence of the thing itself to consciousness are susceptible to doubt by the method of phenomenology itself. Reason, according to Husserl, is the metaphysics of presence as it is produced in history. It is *self-presence*⁴ mediated through language only to return to its original self-identity. Derrida devotes considerable time in deconstructing this Husserlian thesis. Husserl's brand of phenomenology, according to Derrida, has been entrapped in the system it aims at criticizing.

Husserl transcends the limits of its specific subject viz., geometry and goes on exploring the conditions of possibility of the history of science in general. Husserl is not interested in empirical origin; rather he is concerned with the very notion of origin itself. Husserl sometime considers geometry and science in general as cultural forms among others; at other times he depicts science as a unique cultural form that transcends cultural relativism. This contradiction, according to Derrida, originates from Husserl's hesitation about the significance of historical errors. Reacting to Husserl's allusion to Galileo's fatal negligence, Derrida argues that non-communication and misunderstanding are the part of a finitude that can never be entirely overcome.

Derrida's disagreements with Husserl are evident where the former vehemently opposes Husserl's attempt to arrive at linguistic objectivities and mathematical symbolization as a way of maintaining ideality. Derrida thinks that even if the absence of subjectivity from the transcendental field may ensure objectivity, such an absence can only be an artificial one. In Husserl's account writing enjoys a very special status; it is the locus of a whole series of ambiguities involving movement between essence and contingency, purely potential and empirical, dependence and independence. According to Derrida, Husserl gets irreparably trapped in the tension between thinking of language and symbolization as necessary to science and truth as well as the occasion of their alienation and disagreement.

I would like to throw light on Derrida's thought provoking critical appraisal of Husserl's theory of meaning by extending phenomenological analysis to our appreciation of music. If meaning is to be understood in the context of communication, a view which even Husserl would be sympathetic to, then Derrida's opposition to Husserlian ideality of meaning acquires great significance from a detail analysis of what we understand when we understand music. And the key concept that I would like to invoke in this context is *musical pattern*.

Any work of Art is related to the value of its creation. If we consider music as a work of art, then we can say that a theory of musical understanding should lie at the heart of a theory of musical value. Although the listener can find the experience of a piece of music intrinsically rewarding whether or not he understands the music, it is only when he hears and understands the work that the value of the music can be realized in his

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, Translated with an Introduction by David B. Allison preface by Newton Garver, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1973, P.35

experience. A piece of music can produce a certain sort of pleasure with respect to the hearer, but without the musical understanding it is not possible for the hearer to apprehend the musical value of that particular piece of music. Hence, the listener can be aware of, in his experience, the value of the music as music only if he hears the music with understanding. This musical understanding is related to the possibility of musical communication. If music is something that can be understood, it can be possible for many people to share the correct understanding of a piece of music. The composer simulates certain sound in certain way and he intends the listener to hear in a certain manner; and if he succeeds in his intention, the listener understands his work and at the same time he undergoes the experience the composer intends him to have. To listen to music with understanding involves having the experiences the composer wants or intends the listener to have and it is this experience that is communicated from composer to hearer. Composer can also view his work from the point of view of the listener. All these things are possible only in the context of possibility of musical communication. Hence, if a mode of hearing a composition is valued, and if the value resides specifically in hearing the composition in a certain manner, then the value is not detachable from the experience of the composition. The musical value of a work can be located in an experience the composer communicates to the listener only if what is communicated is nothing other than an experience that minimally involves hearing the sounds that constitute the music. To hear a composition with understanding is to have the experience the composer intends the listener to have; and it is the experience that can be said to be communicated from composer to listener. What is communicated is an experience constituted by the experience of hearing sounds.

But the question still remains: What exactly does music communicate; what constitutes musical meaning? What do we understand when we understand a piece of music? One could make a distinction between absolute meaning and referential meaning. The absolute meaning of a piece of music is intramusical which concerns solely the patterns and relationships established within the work and the intrinsic nature of the process contained within the work. The referential meaning of a musical work consists in the relation in which the work stands to any extramusical phenomenon to which it refers⁵. Here we find two rival views about the nature of absolute meaning of music. According to Formalism, the intramusical meaning is purely intellectual. Different types of musical relationship contained within a musical work are grasped intellectually and provide intellectual interest and satisfaction. Formalism defines music as a communication of a meaningful process which is apprehended by the intellect. According to Absolute Expressionism, intramusical meaning of music is emotional. This view holds that the different types of musical relationships established within a musical work arouse emotion in the listeners who understand the style of the music. For them, music is a constant process which is experienced with emotion and its value is communicated to listener depending on its ability to arouse emotion in the listener. Moreover, Formalism gives importance to intellect in music and for Absolute Expressionism, emotion is the central element which has to be defined.⁶

⁵ Malcolm Budd, *Music and the Emotions*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley, 1985, P. 153

⁶ Ibid.

Even if there is no communication of speech or emotion through music, it must be accepted that there is a communication of at least a pattern of sound waves which may be called ‘musical pattern’. When a sound wave is created at 256 cycles / second (Middle C in Piano) and immediately after that another sound wave is created at 440 cycles/second (A above Middle C in Piano), the interval between the second and the first is that of ‘La’ and ‘Do’ of the ‘Do, Re, Me, Fa, So, La, Ti’ relation of sound waves. The consecutive sounding of these two notes creates what may be called a musical pattern and this musical pattern viz. the relation between ‘La’ and ‘Do’ gets communicated to the hearer. In other words, what the musical notation represents gets communicated through music. Even though there is a controversy over whether intramusical meanings or emotion gets communicated through music, I hold that this much is certain that at least musical patterns in the above sense are communicated through music. Phenomenological analysis of the communication of such musical patterns may also throw light on the difference between Western harmonic music and Indian solo music.

An analysis of the notion of musical pattern reveals that there are gaps or fissures that make communication possible. So it is not self-presence, but difference between the notes (auditory or conceptual) that makes musical appreciation possible. Non-communication is not inessential, for it is through some failure new and new musical patterns are discovered. Understanding musical pattern shows that subjectivity is not to be shunned altogether; rather a blend of subjective and objective is the need of the hour in order to take care of both the creative and the communicative aspect of musical pattern.

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