

Lecture: Music and Metaphor

Abstract

In the past metaphor was considered no more than a literary figure, a way of speaking, a use of language with interest mainly for poets. Today the so-called cognitive linguistics and philosophy have raised the status of metaphor as to be central for understanding the way we think and act. The study "Metaphors we live by" by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) had a major impact in challenging the opposition between mind and body and between objective and subjective truth. Their study of metaphor led them to the concept of "the embodied mind" in which the separation of bodily behaviour and abstract thinking was transcended.

The concept of "the embodied mind" seems to be of special interest to musicians since they combine bodily behaviour with apparently abstract thinking every second they make music.

The view that the different levels on which we function are not separated but somehow influence each other is elucidated by the modern theory of metaphor: The ability of men to understand one field of experience in terms of another.

As soon as we start talking about music or about a specific passage in certain music we use metaphor, often without realising it. As soon as we imagine music or when we imagine music while playing it our imagination is fed by metaphor.

We will present the theory of metaphor and the more recent theory of conceptual blending and we will apply it to music.

We will argue that the idea of the pure autonomy of music is an impediment to artistic imagination and we will argue that there is no real opposition between subjective experience and the objective 'world'.

We will analyse examples of composers like Debussy, Beethoven, Mahler and Webern to show how the use of metaphor can enrich our interpretation of the score.

Finally we will show how the theory of metaphor and conceptual blending can help us to understand the way music and image can go together in modern multimedia performances.

Lecture: Music and Metaphor

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Good evening, I am very pleased to be able to present to you an approach to music which I find stimulating and inspiring.

As far as I know my lecture is part of the research program for Masterstudents at the Royal Conservatory. You probably sometimes wonder why you have to do research since you want to become a performer first of all. I am myself a conductor of contemporary music and I never felt a contradiction in performing music at one moment and contemplating it at another moment. Performing music and contemplating music are different activities but I believe they can go hand in hand very well. And both ways: Research can deepen our performance but performance itself can become a subject of research. How do we perform, what do we perform, where do we perform and finally: Why do we perform?

We should not be afraid to use all our human faculties and we should not fear to lose our spontaneity in performance by theorizing on music. This fear has probably something to do with a view on the human mind which has been called in cognitive linguistics 'modular thinking'¹. This view presupposes - in its extreme form - that our brain is divided in totally separate compartments having no connection with each other. Musicians often like to think of man's ability of enjoying and making music as a highly special faculty with no or little connection to other human faculties. 'Music' as a separate module in our brain. This view originates in the Romantic era where the idea of the autonomy of music was paradoxically linked to transcendental thinking: Because music was autonomous it could aspire to the highest spheres of human consciousness, to the spiritual and the universal. The musician and composer as a kind of high priest. This idea still proves to be persistent among musicians of especially classical music and a recent British philosopher even suggested the term 'automania' to describe it as a kind of sickness.²

Recent research in neuroscience and in cognitive psychology seems to prove that, although different locations in the brain are activated when different types of information are processed, nevertheless overlapping processes go hand in hand with modular processes. In a popular publication "Welcome to the Brain"³ of 2008 music is compared with language: "Tasks involving musical harmony activate Broca's area, which is necessary for speech, and a corresponding area in the right hemisphere that is important for prosody (intonation, which tells a listener when you're being sarcastic, for example, or asking a question). Music and language also both activate brain areas involved in the timing of auditory information. Nevertheless, the two functions are at least partly separated in the brain."

So neuroscience seems to question at least the complete autonomy of the music faculty of man.

Cognitive linguistics today reject the claim that there is a distinct language module.⁴ They emphasise the importance of human experience, the centrality of the human body, affecting the nature of our experience.⁵ In other words, our construal of reality is mediated in large measure by the nature of our bodies.⁶

¹ V. Evans and M. Green, *Cognitive Linguistics, and Introduction*, Edinburgh Un. Press 2006, p. 41 and p.144-146

² Aaron Ridley, *The Philosophy of Music*, Edinburgh Un. Press 2004, p. 11-12

³ S.Aamodt & S. Wang, *Welcome to the Brain, The Science of Jet Lag, Love and Other Curiosities of Life*, Ebury Publishing 2008, p. 74

⁴ V. Evans and M. Green, p. 41

⁵ V. Evans and M. Green, p. 44

⁶ V. Evans and M. Green, p. 45

This is called the concept of the embodied mind, which seems of special interest for musicians, since they combine bodily behaviour with apparently abstract thinking every second they make music.

Now what has metaphor, our subject of tonight, to do with this discussion on the autonomy of music?

Metaphor originates in spoken and written language and it is a non-literal way of saying something. It is part of the old tradition of Rhetorics and is called a 'trope' or figure of speech. As the Encyclopedia Britannica puts it: "metaphor is a figure of speech that implies comparison signalled by the words 'like' or 'as'"

There is a well-known example in Dutch language which goes: "The Camel is the Ship of the Desert". Or another well-known example: "He did fight like a lion". Or this one: "I am at a cross-roads in my life".

So what seems interesting about metaphor is the fact that it creates new and unexpected meaning by comparing things that seem to be uncomparable at first sight.

The importance of metaphor in literature and poetry seems evident, but in analytical philosophy in the twentieth century metaphor was considered suspect because a metaphorical saying had no so-called "truth-value": A Camel is not a ship. Today the so-called cognitive linguistics and modern philosophy have raised the status of metaphor as to be central for understanding the way we think and act.

Let me cite from the beginning of the influential book "Metaphors we live by" of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, published in 1980⁷:

"Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish – a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature."

This idea of metaphor as being central to human understanding has led to the idea of the so-called "conceptual metaphor": It means that human beings are translating in everyday life all the time one field of experience into another. This process is called 'cross-domain mapping' by establishing correspondences between different conceptual domains. And often we understand complex experiences because we are able to understand it by "mapping" from a more basic experience into the complex one.

"Love is a journey": We translate the basic concept of a journey to the complexity of the concept of love.

The lovers are the travellers: "We are at a cross-roads".

There is a destination: "I don't think our relationship is going anywhere".

There are obstacles on the road: "Our marriage is on the rocks".

But on an even more basic level – so-called primary metaphors - we "map" - since we are kids - experiences of space, like up and down, front or back, experiences of the senses like hot and cold, of colour, our experience of being close to our mother etc. etc. into more complex experiences like ... like music: 12'

⁷ G.Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Un. Of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 3

“Could you play this passage with more warmth?”

“Where is the climax of this movement?”

“Debussy’s languorous opening melody for the flute alone, suggesting melancholy and a dreamlike state”.⁸

“Here the music is slowing down”

“Finally the Dominantseventh chord is resolving”

Why is it resolving? Is it a fluid?

Why do we speak of high notes and low notes? High notes are vibrations in the air that are vibrating faster than so-called low notes but what is the connection with our spatial experience of high and low?

And indeed: In Javanese Gamelanmusic they like to speak of small notes and large notes in stead of high and low notes, because the “low notes” are played on large gongs and the “high” notes on small gongs.

But could there be a connection with the experience of singing: When we sing high notes it feels high in our throat and when we sing low notes they seem to be resonating in our belly. This suggests that there could even be a very simple physical experience at the basis of our concept of high and low notes. This idea that concepts can be based on a physical experience is the foundation of the theory of “embodied cognition”. And it seems that many aspects of musical experience can be linked to bodily experience, like tension - relaxation, speeding up - slowing down, using ‘force’ in ‘forte’ passages, using stress in articulation etc.

It seems even that as soon as we speak about music, as soon as we teach music or when we rehearse music we speak in terms of metaphor. And some of those metaphors have a very long history and are part of culture. In western music for example we have a long tradition of comparing music to language. We know of the influence of rhetorics on Baroque composers and especially on Bach, but in the eighteenth century composition theories were strongly influenced by the comparison of music with language:

Example 1. source: Language target: Music

result:

rhetorics

musical phrase

sentence

musical grammar

question + answer

articulation

comma

expression,

musical discourse, narrative

etc.etc.

Johann Philip Kirnberger:

“Just as a paragraph in speech consists of segments, phrases, and sentences that are marked by various punctuation symbols such as the comma (,) semicolon (;) colon (:), and period (.), the harmonic equivalent of the paragraph can also consist of several segments, phrases and periods.”

Die Kunst des reinen Satzes in der Musik" ("The Art of Strict Composition in Music", 1774, 1779).¹⁷

⁸ from a CD leaflet: Debussy, DGG 429728-2

Language is of course a complex domain in itself leading to – what is called metaphorical entailments⁹ or rich inferences. Now let us have a look at some more basic domains, co-called primary metaphors or image-schemata.

Example 2, The experience of ‘space’:

source: Experience of space

target: Music

result:

high notes, low notes
register
middle voices, outer voices
open, closed
wide
center, tonical center
pivot tone

literal use of space in: antiphonal music, spatial music (electronics)

Example 3, The experience of the ‘senses’:

source: Physical senses

target: Music

result:

bright - dark/light
warm - cool
clear
transparent
thick
heavy - light
“You should give this note more weight”, “you should play this warmer”

Synesthesia:

A special case where certain people seem to link music and color “literally” in stead of by the metaphorical way of “mapping”: Scriabin and his Light-Organ, O. Messiaen.

Example 4, The experience of motion:

source: Physical motion

target: Music

result:

rhythm
musical event
musical passage
musical goal, path
tempo, fast/slow
musical gesture
rest (opposite of motion)

⁹ Zoltan Kövecses, Metaphor, a practical introduction, Oxford Un.Press 2002, p. 94
V. Evans and M. Green, p. 298

intensity
force
future musical event
past musical event
change of emotional state
Ballet, Dance, Filmmusic.

To end this survey I like to add a typical culture dependent metaphor:

Example 5: compound metaphor

source: Theatre target: Music

result:

drama
contrasting themes (masculin/feminin)
The "Emperor" concerto
Florestan and Eusebius (Schumann)
music as personification
opera, music and theatre
filmmusic
music as theatre (Mauricio Kagel)

25'

Now before I turn to real music I want to introduce an extension of the theory of conceptual metaphor which provides us with a nice model to apply to music. It is called the theory of "conceptual blending".¹⁰

The model of metaphorical mapping shows two limitations:

It is a one way system leading from the source domain to the target domain and the model seems to concentrate mainly on two fields of experience.¹¹

The model of 'conceptual blending' offers a solution to those limitations.

In stead of supposing a source domain and a target domain we suppose different 'mental spaces' that can blend because they have some features in common on a more abstract level which is called the 'generic space'.

Example:¹²

¹⁰ G. Fauconnier, M. Turner, *The Way We Think, conceptual blending and the mind's hidden complexities*, Basic Books, New York, 2002

L.M. Zibowski, *Conceptualizing Music: cognitive structure, theory and analysis*, New York, Oxford Un. Press, 2002

¹¹ Although solutions have been developed in metaphor theory with the concept of 'metaphorical entailments'.

¹² Example from:

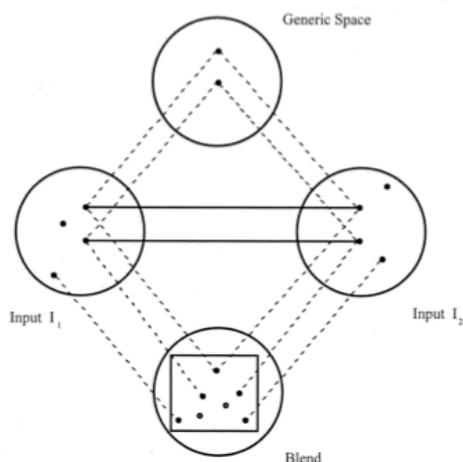
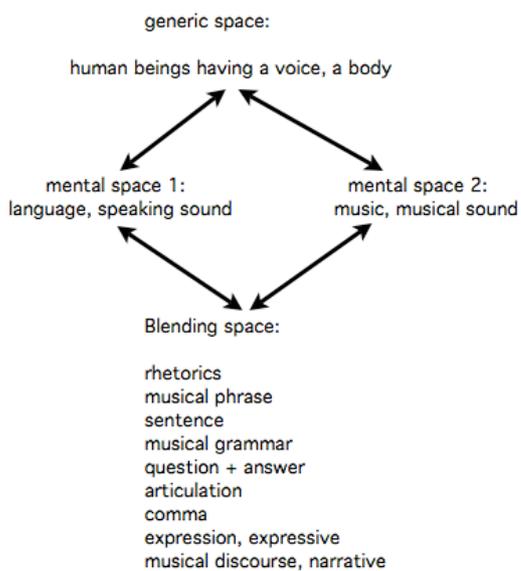


FIGURE 3.6 THE BASIC DIAGRAM

While this static way of illustrating aspects of conceptual integration is convenient for us, such a diagram is really just a snapshot of an imaginative and complicated process that can involve deactivating previous connections, reframing previous spaces, and other actions. We think of the lines in this diagram (lines that represent conceptual projections and mappings) as corresponding to neural coactivations and bindings. Here, then, are the essential aspects of blending, presented in a sequence not meant to reflect actual stages of the process:

If we use this model to show how language did influence the way we understand music the way we composed music, it could look like this:

Example 1: The mapping of language into music translated to the model of blending:



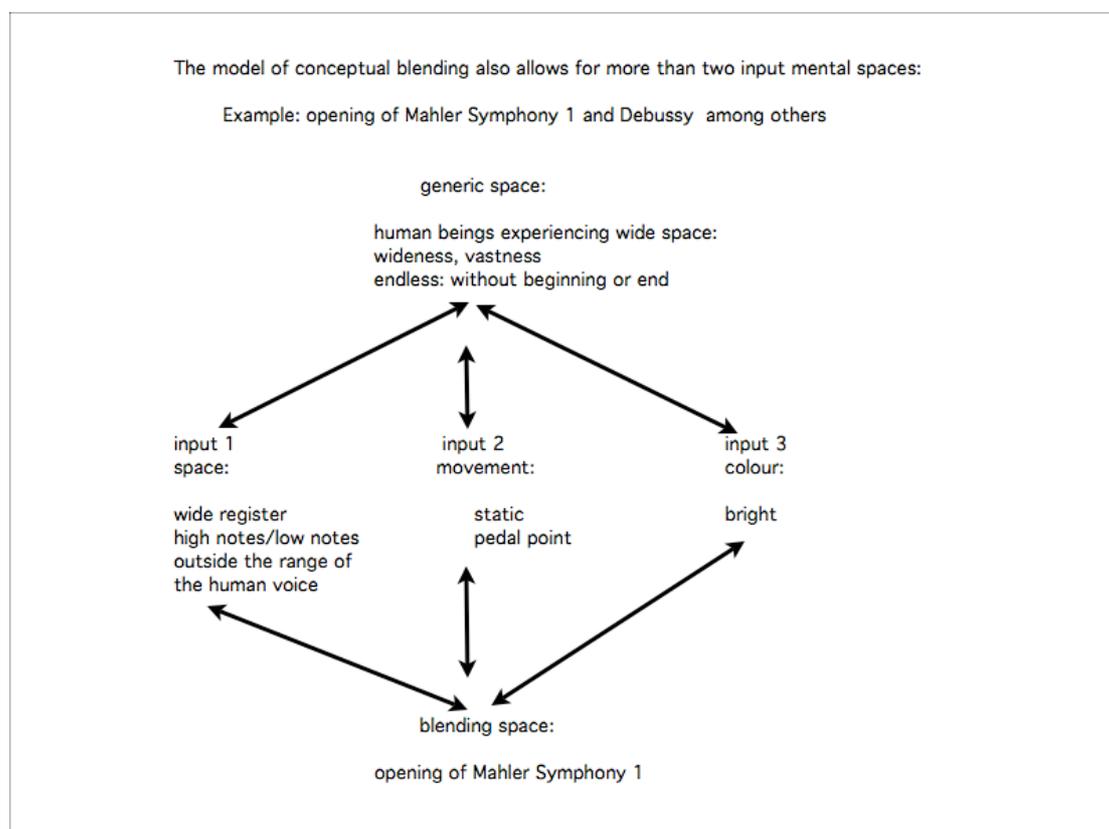
Important is the way we can extend the number of 'mental spaces' that interact to create a blend' or to create new, and sometimes unexpected meaning.

(The experience of 'space' in the opening of Mahler's first symphony)

Let us take the primary or basic metaphor of 'space':

As human beings we experience space and we learn to orientate ourselves in space from the moment we are born. We learn that we have a front and a back, we lean what is up and down, etc. When we experience wide space in nature it is often combined with a feeling of infinity and contemplation, we are centered within an endless space. So the sensation of space is combined with a lack of motion, a feeling of stasis: "a state in which something remains the same, and does not change or develop".¹³ And because we are in the middle of the picture, the way the composer fills in the middle register sounds as if life enters on stage. And often, when we experience space in nature it is combined with the sensation of light. In this way three types of basic-level experiences - space, motion and light - lead to a musical Topic, that we find in the beginning of Mahler's first symphony and in many other examples:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. <i>Gigues, Debussy</i> | 2. <i>La Mer, deel 1 beginning</i> |
| 3. <i>Delius</i> | 4. <i>Wagner, Overture Rheingold</i> |
| 5. <i>Jan Boerman,</i> | 6. <i>Cathédrale, Debussy</i> |
| 7. <i>Mahler I</i> | 8. <i>Les Parfums de la Nuit, Images, Debussy</i> |
| 9. <i>Rondes de Printemps, Images, Debussy</i> | |



¹³ Collins Cobuild, Advanced English Dictionary, 2006

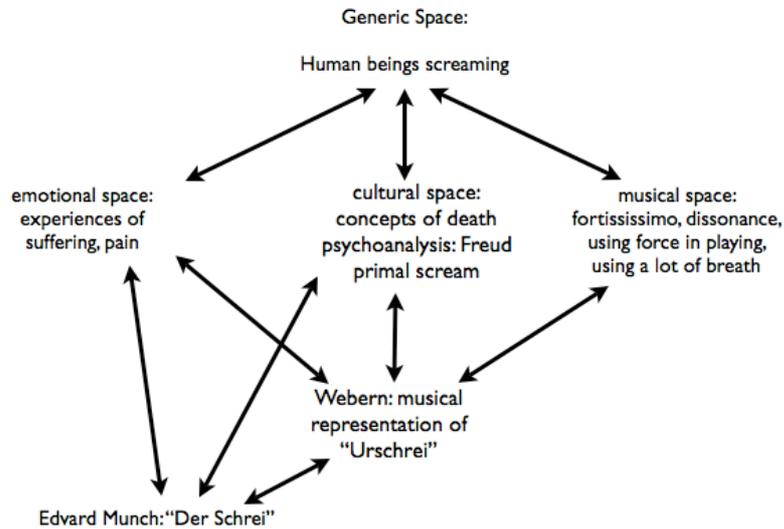
I will show now another simple and short musical topic, a musical gesture which is found in the music of the Second Viennese School: Schönberg, Berg and Webern. And this Topic is found in their music during the very short period of free atonality, of free expressionism that lasted only from about 1908 to 1918. In this period Schönberg and his pupils Berg and Webern were experimenting with free forms in which they wanted to express themselves without any limitations of traditional forms. They “invented” atonality and free forms at the same time when painters like Wassily Kandinsky or Mondriaan were moving towards abstract painting to express their ‘inner life’ without the limitations of the representation of reality. Schönberg and Kandinsky have been exchanging letters for many years and the first letters they wrote each other can be read as the ‘credo’ of expressionism. Schönberg answers Kandinsky’s first letter on January 24th 1911 as follows:

“Many thanks for the pictures. The portfolio really pleased me. I understand it entirely and I am convinced that we recognise each other in this. And at the most essential level. That which you call illogical and what I call the elimination of the conscious Will in art. Every design which aspires to traditional effects is not free of conscious treatment. But art belongs to the level of the **unconscious!** One must express **oneself**. Express oneself **directly!** Not one’s own taste, nor one’s own upbringing, one’s own skills or insights. Not all of these nurtured traits but **the innate** traits which arise from the **“instinctual drives”** (Freud, Nietzsche?)

As a result of this esthetics of ‘instinctual drives’ Schönberg and Webern created there so-called ‘aphoristic’ pieces, based on a series of short musical gestures. ‘Gesture’ is once again a metaphor to describe the very direct impact of the short motives. One of those gestures I would like to describe as a “Scream”. And I try to describe the meaning of this musical topic as a blend of several mental spaces that are linked together because of there general background in the experience of human beings screaming. First we connect screaming to pain and suffering as an emotional reason to scream. Next we have an enormous lot of cultural concepts linked to screaming: concepts of death, more recently ideas about the primal scream in psychoanalysis, thinking of Freud. And thinking of Freud we know that he lived in Vienna at the same time when Schönberg and Webern were composing there expressionistic compositions. And the experience of screaming can be translated literally into music by using force and dissonance, and by using a lot of breath in playing. The interesting thing is that an expressionistic painter like Edvard Munch linked the emotional experience of screaming to psychoanalytical interpretations of fear and death when he created his famous painting: “Der Schrei” and today I can link the ‘scream’ of Munch to Webern’s musical outbursts: In this way a complex network of concepts and experiences leads to my hermeneutic interpretation of this short musical gesture in Webern’s and Schönberg’s music. And of course we also know the paintings of Schönberg himself, the so-called ‘Visions’. Paintings that are not so much representing a scream but they certainly represent existential fear and of course we know today that the beginning of the First World War of 1914 was about to start. 35’

Expressionism: The musical Topic “Urschrei”

Conceptual Integration Network leading to the blend ‘Urschrei’



Now we can discuss if the way I hear this music is right or not but I will argue that this discussion has no importance and is a waste of time. What is important is that ***I can hear the music as if it represents a scream*** and I can use that image to stimulate my imagination. And as a conductor I can stimulate my musicians to play this passage ***as if it could be a scream*** with all the connotations that we just found.

This means that we are dealing with the question if my imagination is totally private and if there is any truth in my interpretation. But before I will go into this I will present you one more musical example from the late Beethoven.

Beethoven, slow movement Hammerklavier Sonate, op. 106

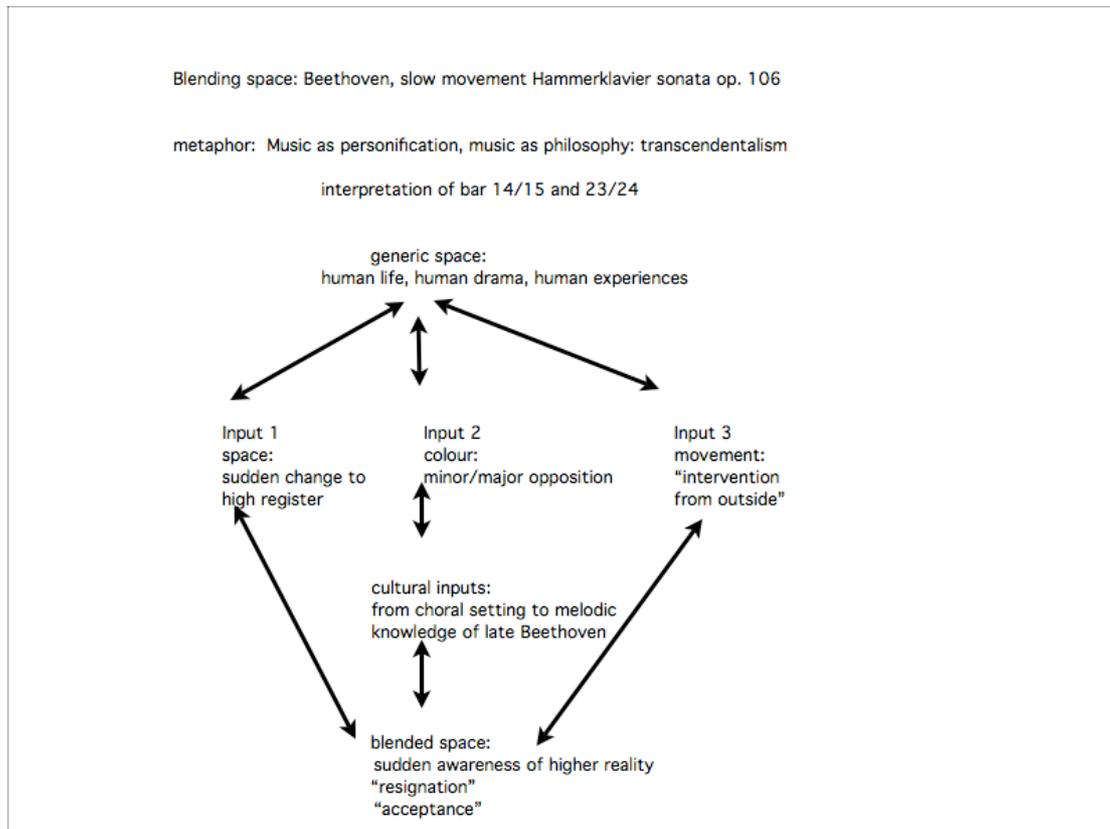
The Hammerklavier Sonate is one of the latest sonatas by Beethoven. We all know that he was already deaf and his music became more and more “spiritual”. (This is a metaphor that I will not comment on for this moment) The knowledge we have of the late Beethoven will influence the way we hear the music.

This slow movement is an extraordinary piece of music and the key itself is already extraordinary: f-sharp minor after a first movement in B-flat major! We would probably expect g-minor but not f-sharp minor! The music starts like a choral setting or a hymn and Beethoven added the first bar later. The atmosphere could be described as a solemn sadness? A special moment is created by the way Beethoven repeats the diminished 7th chord three times in bar 5 and 6, as if there is a standstill on this expressive chord.¹⁴ And several times the downbeat is characterised by an expressive chord like a dominant-ninth chord on bar 10 and 12.

What happens in bar 14 sounds like a surprise: We are suddenly in G-major and everything is changed: The register is very high opposed to the middle register of the

¹⁴ The analysis is based on Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*, Indiana Un. Press, 1994, pg. 11

'hymn', it is more a melody than a choral setting. Harmonically it is a 6/4 position of G-major and a melody that recalls the Topic of the "Pastoral" with its typical rhythm in the six-eight metre. In bar 23 it happens once more and leads to the dramatic silence of bar 28, "suspensio".



So in bar 14 we have a sudden change of space, of register, we have a sudden change of colour, the G-major, and we have a change of texture: It is as if the composer does a sudden intervention in the music which cannot be explained by purely musical or formal reasons. So how can we interpret this change to G-major? Robert Hatten – from whom this analysis is derived - needs four pages for this passage alone and seventeen pages for the whole movement and he explains the opposition of the sudden G-major after the f-sharp minor as a sudden insight, a sudden awareness of transcendental reality, "a vision of grace in the midst of tragic grief"¹⁵

Again the question may come up if this a totally subjective interpretation, if there is any truth in it?

This is a philosophical question that I cannot deal with extensively but I believe that we should pose the question differently: Does the interpretation **fit** or not? Is my interpretation effective or not? This is the pragmatic view on truth which is supported by cognitive linguistics: Even in the way everyday language functions the meaning of what we say is much more dependent on the context of the situation than we often think. Understanding and interpretation always makes part of the communication.

Or to cite Lakoff and Johnson 1980:

" Since the truth of a statement depends on whether the categories employed in the

¹⁵ Robert Hatten, op.cit., pg 16

statement **fit**, the truth of a statement will always be relative to the way the category is understood for our purposes in a given context.”¹⁶

They define “The Nature of the Experientalist Account of Truth”:

“ We understand a statement as being true in a given situation when our understanding of the statement **fits** our understanding of the situation closely enough for our purposes”¹⁷ This is called pragmatism.

So an interpretation is not so much true or untrue but more or less **fitting!** More or less effective. And we should discuss together if an interpretation fits or not, so as to create intersubjectivity in our community, agreement between players of a string-quartet, between you and your teacher etc.etc.

Now we are back at the beginning of our lecture: Metaphor is not a suspect way of mixing up things but an act of **imagination** to interpret what we see , hear, experience, and it plays a major role in our understanding.

And imagination is what we need as musicians to create fascinating performances or to create fascinating new works.

Thank you.

Jurrien Sligter
8/3/2009

¹⁶ G.Lakoff and M.Johnson, op.cit., 1980, pg 164

¹⁷ G.Lakoff and M.Johnson, op.cit., 1980, pg 179