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## Musical Meaning and String Quartets

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### Mendelssohn Op. 44 No. 1

Felix Mendelssohn's mature chamber music has met with a puzzling variety of responses from critics and scholars. On the one hand, these compositions, written between 1837 and 1844, "rank not only among the finest works of the composer, but among those achievements of his that were of lasting importance of the entire century" (Schmidt-Beste, 2004, p. 138). Indeed, the three string quartets that comprise Mendelssohn's Op. 44 were enthusiastically received by both critics and audiences in the composer's lifetime.

On the other hand, these same quartets have not fared as well in later analyses (Schmidt-Beste, 2004). Mendelssohn biographer Eric Werner argued that they "as a whole, do not reach the heights of originality and inspiration of their forerunners Op. 12 and 13" (p. 358), which were written a decade earlier (Werner, 1963).

One reason for Werner's appraisal of Mendelssohn's quartets was their relationship to the towering legacy of Beethoven's chamber music. Mendelssohn was strongly influenced by Beethoven, and his early compositions were framed in the classical forms that Beethoven perfected. However, as Mendelssohn matured, he invented new approaches to instrumental music. In 1835, Mendelssohn's sister Fanny wrote to him that "we were young precisely in the time of Beethoven's last years, and it was only to be expected that we completely assimilated his manner, as it is so moving and impressive. But you have lived through it and written yourself through it" (Schmidt-Beste, 2004, p. 141). Schmidt-Beste argues that Mendelssohn "attained maturity precisely by having transcended Beethoven and having created something of his own".

What did Mendelssohn create of his own? Mendelssohn's style disguises his musical innovations, which steered "between the ideals of classicism and romanticism [and] avoided the exaggerations of both" (Young, 1949, p. 21). Ralph Hill observed that Mendelssohn bridges two ideals of mu-

sic: the older classical ideal of music for music's sake, and the newer romantic ideal of music as a means of expressing strong emotions (Mendelssohn, 1951). In short, Mendelssohn was a Romantic Classicist (Einstein, 1947).

This romantic classicism is evident in Mendelssohn's string quartets. He adopts the classical goal of communicating pure music to his audience -- music for music's sake. That is, Mendelssohn does not endorse the romantic aim of using music to express "strong emotions and literary and pictorial ideas as characterized by the music of Berlioz, Schumann, and Liszt" (Hill, in Mendelssohn, 1951, p. 10).

One reason for this was his view of the relationship between musical and literary communication. In an 1841 letter to Marc-André Souchay, Mendelssohn famously wrote: "Words seem to me so ambiguous, so vague, so unintelligible when compared with genuine music, which fills the soul with a thousand things better than words. What any music I love expresses to me is not too *indefinite* to be put into words, but on the contrary, too *definite*" (Young, 1949). Mendelssohn intended his music to have clarity, "in the sense that the ideal listener immediately understood the 'meaning' of his music without requiring verbal explanations" (Schmidt-Beste, 2004, p. 144).

Achieving such clarity in his mature string quartets, however, led Mendelssohn to move away from classical traditions (Schmidt-Beste, 2004). Beethoven's chamber music provided prototypical examples of sonata form, founded on the dramatic contrast between a powerful, aggressive theme and a relaxed, song-like foil (Copland, 1939). Mendelssohn replaced this contrast with an emphasis on thematic unity because he saw the quartet as a "conversation of four reasonable persons". He departs from Beethoven by using the first violin at the beginning of each quartet in Op. 44 to carry the theme, while the other strings accompany in tremolo, producing a melody-plus-accompaniment texture that is almost orchestral in nature (Schmidt-Beste, 2004).

This makes the theme directly apparent to his audience, consistent with his belief that “the music of the song alone can awaken the same ideas and the same feelings in one mind as another” (Hill, in Mendelssohn, 1951, p. 10).

Departing from classicism in this manner provided romantic elements to Mendelssohn’s music. Despite his lack of sympathy with the romantic program, his music had “a gossamer lightness of touch which could conjure up a fairy atmosphere that no other composer has ever equaled” (Hill, in Mendelssohn, 1951, pp. 11-12). Such qualities, though, contributed to numerous critiques of Mendelssohn’s compositions, and a fading of his music’s importance which only began to reverse in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is only very recently that scholars have noted that it is too simple to critique music like Mendelssohn’s string quartets “because they do not maintain the Beethovenian tradition of chamber music” (Schmidt-Beste, 2004, p. 141).

Mendelssohn’s goal of clear communication with his audience provides a bridge between classical music and the so-called classical approach in cognitive science, which is the interdisciplinary study of thought. Classical cognitive science is founded on the Cartesian separation between an internal mind and an external world – in short, disembodied thought. Cognition is construed as a sense-think-act cycle: the world provides information to the mind, which manipulates it by following logical rules, eventually deciding upon some future action.

The sense-think-act cycle accords with another foundational assumption, called the *conduit metaphor* (Reddy, 1979). According to the conduit metaphor, language provides containers (e.g., sentences, words) that are packed with meanings and delivered to receivers, who unpack them to receive the intended message.

As late as 1790, the dominant philosophical view of music was that it was incapable of conveying ideas, but by the time that E.T.A Hoffman reviewed Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony in 1810, this view was rejected (Bonds, 2006). One of the central questions

in the modern philosophy of music is not *whether* music can communicate, but *how* (Kivy, 1991; Meyer, 1956; Robinson, 1994, 1997; Sparshoort, 1994; Walton, 1994). Modern composers certainly believe that music can express ideas. Aaron Copland (1939, p. 12) notes that “my own belief is that all music has an expressive power, some more and some less, but that all music has a certain meaning behind the notes and that that meaning behind the notes constitutes, after all, what the piece is saying, what the piece is about.”

We have seen that Mendelssohn also shared this belief, for he viewed his music as a medium – a conduit – through which he could communicate his ideas and feelings to his listeners in a manner that he felt was impossible to do with words. Mendelssohn’s development as a composer might be described as his exploring various techniques for mediating, and for improving, his musical communication.

How do composers convey intended meanings with their music? One answer is by using the conventions of particular musical forms. Such forms provide a structure that generates expectations, expectations that are often presumed to be shared by the audience. For example, Copland’s (1939) book on music listening – which places such a strong emphasis on musical form -- is designed to educate the audience so that it can better understand his compositions, as well as those of others.

If this view of musical communication is true, then it would seem that the conduit metaphor also applies to classical music, making it a “hot medium” in the sense of Marshall McLuhan (McLuhan, 1994). That is, the composer uses musical form to place some intended meaning into a score, the performers bring the score to life as instructed by the score, and the audience unpacks the delivered music to get the composer’s message.

As we listen to a work like Mendelssohn’s String Quartet Op. 44 No. 1, we might ask ourselves whether we are receiving the message that he intended. Are we following the sense-think-act cycle by mentally unpacking the musical parcels that

make up this work? If so, then what elements are we paying attention to? Do we understand Mendelssohn, and differentiate his messages from those of Beethoven or Brahms, in virtue of our detecting the nuances of his musical structure? Do we receive music for music's sake? Do we instead understand the music in literary or pictorial terms? Or is there a more direct, and more embodied, manner in which we can appreciate and understand this composition?

### **Brahms Op. 51 No. 1**

One perspective that characterizes analyses of Brahms's chamber music – as well as analyses of 19<sup>th</sup> century music in general – is that this music is timeless (Krummacker, 1994). This perspective is plausible if cognitive science's conduit metaphor applies to classical music. Musical meaning would be timeless in the sense that it is stored in a composition's structure, awaiting a future performance to be transported to a new audience.

While his music is novel and individualistic, Brahms also took great pains to adhere to the structural conventions of his time. Evidence suggests that his Op. 51 No. 1 was twenty years in the making, and was rewritten at least once during this long genesis (Krummacker, 1994). Brahms himself wrote of this process: "If I want to retain the same idea, then it should be clearly recognized in each transformation, augmentation, inversion. The other way would be a trivial game and always a sign of the most impoverished invention" (Krummacker, 1994, p. 32).

Brahms's music is also timeless because other chamber music written around the same time is less well known. "The quartets of Brahms were the only survivors from more than half a century of the genre's history" (Krummacker, 1994, p. 24). Thus the historical context surrounding Brahms's string quartets has largely vanished. Because of this, modern theorists analyze them in the context of current musical ideas. "It has become customary to view Brahms's works from our own contemporary perspective" (p. 27).

That modern perspectives can be applied to 19<sup>th</sup> century music suggests that we should consider other, less timeless, approaches to musical meaning. Many modern listeners may be unaware of the 19<sup>th</sup> century structural conventions that Brahms wrote into his music. Modern listeners may approach (and appreciate) Brahms's music in ways that he never intended or imagined. Consider an analysis which recently appeared on Twitter: "listening to brahms for the second time, better now, bit beethoven like mixed with church mozart. save it for the kids they loving it".

What does this imply about musical meaning? Imagine that a 21<sup>st</sup> century music theorist finds modern structures, modern techniques, and modern meanings in their analysis of a Brahms string quartet. Were such modern meanings intended by Brahms the prophet (Krummacker, 1994)? Or instead do these meanings arise from the interaction between a Brahms composition and the active involvement of a modern theorist or modern performer or modern listener? If the latter is the case, then the conduit metaphor is not apt. The meaning of music may not exist solely in its "timeless" structure, but may also crucially depend upon contributions of an active audience. From the perspective of McLuhan, this would make classical music cool, not hot.

The coolness of art music is inconsistent with the conduit metaphor of classical cognitive science. However, it is predicted by alternative theories of perception. Embodied cognitive science views perception and thought as emerging from the rich mutual relationship between an agent and its world (Clark, 1997, 2008). This relationship depends crucially on the physical form – the embodiment – of the agent. The way in which we experience the world depends upon how we can act upon it, how we can move within it – and how it reacts to us (Gibson, 1966, 1979). Why build an internal model of the world, when the real world is out there ready to be directly acted upon (Brooks, 1999)?

It is only recently that the embodied approach has begun to be applied to the perception of music. What kind of meaning do embodied cognitive scientists believe can

emerge from the interactions between a musical composition and an active, embodied listener?

One interesting answer to this question relates music to motion (Clarke, 2005). Some researchers believe that music's meanings come from the possible actions – movements – that it suggests to listeners. You might think that if you are using headphones to listen to recorded music, eyes closed, that such suggestions are quite limited. However, there is evidence that music stimulates areas of the brain responsible for balance, and can thus generate powerful sensations of self-motion even under these restricted listening conditions.

There are far more opportunities for embodied musical meaning when we abandon our headphones and take in a live performance. First, we can become more active in our perception by directing our attention or gaze from one performer or one instrument to another (Noë, 2004). This is obviously one way that musical meaning can be affected independently of the composer's score! Second, the physical actions of the performers are themselves powerful sources of information. These movements can stimulate the mirror neurons in the brain, which become active when we perform an action – or see the same action being performed by someone else. Perhaps our own physical experience with musical instruments might affect our perception of music by altering how our mirror neurons respond to musical actions.

The embodied cognitive science of music is an emerging field. As we listen to the performance of Brahms's Op. 51 No. 1, we might reflect on its implications. How is our musical experience altered when we compare watching a live performance to listening to recorded music? Is our impression of a piece due solely to our disembodied musical knowledge, or is it affected by our experience with playing an instrument, or reading a particular score? Are we passive listeners receiving timeless meaning through a musical conduit? Or does musical meaning instead crucially depend on our active engagement with a piece?

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