

How Metaphors Make Music More Relatable

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Being a teacher in both language and music, the question of how one can make use of the structured system of linguistic signs to describe the abstract system of sound, that is music, has always fascinated me. Both linguistic and musical sounds are physical phenomena, but the way in which we understand these phenomena is through abstract and symbolic thought. In this short article, I want to give some examples of this, and especially how our skill to think metaphorically is a key aspect in how language and music can find common grounds that increase our understanding of them.

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word from one domain is used to describe something from another domain. Contrary to a somewhat popular belief that the metaphor is used almost only in poetic speech, metaphors are in use all the time, even in our ordinary language use. Think of the common phrase “that person has really climbed the corporate ladder”. We know instantly that the phrase denotes a person that has got a raise and a better position within the company, and that there are no actual ladders involved. So, in this very typical phrase, we use a metaphor without even thinking about it. The metaphor works because we can understand the conceptual link between climbing up on a ladder and getting a better position at a company, and also because upward movement usually is connected to progress. We know that the question “Moving up in the world?” refers to some positive change in a person’s life.

When talking about music, which is an abstract phenomenon, do we use metaphors? Yes, of course, and in fact, that is almost the only way we have available to us when describing how something sounds, if we’re not using scientific language (such as *Hz* and *dB*). For example, we say that “the melody goes up/down”, even though the sound waves themselves move in the same direction whatever the pitch is, albeit in shorter or longer intervals. Could this be linked to the rumblings of an earthquake coming from down below, and the high-pitched melodies of birds usually being situated above us? That could very well be, but some cultures refer to pitches with adjectives such as *wide* and *narrow*, *dark* and *bright*, or *light* and *heavy*, so the *up/down* metaphor is not universal, despite being popular.

When we talk about rhythm, we can experience them as *jagged* or *smooth*, and here we transfer the source domain, a jagged or smooth surface, to the target domain, how we perceive the music. And it works! Most people instantly have some kind of conception of how a jagged

rhythm sounds, with irregularities, uneven accents, quick movements with sudden shifts and so on, while a smooth one is more regular, with even accents and steady movements. When we say that the music has good *flow*, we use a word describing how water moves in a stream, and when used in music, it describes a feeling of easy and natural progression and movement. Two dissonant sounds, however, are often described as *clashing* against each other, suggesting some kind of collision, or we can say that there is a *tension* between the sounds, referring to the unstable nature of the interval. Sounds can *push* away from a *resolution*, or *pull* towards it. There is a physical reality here that can be measured, that is, that consonant sounds share more overtones than dissonant ones, but it seems the description of our experience of these sounds still relies on the metaphor. That a sound seems to pull another sound to it has its source domain in something concrete, the actual act something being pulling in the physical world, that we then transfer to the target domain, the abstract world of sounds.

When we discuss larger musical structures, we also tend to use larger source domains. For example, we use the metaphor *wall of sound* for something so rich in timbre (usually by using many instruments and/or lots of effects like delay, feedback, dense reverbs and so on) that it's hard for new instruments to be heard through this texture. Here, we conceptually link how a wall in the physical world is hard to penetrate, to our perception of a certain musical passage as being thick and saturated. The opposite could be called *spacious*, i.e. something that leaves space for other instruments to enter. Interestingly, my experience is that most people understand these metaphors, even without having any formal training in music, or in writing about music.

If we try to talk about the whole musical work, we tend to use the largest structures available in the physical world. For example, we have a "musical landscape", where the music presumably evokes the feeling of having a certain atmosphere. For example, more dampened sounds can sound *hazy* and evoke feelings of distance and fog, while *crisp* sounds may resemble the rustling of leaves or drops of rain. The somewhat abused phrase "a musical rollercoaster ride" also manages to convey something about the character of the music, due to the fact that we can conceptually transfer the abrupt changes in speed, as well as the ups and downs, and twists and turns of a rollercoaster to similar movements within the music. No-one would get the idea to describe Erik Satie's *Gymnopédies* with this phrase, but perhaps his quirky ballet, *Parade*.

One interesting detail here is that when composers themselves want to paint a certain picture with their musical works, it is not always certain that this picture translates well into music. For example, when Bernie Crause played to a group of seventh graders a piece they hadn't heard before, Debussy's *La Mer*, and had them describe it, no-one actually mentioned the ocean, or even water, and it is doubtful that someone listening to Vivaldi's *Summer* for the first time, without knowing the title, would actually think of summer. This tells us that while language can be used to describe music, the metaphors can only reach a certain level of understanding. Physical shapes, such as hills and mountains, can be mapped onto rising and falling melodies, but it is near impossible to write a piece of instrumental music that transfers the image of, say, the city London. London can work as inspiration for the composer, but instrumental music alone cannot convey this type of specific meaning (which is why some composer

then resort to adding field recordings of specific places and sounds).

Finally, then, we can see how our perception and understanding of the physical world both give us tools to use in language, when we map concrete events to abstract speech, and how this in turn influences how we “see” music conceptually, i.e. how we perceive it and are able to talk about it. By doing this, we’re also making the music more tangible and relatable, and albeit there are limitations as to how precise such a description can be, it is well worth spending time talking and writing about music in this way, and also discussing whether other listeners perceive the music in the same way. Also, well articulated descriptions of the music can help increase the understanding between disciplines, such as when a movie director wants a certain type of music from the composer for a scene, or when we describe music for other occasions, such as in music reviews or in program notes for concerts, to name two things.