

Tonality Rulz: A Review of Wear's Sonic Experimentalism

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The artist presents a work that he claims is not 'musical.' In his footnote he writes: "I prefer sonic, over musical, to acknowledge that as an experimental artist, I employ very few of the aesthetic structures that are usually associated with music," a statement that begs the question, "What is music?"

This 22-minute piece that explores sounds generated on an electronic device (*musique électronique*) incorporating environmental sounds (*musique concrète*) lacks, as the artist insists, handrails to guide our attention as we listen. There are, however, elements within the work which may give sense to our engagement.

If music is the art of giving order to sound, then I listen to this work *as* music. To be sure, it is difficult writing about music ('sonics,' to use the artist's term) without falling into the trap of assigning emotions, for our ears are the turnstiles which prompt affect. We listen, feel, listen, feel, in a constant checking and rechecking our responses in relation to sounds. However, philosopher Suzanne Langer (1942/1960) noted that music has no emotional meaning; rather, music is a symbolic representation of life. She wrote:

If music has any significance, it is semantic, not symptomatic. Its 'meaning' is evidently not that of a stimulus to evoke emotions, nor that of a signal to announce them; if it has an emotional content, it 'has' it in the same sense that language 'has' its conceptual content – symbolically. (p. 218)

Therefore, as we listen to this sonic experiment, we might attend to the symbolic within it. For example, I note that it begins and ends with a pulsing figure that replicates a beating heart. This bracketing grounds the work in the body, the site of aesthetic experience. What follows is an examination of tones, timbres and textures which build in intensity.

Returning to Langer may be instructive. She argues that "musical structures logically resemble certain dynamic patterns of human experience" (p. 226) and as justification invokes Gestalt psychologist and musician Wolfgang Köhler who described the connections between thinking and music, in terms of lived experiences. She wrote:

'Quite generally, the inner processes, whether emotional or intellectual, show types of development which may be given names, usually applied to musical events, such as: *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, *accelerando* and *ritardando*.' He [Köhler] carries these convenient terms over into the description of overt behavior, the reflection of inner life in physical attitudes and gestures. 'As these qualities occur in the world of acoustical experiences, they are found in the visual world too; and so they can express *similar* dynamical traits of inner life in directly observable activity...To the increasing inner tempo and

dynamical level there corresponds a *crescendo* and *accelerando* in visible movement. Of course, the same inner development may express itself acoustically, as in the *accelerando* and *reforzando* of speech...Hesitation and lack of inner determination become visible...as *ritardando* of visible or audible behavior.' (Köhler in Langer, 1942/1960, p. 226)

The sonic experiment is, therefore, a symbolic representation of our lives. As I listened, I became intrigued by the intervals implied in the sounds. Music is an abstraction of harmonics and overtones working in melodic sequence and harmonic intervals: horizontal and vertical arrangements occurring over time. Although the edgy qualities of the sounds attracted my initial attention, the intervals between sounds and the clusters they created captured my imagination.

For my ears, this sonic experiment is, indeed, music. It invokes the harmonic series and to that extent, points towards tonality. From this acoustic it is a conventional work which overlays the simplicity of Philip Glass, with an array of tones, that center, more or less to my ears, around about B \square . A tonal center, intervals and clusters that build crescendo towards a climax and decrescendos to a heartbeat, comprise the work's narrative arc. Now that I have, to my satisfaction, made some sense of the work, my ponderings underscore the artist's ruminations that "apprehending and organizing and inhabiting is, for me, and in my practice, a necessarily pedagogical pursuit." I wonder, though, at *how* the connections are made among elements: the emancipatory project, pedagogical development, and transformation.

I understand and agree with the artist's insistence that we are exclusive in our attention and only listen. Köhler might respond and insist that our other senses are recruited into our processing. Therefore, in this absence of synaesthetic media (a picture, movie, or poem, for example), how is this work demonstrable of "the passage from chaotic material to ordered form through sculptural movement" and what are the implications for my educational practice? And further, in the absence of available technologies to carry out sonic experiments myself, how will I use this work?

The artist has offered a provocation. Now is our turn to engage with sounds and let them inspire us afresh.

Reference

Langer, S. K. 1942/1960. *Philosophy in a new key: A study in the symbolism of reason, rite, and art*. Harvard University Press.