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A Critique of Susanne Langer's View of Musical Temporality

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ABSTRACT. Susanne Langer's idea of the primary apparition of music involves a dichotomy between two kinds of temporality: "felt time" and "clock time." For Langer, musical time is exclusively felt time, and in this sense, music is "time made audible." However, Langer also postulates what we would call 'a strong suspension thesis': the swallowing up of clock time in the illusion of felt time. In this paper we take issue with the 'strong suspension thesis' and its implications and ramifications regarding not only musical meaning, but also the purported metaphysics of music construed as essentially inhering in felt time. We argue that this thesis is overstated and misdirecting insofar as it purports to describe what we experience when we hear music with understanding. We discuss a selection of examples of repetitive formations, from mediaeval music to contemporary music, which show that persistent, motion-inhibiting repetition undermines the listener's ability to identify order and coherence due to a relative inability to anticipate the next occurrence of a differentiating musical event. We argue that Langer's one-sided view of musical temporality, which patently relies on the

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conceptual framework of memory time and the specious present, exemplifies what we propose to call 'the searchlight model of musical understanding,' wherein the constant span of illumination of the searchlight (representing the span of the specious present) moves continuously parallel to, and along, its postulated target, i.e., the music heard, as it 'illuminates' it. We argue that, in the last analysis, memory time conceptually presupposes the publicly identifiable means of chronometric length. One maintains the 'strong suspension thesis' on pain of conceptual confusion.

Susanne Langer's philosophy of art retains an enduring appeal as a thoroughly systematic, beautifully laid out, overarching theory of the arts. In particular with regard to music, her theorizing still stands out in its bold, quintessentially Romantic yet clear-headed insistence on relating what is meaningful in music to organic vitality.

In this paper, we would like to show our indebtedness to Langer's ideas by critically addressing her view of musical temporality, a profound topic that has attracted surprisingly little scholarly attention over the last sixty-five years. Profound ideas may show their mettle by giving rise to deep problems, which in turn may become conducive to new and fruitful lines of investigation. We believe that Langer's view of musical temporality is a fine example of this.

Let us begin by offering a precis of Langer's view. In her books *Form and Feeling* (Langer 1953) and *Problems of Art* (Langer 1957), Langer put forward the idea that the realm of music is characterized by the appearance of movement. It is what Langer calls the "primary apparition" of music, which is created whenever tonal materials beget a musical impression. Such

motion—which, Langer maintains, is best captured in Eduard Hanslick's phrase "sounding forms in motion"—is the essence of music. It is the answer to the philosophical question "what is music?" This answer hinges upon a sharp distinction between what Langer calls the *ingredients* or *materials* of music, and the *elements* of music. Musical materials are "sounds of a certain pitch, loudness, overtone mixture, and metronomic length" (Langer 1957, p. 39). Musical elements are "figures, motions, and what we call 'colors,' 'spaces,' tensions and resolutions, resting tones, emptiness, beginnings and ends" (ibid.).

Regarding musical temporality, this sharp distinction between materials and elements entails a sharp distinction between two kinds of temporality: correspondingly, "clock time" and "felt time." For Langer, clock time is a matter of chronometric length, a simple one-dimensional trickle of successive moments. It is ordinary, practical, "commonsense," and in its systematically refined form, it is also scientific. Clock time is public in the sense that "it is the only adequate scheme we know of for synchronizing practical affairs, dating past events, and constructing some perspective of future ones" (Langer 1953, p. 111). It relies on supplementing one sort of experience by another. Hence, it is composite and heterogeneous, and may also seem fragmentary.

On the other hand, felt time is thoroughly perspectival: it is lived time or experiential time, subject-centered, memory-centered, and organic: a realm of pure duration, of the specious present. It is entirely perceptible through the agency of a single sense—hearing—hence it inheres in a unified virtual space. It has a sort of voluminousness and complexity akin to the

passage of vital functions and lived events.

Langer goes so far as to maintain that felt time “is incommensurable with the progress of common affairs” (Langer 1953, p. 109). And not only does she assert such a sharp distinction between these two kinds of temporality, she also maintains that felt time is ontologically prior to clock time. According to Langer, clock time is ultimately an abstraction from our experience of time (*ibid.*, p. 111), and we let it predominate for practical purposes in order to coordinate what is otherwise incoherent temporal data (*ibid.*, pp. 109-110).

The crux of Langer’s argument is what we propose to call “a strong suspension thesis”:

In artistic production, the composer’s materials must be completely swallowed up in the illusion they create, in which henceforth we find only illusory elements, but not—except through technical interest and workmanlike attention—the arrangement of materials. (Langer 1957, p. 39)

Regarding musical temporality, this means that clock time is suspended in musical experience, which, for Langer, is fundamentally the listener’s experience—“For listening is the primary musical activity,” she writes (Langer 1953, p. 148). She emphatically quotes Basil de Selincourt: “Music is one of the forms of duration; it suspends ordinary time, and offers itself as an ideal substitute and equivalent” (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 110). The essence of music inheres solely in the experiential realm of *elements*. According to

Langer, “music is time made audible” (Langer 1953, 110; Langer 1957, 38). In this paper, we take issue with Langer’s “strong suspension thesis” as pertaining to musical temporality, which we find overstated and misdirecting insofar as it purports to describe what we experience when we hear music with understanding. To anticipate, according to Langer’s theory of musical hearing, “what the auditor ought to hear [is] virtual movement, motion that exists only for the ear” (Langer 1957, p. 38). Thus, her ‘strong suspension thesis’ implies a strong restriction on musical understanding and musical meaning. Insofar as we can construe the meaning of music as whatever we understand when we understand the music, musical meaning is (according to Langer) patently ascribed to felt time. We beg to differ.

Yet before we turn to taking a closer look at the viability of Langer’s “strong suspension thesis,” we would like to make some critical comments on the theoretical and practical implications of Langer’s general distinction between “materials” and “elements” in music.

Langer’s dictum that “music is time made audible,” which epitomizes the veiling of materials by the apparition of elements, comes with two counterpart theories: a theory of musical creation, and a theory of musical performance. Langer’s theoretical rationale here is quite clear: to present a unified theory. And theory needs to be unified by aligning all aspects of musical activity with the primary musical activity: listening, that is, musical hearing. According to Langer, the first principle in musical hearing is the ability “to experience the primary illusion, to feel the consistent movement and recognize at once the commanding form which makes this piece an inviolable work” (Langer 1953, p. 147); “The musician listens to his own

idea before he plays, before he writes” (ibid., p. 148). The distinction between materials and elements presupposes this ideal alignment between the tasks, skills and purposes of the composer, the performer, and the listener. Langer requires that all aspects of musical activity should proceed from inner experience to outer manifestation. Yet precisely due to Langer’s need to unify her philosophical theory of music in such a way, her counterpart theories of musical creation and musical performance feature odd biases when viewed against the backdrop of actual musical practices as well as musicological concerns.

Let us briefly consider these odd biases. According to Langer’s theory of musical creation, “the first stage is the process of conception, that takes place within the composer’s mind [...], and issues in a more or less sudden recognition of the total form to be achieved” (Langer 1953, p. 121). “Once the essential musical form is found, a piece of music exists in embryo; it is implicit there, although its final, completely articulate character is not determined yet, because there are many possible ways of developing the composition. Yet in the whole subsequent invention and elaboration, the general Gestalt serves as a measure of right and wrong, too much and too little, strong and weak. One might call that original conception the *commanding form* of the work” (ibid., pp. 121-122).

Langer’s position is actually old wine in a new bottle. It is a pretty straightforward recasting of eighteenth-century theory of composition, as exemplified in the theoretical writings of Johann Georg Sulzer and Heinrich Koch (Baker and Christensen 2006). Langer’s “commanding form” is what these theorists called *Anlage*, the sketch or plan, which is the first of a

threefold process of artistic creation, including also “realization” and “elaboration.” The *Anlage* is the most crucial of these three stages. It is the first burst of inspiration, consisting of the essence of the work. It is a product of genius which contains all the essential ideas and defines the affection to be expressed. Through it the work becomes a coherent artistic expression.

However, it is important to observe that this venerable theory of composition is at odds with the facts concerning actual processes of composition. The most striking counterexample is none other than Ludwig van Beethoven. Beethoven's composing strategies involved detailed sketches, many of which have survived. Beethoven devoted considerable time to developing elaborate methods of sketching music in great detail. After the long stage of sketching, he did not rely heavily on the keyboard for composing, but instead preferred to complete his compositions by working out most of the details on paper in his sketches. He kept those sketches bound in several volumes. Beethoven scholars generally agree that Beethoven's process of composing involved distinct stages: “concept sketch” and “continuity draft,” and occasionally also “sketches of intermediate length” and “movement plans.”

His sketches for the *Eroica* provide crucial evidence that sheds some unexpected light on the evolution of this work:

1. Early sketches of the piece introduce a different opening as compared to the final score. The sketch suggests an opening on a dominant harmonic rather than the familiar opening of the piece that

appears on the tonic (Nottebohm 1880, p. 6).

2. The order of the musical ideas in the sketch does not correspond to the order in the final score; in some cases, ideas are distributed between movements, and in others, Beethoven insinuates ideas of a subsequent movement and then shifts back to the movement in progress.

3. Several musical ideas are shaped differently in the sketches as compared to the final version. In some cases, the sketch version is more concise, while in others, it is (against our expectations) more elaborated.

4. The finale of the *Eroica* relies on former materials that appeared in earlier compositions. The main theme of this movement, known as the famous *Basso del Thema*, previously appeared in *Creatures of Prometheus* (1801), *Ländler no. 7* (1802), and in *Variations op. 35* (1803).

Regarding Langer's position, the upshot is very simple: in Beethoven's actual composition process for the *Eroica*, one cannot speak of a "commanding form" in Langer's sense without begging the question. The organic final form of the symphony is a result of completely different compositional strategies than the one postulated by Langer uncritically, following classic models such as the ones introduced by Sulzer and Koch.

Langer's theory of musical performance only adds to the bias of her

theory of musical creation. It oddly, perhaps even incoherently, relies on the notion of inward (mental) hearing and its purported relation to actual (physical) hearing. According to Langer, “inward hearing is a work of the mind that begins with conceptions of form and ends with their complete presentation in imagined sound experience. [...] inward hearing usually stops short of just that determinateness of quality and duration which characterizes actual sensation” (Langer 1953, p. 137). “Performance is the completion of a musical work, a logical continuation of the composition, carrying the creation through from thought to physical expression. Obviously, then, the thought must be entirely grasped, if it is to be carried on. Composition and performance are not neatly separable at the stage marked by the finishing of the score; for both spring from the commanding form and are governed throughout by its demands and enticements” (ibid., p. 138).

Inward hearing is a pre-performance practice. It may indeed serve to highlight and explicate hierarchies of the different levels of structure within the piece. Thus, inward hearing may enhance the performer's ability to deliver a clearer articulation of both the formal and the tonal plans of the work. Still, inward hearing cannot be used to similarly enhance the sense of musical time in the piece. Quite to the contrary, the challenge in inward hearing is precisely to preserve a higher level of organization in order to avoid an uncontrollable flow of pitches and rhythmic patterns, which could result in a meaningless series of tones. Furthermore, in inward hearing it is always easier to keep in mind a constant pulsation akin to clock time. The quality of musical time will be absent in inward hearing because it requires

physical and acoustic ques, for example, the attack and decay of the instrument, which not only varies from one instrument to another, but also may vary from one concert hall to another. Such material ques cannot be predicted ahead of the actual playing. The absence of a sense of musical time poses a real problem for Langer's postulation of a seamless progression from the composer's commanding form to its actual execution in performance by means of the performer's ability to hear the form inwardly.

Our general critical point here is this: actual misalignments between the tasks, skills and purposes of the composer, the performer, and the listener serve to weaken the rhetoric which would impel one to uphold a sharp distinction between materials and elements. The "strong suspension thesis" only amplifies all that is inherently problematic about this distinction.

So let us now turn to a discussion of musical examples which show the limitations of Langer's "strong suspension thesis" in her view of musical temporality. The examples are concrete, yet they expose a lacuna in the way Langer describes the primary musical experience, that of the listener, and they impinge on what Langer takes to be the "primary apparition of music," its very essence.

Since early stages in the evolution of music, repetition has served as a device for extending a musical idea. Repetition may be exact or varied; however, its function varies in different contexts along the history of music. With the mediaeval chant, appearing in pre-tonal contexts, a repetitive reciting tone was used as a rhetorical device for elucidating the text. In the non-hierarchical environment of such modal music, the listener will not be

able to perceive the differentiation of musical events necessary for experiencing integral (musical) time, but rather will experience the persistent pulse of clock time.

Repetition in the common practice era relies on the wide range of devices available to the composer, who is relying on the solid force enabled by tonal organization. The “codification” of the tonal organization supports varied devices that contribute to the extension of the germinal musical ideas. However, in cases where excessive repetitions appear an interruption in the functional four-stage tonal circle occurs. We can find examples of this in several of the keyboard sonatas by Scarlatti. As a result, the listener experiences a certain ‘freeze’ in the flow of musical events, leading to a deficiency in the prediction of events and a corresponding experience of disproportion in the musical organization. In such cases, the listener will not be able to perceive a coherent organization. As excessive repeats dominate the sound stream, the metronomic pulse shines through the texture.

In twentieth-century music we find many ostinato patterns, repetitive cells and repetitive ‘sound blocks.’ Ostinato patterns are typical in neoclassical music or nationalistic music. An example is the “augurs” chord in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* or Bartok's *Mikrokosmos*. In such cases, the repetitive ostinato forms result in long moments of persistent ‘blocks’ on the same bass note. Oftentimes, these blocks are combined with an active rhythm that creates a strong sense of motion. Although motion is necessary for the differentiation of events, the lack of change in the bass line is regarded as ‘pseudo motion.’ In such cases, the listener will experience difficulties perceiving any differentiation between events. Moreover, in

many cases the repeated blocks actually appear without any breaks at all. Their lively rhythm encourages the listener to become aware of the persistent pulse, not of any illusory movement.

Other relevant examples appear in minimalist music, which is characterized by reduced musical content and the consistent use of repetitive patterns. *In C* by Terry Riley introduces fifty-three short musical phrases; each phrase may be repeated an arbitrary number of times. Each musician may choose which phrase to play, but the players are encouraged to start the phrases at different times. Although the melodic phrases are given, the performance instructions call for significant freedom for the performers. However, it is expected that one of the musicians will play the note C persistently with consistent eighth notes. This functions as the pulse. Due to the persistence of patterns, unsynchronized transitions from one event to the other, and the lack of harmonic motion, the listener will hark back to the persisting pulse.

Regarding Langer's insistence on the suspension of ordinary time in musical experience, the upshot for all such cases of repetition is that ordinary time—time involving the specification of time-references by means of publicly observable chronology—may become musically important in a way that Langer's theory cannot accommodate: elemental apparition gives way to material manifestation as we hear the music with understanding.

In the remainder of this paper, we would like to offer a broadly philosophical critical perspective on Langer's view of musical temporality. Langer's view belongs to a venerable tradition of thinking about music as an embodiment of time, which began with Augustine's discussion of time in

terms of chanting in Chapter XI of his *Confessions* (Augustine 1948). Philosophies of music, which are shaped and informed by Augustine's view of temporality, share common fundamental features:

1. The primacy of the conceptual framework of memory-time
2. Musical flow embodies the flow of time and the musical present contains time in some sense
3. The particularity of expression patently inheres in musical motion

It is easy to see how Langer's view of musical temporality fits this model. Langer postulated that felt time is ontologically prior to clock time (Langer 1953, p. 109). Her concept of "passage," the sense of transience, precisely captures not only the idea of musical flow but also the spatial idea of "volume" (ibid., p. 110). The essential connection between expression and musical motion is undoubtedly the hallmark of Langer's philosophy of music.

Augustine's conception of time was a subject of Ludwig Wittgenstein's criticism in his writings and lectures in the 1930s. Some of Wittgenstein's points undercut conceptions of music, which rely on the framework of memory-time (Guter, forthcoming). Wittgenstein aimed to show that what generates the Augustinian tendency to reify memory-time, to render it as a substance or in spatial terms, including the very idea of

measurement, is a set of false analogies, which only generate philosophical confusion. Augustine himself seems to have commingled the very different ways in which we measure time and space, as he comes to the conclusion that we measure the specious present in our mind, as if the present is some object in front of him.

Related to this is the idea of the flow of time, which is also the product of an analogy to things like logs of wood floating down a river. Such analogy seems to allure us into thinking of temporal events as fixed points or entities coming towards us as we expect them, passing us by as we experience them, and then flowing away from us as we remember them. We are then tempted to think not only that we can measure, as it were, the distance between these events, but also—as strongly suggested by the picture of the floating logs of wood—that we can measure the length of each event.

For Wittgenstein, Augustine's original puzzlement concerning the nature of time is a prime example of language being seduced by substantives as it runs against its own limits. The very idea of time qua temporal *space*, and with it the captivating idea concerning the flow of time (within that space), sidelines the way we use "time" as a temporal *ordering* of events. "It's just we've used a simile," Wittgenstein wrote, "and now the simile is tyrannizing us. In the language of the simile, I cannot move outside of the simile. Wanting to use the language of this simile to speak of memory as the source of our cognition, as the verification of our propositions, has to lead to nonsense" (Wittgenstein 1975, sec. 49; Wittgenstein 2005, p. 518).

Wittgenstein's point is that we need to observe a limit: we cannot

apply the concept of time, i.e., the syntactical rules as they apply to physical nouns, to the world of mental imagery, where one uses a radically different way of speaking: "For 'time' has one meaning when we regard memory as the source of time, and another when we regard it as a picture preserved from a past event" (Wittgenstein 1975, sec. 49). For instance, saying that we have perception into the past (as we do in the framework of memory-time) contradicts every concept of physical time (ibid., sec. 50). Also, the idea of the specious present invites us to regard the future as preformed in some sense. This is also characteristic of Langer's theory of musical creation, which capitalizes on the notion of "commanding form," as we pointed out earlier. Wittgenstein points out that "there is a point in saying future events are pre-formed if it belongs to the *essence* of time that it does not break off" (ibid., sec. 51). Yet not breaking off is characteristic of the framework of physical time. The present in memory-time is patently slipping away from us.

Wittgenstein's criticism is given striking expression in the context of his consideration of C. D. Broad's theory of our awareness of the temporal extensity of the immediate objects of our experience (Broad 1923). Broad argued that at a given instant we are directly acquainted with a temporally extended sense datum, which occupies a short interval of time "stretching" into the past from that instant. He also argued that the sensing involved in our experience of a long musical tone and the aural-sensum with which we are acquainted are both *continuous*. Thus, our mode of identification of the musical object is, in the last analysis, of the "searchlight" kind (Mabbott 1951). The constant span of illumination of the searchlight (representing the

span of the specious present) moves continuously parallel to, and along, its postulated “target”—the sense datum, in Broad’s case—as it “illuminates” it.

Again, Wittgenstein shows his characteristic move (in his middle period): distinguishing between different kinds of logical or grammatical “spaces,” pointing out analogies and dis-analogies between them, and stressing that what could be said of the concepts which belong to one such space could not meaningfully be said of concepts belonging to another space. Wittgenstein’s point here is that the word “continuity” belongs strictly to the vocabulary of the physical world. When we apply the physical notion of continuity to our immediate experience of a musical tone, we end up precisely with a “searchlight” model of music. According to Wittgenstein, this presupposes the nonsensical idea that there is an intermediate stage in our experience in which we both hear and remember.

The confusion lies in thinking that physical sound and the sense-datum are both continuous. The physical sound is continuous, but the sense-datum is not. The two experiences, hearing and remembering, are quite distinct. You can narrow down the point between where you finish hearing and where you begin remembering, but there will be no point at which you can say you both hear and remember. (Wittgenstein 1980, pp. 71-72)

Wittgenstein makes it very clear that a notion of continuity based on memory-time is nonsensical, and his response—apparently a direct rebuttal

of C. D. Broad's position—undercuts the very foundation of Langer's view of musical temporality: "Music makes time audible, and its form and continuity sensible" (Langer 1953, p. 110).

It falls beyond the scope of this paper to consider Wittgenstein's remedy for the philosophical puzzles generated by insisting on the primacy of memory-time. It would suffice to say that he suggested reversing the Augustinian priorities. For Wittgenstein, what is conceptually prior is a temporal order involving the specification of time-references by means of public, observable chronology, which is implemented not only by means of chronometers and calendars, but also by means of documents, diaries, manuscripts, and other modes of making records or consulting them. Wittgenstein calls this framework "information-time" (see Hintikka 2006; Schulte 2006). This is actually Langer's "common sense" version of time—composite, heterogeneous and fragmentary—a framework for the variegated activity of asking and receiving information, including all the many subtleties of human gesture in actual music making, the time in which music is played together, rather than experienced in the solitude of one's mind.

Whether Langer's philosophy of music could accommodate such a reversal of Augustinian priorities, and how, are questions that we happily leave for another occasion.

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