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## BEATING THE AIR

### *Phenomenological remarks on the semiotics of conducting*

The following is about the "conductor's signs". But the question is whether there really is such a thing - whether the conductor makes signs at all. The most important sign is missing: the question mark.<sup>1</sup>

In order to say anything reasonable about (1) the conductor as a "sign-maker", about (2) the signs being what he makes as a sign-maker, and about (3) the signs as eventually sharing in a sign *language*, we must first ask about the *situation* in which it takes place: What is the meaning of doing "this and that" with the hands? What kind of meaning is the meaningful full of? The study of the meaning of signs begins with the study of the meaning of making signs.

A triangular sign *shows* a train, and *is* a sign in that place: a warning: "be careful!" It is not indicative mode, but imperative. The traffic policeman does the same thing, but now "does" means something else. The traffic cop *is* not a sign; he *makes* a sign. The sign belongs to the action, and therefore to the situation.

If somebody suddenly says "meatballs", we understand less than a word of what he is saying, unless the situation, including the other words which are said in the situation, tells us what he is *doing*: (a) Is he a guest, *ordering* his dinner at the counter in the cafeteria? (b) Is he a waiter on the other side of the counter, *instructing* the staff (c) Is he a patient, the next day *answering* a doctor's question as to what he ate yesterday?

Without a landscape, without a situation, without a syntax connecting the particular action to other actions – without all these, any utterance remains "something somebody suddenly says".

In almost the same way, we must ask of the conductor's signs: What type of action is he performing, when he, in one situation or another, makes this or that sign?

A conductor is obviously the leader of a collective undertaking. What kind of task is carried out by what kind of collective in this situation? What kind of leadership? With what powers? By what means? The beat/gesture is one of these means, and the one we will look at in the following. If it contributes something communicative by beating, can we then say that he makes use of a sign-system? What on the whole could the function of conductor's signing be?

First: What kind of situation? Answer: An ensemble situation, requiring centralised co-ordination by one person. We will limit ourselves here to musical *performances*, i.e. to situations in which the music in a certain sense "exists" before we play it. It is written. The score prescribes how it is to be played, and thus describes how it sounds. When we play it, we say that we *perform* it. Thus several performances of the same piece of music can exist.

A conductor is the leader of a musical performance. Leaders are found everywhere – including places where they are not needed. But occasionally they are indispensable. When does a musical performance need a leader?

The answer has an elementary quantitative aspect: There are so many of us that we cannot make the whole function without a co-ordinator. But how many “too many” is, depends again on what music we are to play. How differentiated is the relationship between the individual contributions? How many details should “show through”? (a) Ten thousand people may be able to sing “The star-spangled banner” although it is quite a lot more difficult than “America the beautiful”. (It is difficult to stay together. But if the idea is to make the plurality heard, then it is quite all right that we do not stay together very well.) (b) A march needs no central co-ordination, if people are actually marching to the music. But when the Guards are playing while standing still in front of Buckingham Palace, they must be conducted. On the whole, music for dancing needs less co-ordination than music for listening. (c) Music in which a part of the sound product in itself serves the purpose of “beat-keeper” (e.g. the drums) does not need a central authority to take care of *that* function. (d) Especially important, music which is first and foremost meant to be heard by others than those who play it - and hence may not even be heard properly by those who play it – requires, other things equal, a stronger co-ordinating effort. The ideal place for listening to that music is not where the musicians are playing it, whether they are playing for Royalty, a paying public or God; in the ballroom, in the opera, in the concert hall or in the church. (e) More generally, it is a question of how unpredictable the individual finds the connection between his own contributions and the whole to which he contributes.

The type of conductor with whom we will concern ourselves is the one we use to see in action in front of the symphony orchestra, idiomatically in the great repertory of Romanticism. It is in his field of activity that the need for co-ordinating intervention is greatest. Here are the largest numbers of things that can only go well with leadership; in so far as the music does not just go along by itself. Here we can also expect to find the greatest number of signs; here the magic is greatest. He is the modern conductor: both the paradigm and the myth.

As far as that goes, he is good at many other things than those we hear and see – and are intended to react to – during a performance. Outside the performance we have all the aspects of practicing, the rehearsals, the ability to motivate, the personal charisma or you name it. Such things will be totally left out of account in our discussion. But during the performance the conductor is also good at many other things than what is performed with hands or arms. The gesticulating involves the face, the eyes, the attitudes and movements of the rest of the body, all of it being extremely important and not to be disregarded here. However we will allow ourselves the latitude of considering it to be included in a concept of beat/gesture in a *broader* sense.

Not everything succeeds. Not all orchestras and conductors are equally good, or good at understanding each other. Not all the conductor’s messages get through. It is a fact that people cannot always make themselves heard. Especially not when so much must be said all at once, or in rapid succession. The conductor may not always know what he wants to do, or he does not make it clear enough. All that is important enough. But in order to understand the deficiencies, we must first understand what they are deficient in. And that is precisely *our* question: What does gesture/beat do *when* conducting succeeds?

In principle it may be possible to think it in many ways. Let us take a look at a few of them. First:

(1) The conductor's gestures are *signs*. In that the conductor makes the signs, he *says* how the music is to be played. The signing is *enunciation*.

If the signing is *enunciation*, the statement is apparently "do like this: '...!'" The signing is a sort of "successive instruction". Using a special conductor-language, the conductor at any moment tells the musicians what he wants them to do - and lets them do it. Such a conception is misleading: (i) In the first place, the model does not allow for an explanation of how the conductor is actually able to manage it! How can he manage to make the great *difference* that we know he does make? Every 40<sup>th</sup> millisecond would in that case have its own complicated set of instructions, and these should immediately be followed by new instructions, as well as adjustment and correction of what had just been said – and has just been done. (ii) But even if we assumed that such detailed instructions in principle could be communicated so quickly - given and received - the equation would still not fit: the instructions would never be *musical* instructions. For what the musicians do is not a sequence of individual actions, each lasting a spilt second. I do not think there can ever be a language that, on the music's own level – treating music *as* music - expresses what the musicians are to do at any given moment. It would not be a language in terms of music or making music. The mode of conducting music is as little *instructive* as it is descriptive. The signing is not enunciation.

Instead we try:

(2) The conductor's gestures are *signs*. The conductor *demonstrates* by these signs, how the music is to be played. The signing is *demonstration*.

What takes place is not that something is said, but that something is shown. Not a "Do like this: ...!", where that which is to be done is found after the colon, so to speak referred to or "described" in conductor-language. Rather it is a "Do like this!", where "this" is the act of demonstration itself. The conductor shows the musicians what to do. But he does not *do* what they are to do: he *demonstrates* it with signs. Is that what happens?

First, the conductor must in any case show the musicians what to do; and let them do it in the very moment he shows it. Making the sign and following it are two things that must "keep in time", to use an expression not only used in speaking of music. (It is related to a phenomenon most clearly appearing in music, but so deeply rooted in our temporal experience that we readily use it in other areas of life too.) But the formulation is paradoxical: How can the sign be made and followed at the same time, when the one is a reaction to the other? How are we to understand a sign that is given, received, and followed up at the same time? And furthermore: the sign is not only something in which we *actually* meet at this moment; it is also a sign of in what sign we *shall* meet at the next moment. Is this not a paradox?

Of course extremely sensitive instruments could, over a period of time, prove the existence of an interval between what the conductor does, when he demonstrates what the musicians are to do, and what the musicians do, when they do what the conductor shows – so that they do it *together*. It depends, among other things, on the terms we choose to use when we say that at  $t_1$  the conductor did "like this", and at  $t_2$  the orchestra did "like this" and the second "this" was a reaction to the first. (Note, by the way, how immediately we turn from speaking of the "orchestra" - i.e. "the musicians" *in toto* - to speaking of "the individual musicians", although these too indeed have their mutually objective reaction times.)

Part of the conductor's art consists precisely in "avoiding the interval". The beat is not just the beat, as the hammer's blow on the nail, or the fist hitting a feather puff. The conductor's beat is first and foremost the beat as a movement toward the point of

impact, so that we meet “on” the beat. His gesture constitutes what the Germans call “agogisch vorenergisierende Kurven”. Whatever else he does is what it is still possible to do after this function has been carried out.<sup>2</sup>

We now find ourselves in the neighbourhood of the great paradoxes which the analysis of time has been struggling with for a couple of thousand years, and which found their first major description in Augustine<sup>3</sup> If we insist on thinking of movement as a “sum” of arbitrarily small stretches, or of “positions” of the object (here: the hand), we will go astray. The movement as a whole must be the *smallest* unit. If we dissolve it in detail - as, of course, we can, and in the treatment of other questions, should – the analysis only works when recognising the fact that such detailing is fundamentally destructive to its object. (That is, as we know, the original meaning of the word “analysis”. The technical meaning of the word draws on experience from the art of medicine: In analysis, Hippocrates separates organs and limbs from each other in order to study them – to the effect that they cease to *be* organs and limbs.)

But we also have a problem when we call the movement “the smallest *unit*”. As a “unit”, the movement must have a beginning and an end. But strictly speaking only the first beat has a beginning, only the last an end. The movements are *non-discrete* and thus *non-numerable* or at any rate “arbitrarily” numerable.

It is almost as if someone, out of context, asks me how *many* things I have “done today”. Well, I went to the baker’s for bread. That was one thing, just as doing the dishes was one. Or many things, in so far as I must first get into the car, then start it, drive to the baker’s, buy the bread, etc. Or even more, for first I had to go out of the door and lock it behind me, walk up the walk to the car, open the door, stretch one leg and bend the other ... etc. (But note, too, that it is hard to arrange the example far enough out of context to make all answers equally valid. Just the formulation “... done *today*” indicates the type and extent of the entities.)

We are at a loss as to what a “sign” is at all, when the signing does not itself indicate what *one* sign is. What is one movement? The fall of a stone begins when there is no longer anything to keep it from falling; and the fall reaches its end when the stone hits the ground. As such, the fall is one movement. The mailing of a package begins when Peter delivers the package to the post office, and ends when Vera receives it from the mailman. In that sense, it is one movement. But what is one movement, when we follow the conductor’s movements?

The next thing is that signs, as we usually know them and make them, are valid as the *occurrence* of a *type* “This sign ☞ means ‘open’, “the clouds over there are a sign of rain”, “that is a stop sign”, “this is a W”, “a finger in front of the mouth, like this, means we must be quiet”. The individual signs may be “individual” both as in being particular, as a *token*, and in being general, as a *type*. At least this is the case as long as we make no other demands on the distinction than what makes it possible to say “this sign ☞ is the same as this ☞ and this ☞“, or “this sign ☞ must be distinguished from this ☞“ (and not only because “this<sub>1</sub>” points somewhere else than this<sub>2</sub>). In that sense, the conductor’s shaping gestures are not individual occurrences of a type, there *are* no types: the gestures are *non-typical*. We cannot distinguish between the essence and the accident in the sign. We should rather say that “the whole of it” is essential, strangely enough implying that we cannot recognise the essence spoken of, since we could not know it before its appearance.<sup>4</sup>

Closely connected with this is the fact that the conductor’s signs are *non-repeatable*: the same sign cannot be given more than once. – Well, but is a downbeat not a downbeat? Is the downbeat – at least in *allegro*, in that movement, in that bar – not the same as the downbeat in

the next bar? No, for the other things that are to happen – what is written in the next bar - are not the same. Further: that a downbeat is a downbeat is only a small part of what the downbeat actually means. As an occurrence of *the type* ‘downbeat’, the function might just as well be carried out by setting up a metronome, visible to all. The closest the conductor comes to a sign as a repeatable occurrence of a type, is probably the lifted index finger, whether at arms-length in front of the eyes (“Watch out!”) or in front of slightly pursed lips (“Hush!”). To be sure, this too has its particular “modes”. But they are modes in the occurrence of signs that are basically the same, in so far as they can have the same function in situations that are basically different.

What matters is not “what” he does, but “the way” he does it, as we say, when we are having trouble finding universal concepts, i.e. in fixing a concept at all. To give a cue to the 2<sup>nd</sup> violins clearly has the character of making a sign. But the sign is a sign of little or nothing, until it has been given its *way*.

There is a tremendous multitude of distinguishable “ways” in which things can be said, shown, and done. But in conducting, that which is said, shown, done, cannot be distinguished from the way it is said, shown, done. And further: the “no-parking” sign can, of course, be said to mean the same, whether the context is East Ave. or Western Blvd. whereas no one has ever said two different things in exactly the same tone of voice. If the “content” is different, it makes no sense to say the tone of voice is the same. Take e.g. a smile (or laughter) as a sign of happiness. It will always be *that* happiness, you are happy in *that* way, about *this*. If you change “that” and “this”, you change everything, and the smile itself becomes something different. And if you leave out of account “that” and “this”, not even the smile is left.<sup>5</sup> (Imagine the – supposedly - same smile on the face of the same person, first watching a group of children playing, then a traffic accident. Indeed it is *not* the same smile!)

In the same way, it may be said of the conductor’s beat: two approximately identical beats – identical if seen by an eye abstracting them from the context - do not remain identical if they are brought back into context. At the level where the signs – if they are signs – really mean something, they are basically unique insofar as anything that they carry out depends on [is derived from] their full concretion, including their full context. *We cannot distinguish between what is said and the way in which it is said. Or: We cannot distinguish between what is shown and the way in which it is shown.*

The conductor’s gestures may – structurally at any rate - be said to correspond to the “*tone of voice*” of deaf sign language. The latter is the “gesticulatory-visual tone of voice” of a sign, which is gesticularly made and visually comprehended. – There are many ways in which one can say “ - - - ”.<sup>6</sup> Deaf sign language (understood as a language system in ‘system’s’ broadest sense) is related to the language of conducting, as the literal part of the spoken language is related to the tone of voice of the speech.<sup>7</sup>

I know little of the sign language of the deaf, but I assume that once the sign has been made, and as such is recognisable as *that* sign (as an occurrence of *that* type), an infinite variety of “ways” of saying what was said remains.

I once saw an argument between two deaf people. As anyone familiar with the art of arguing knows, it is often the *way* we say what is important, that *is* important. Between two who can hear, much depends on the tone of voice - especially if the argument takes place over the telephone! But part – and that is the part those who can hear may share with those who cannot – lies in the facial expression, gestures, etc. And it seemed to me that the deaf people who were arguing had, so to speak, special “strings to their bows”, because their bodily movements were *already* (linguistic) signs.

When we introduce the analogy of the tone of voice, we should immediately add that there are languages that use differences in intonation as being phonetically distinctive – Chinese, for example. But this too, is then typified. (A typical difference is the difference between rising and non-rising intonation.) Indeed we know this from our own language, where the remark: “He loves meatballs ...” becomes interrogative in one tone of voice, and present indicative in another. And if your intonation is not clear, you may not succeed in your errand, whether it is to ask and receive an answer, to give a message, answer a question, etc. Every word must be capable of being pronounced correctly – and especially more or less correctly – in order *to be* that word. But inside this framework we can – so to speak “afterwards” – in principle make infinite variations in the concrete discourse.

So far we may conclude: The conductor shows the musicians what to do. But he doesn’t do what they are to do and he does not show it by signs. What the conductor does with his “do like this!” is neither to say nor show something *by signs*. – How, then, does the demonstration take place, if not by signing?

Let us try a third possibility:

**(3)** What is shown is shown to be imitated. The relationship between the contributions of the conductor and the orchestra is *mimical*.

Imitation? How? Show the boy how to hammer nails, and let him do it himself. Pronounce the French word “rouge”, and let the pupil repeat it. Clearly, that is not what the conductor does. The orchestra does not play as the conductor plays, for he doesn’t play. And even though the musicians follow him, they do not follow *after* him. How then? *The conductor mimes the music, as he wants the orchestra to play it.*

But how can one mime music with anything but music? How can the conductor’s performance: “this<sub>1</sub>!” *resemble* the musicians performance “this<sub>2</sub>!”? They can only resemble each other if they are comparable. We can, for example, specify the conductor’s “do like this!” in statements such as:

“Play *what* I show, play *as* I show it!”

“Play *as* I gesticulate!”

“Play *like this*!”

“Play, as I *show* how to play – in that I *do* as you are to do!”

The question is then what an ‘...as...’, or a ‘...just as...’ means, in so far as it is found between incommensurable entities? What does ‘thus’ mean, when what I do with my “thus<sub>1</sub>” is entirely different from what you do when you follow *my* thus<sub>1</sub> with *your* thus<sub>2</sub>? There is only one possibility: In some essential respect, what the conductor, the musicians and the music *do* must be – i.e. in principle they must *be able to be* – the same. What do they do, then, that is “the same”?

The answer is that they *move*, and do so in respects that are basic and inevitable in any phenomenon of movement and without which even the most refined concepts of movements cannot be carried out. The conductor’s beat has the *inquit*:

“Play so that the music moves as I move..!”

The question now is how the movements of the conductor (his “beats/gestures”) can be said to be “the same” as the movement of the music. We will attempt to throw some light on this in the following.

First, there is the *movement up-down*: The movement *with* an effort, as if “in spite of” gravity, as opposed to the *effortless* movement, as if “because of” or “supported by” gravity. The force of gravity the conductor plays with or against, is “pretended” in the discourse; but he constantly relates to an ideal scheme of verticality.<sup>8</sup>

The most elementary experience – not of gravitation itself, but of a *movement* that, in a simple manner, relates to, and expresses gravitation – is probably found in the scheme *throw-fall-rebound*. An impulse from the earth has initiated the upward movement, it has decreased “by itself”, everything has stood still for a moment, now the fall begins, something returns to the earth, meets the earth. After this, a movement upward again – the movement up from the earth as *ground* – can take place with no effort: *whether* it takes place or not is a question of the earth as surface: whether the earth holds, brakes, hinders, or releases. – No Certainly, that is not what the conductor does. But in what he does, he constantly relates to this ideal-scheme of verticality. The beat as downbeat is a beat to the ground (“zur Grunde”). And the greater or lesser the impulse in the downbeat, the greater or lesser the rebound.

Another elementary expression of gravitation is found in the very experience of heaviness *itself*: to *lift* something up from the ground it rests on, and *carry* it – something *light*, and something *heavy*. Also, to *push* or *pull* something on the surface of the ground it rests on.

Next, we have the *medium* of the movement:

The air as that which *supports*, so something can *float*, and possibly land on the earth - or fall to the earth in spite of having just floated.

Next, we have the *medium* of the movement:

The air as *nothing* (We “give him the air”, we say of someone we ignore; an object thrown - no matter in which direction - is always an object thrown “up in the air”, etc.) The movement through something that makes no resistance, as opposed to the movement in - and hence in spite of – a greater or smaller resistance.

The air as that which *supports*, so that something can *float*, and possibly land on the earth - or fall to the earth in spite of having just floated.

So far the description has merely applied terms from mechanical physics, i.e. of “dead” nature. But hardly according to the concepts of Galileo or Newton. Especially because the phenomenon of *inertia* does not exist: that which stands still, must be kept standing; anything existing must be “maintained” in order to continue to exist; and any movement must be kept going.<sup>9</sup> But our paradigm of movement as regards the music and the conductor is more likely the movement of the living: in brief, the *living movement*. Anything that can be said of the dead movement can also be said of the living movement, but not the reverse. (And actually, it has from the very first been necessary to include terms of the living movement in the description of the dead movement. E.g. gravitation appearing in the *effort* against it implies the existence of a living being performing that effort.

The living is that which maintains itself in motion by itself. This definition is not that of biology, when it determines life through concepts like “organism”. The living we speak of here, is the living that every human knows and experiences at any time, whether or not he

knows of a “science” of the living. It is, as well, the life that biology itself, in its own source, asks about when it is founded.

The priority of the living movement is obvious to the mature Aristotle. And what *he* makes explicit is – here as often elsewhere in his metaphysical thoughts – what *we* know implicitly from experience: We divide things in the world into living and dead. But life is not something the bird has and the stone has not. Life is rather something the stone “lacks”, which is exactly the reason why we call it a “dead” thing. We categorise both the stone and the dead animate being as dead things. The difference is that the first is dead, in so far as it *is*, the other is dead, in so far as it *has died*.

The ability to move has “its price”. One can only *be* in motion by moving *oneself*. As an illustration of what movement means, we should not choose a stone falling, nor a bird, floating with its wings spread in a fixed position. Rather a bird in flight, constantly *maintaining, adjusting and adapting* its movement *in* the movement.<sup>10</sup>

The basic musical terms (whether we speak Italian or any other language) are elementary expressions of the living’s movement, or for the living on the whole. Speech has searched for words and found them apt in the sense that words are able to be apt at all. Even the anti-organic, e.g. as we know it in Mahler, presupposes the organic as a background. Even Carl Nielsen’s “machine” in the Fifth Symphony is only expressive because it defies everything organic.

Nevertheless we may still be at a loss, even when we here listen carefully to Aristotle. There are two problems:

(1) With Aristotle, the movement is always something that is ascribed to a subject (a *substance*). The movement is motion, change, transformation, and hence there is always *something* that moves, changes, transforms itself from ... and to... But music’s movements are “subjectless”: there is nothing, that before, during and after the movement remains “the same”, having changed from something it was to something else that it has become. We can distinguish between the bird and its flight. But what is the melody, other than the movements of the melody? Several of the formulations above are aporetic, because to speak of movement without a subject – or at least of movement with a parenthesis around the subject – can, for the most part only be done in poetic speech.

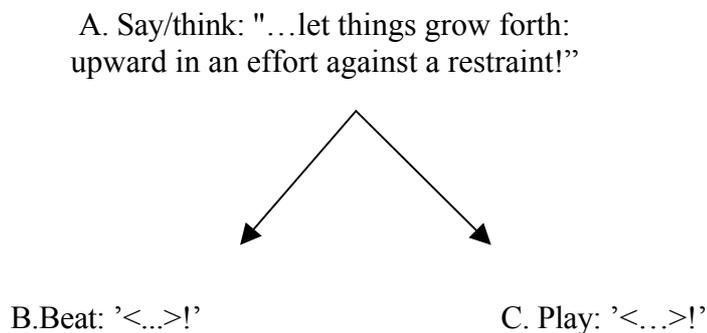
(2) But that the movement of the conductor and the music can *be* movement without being ascribed to a subject, is a precondition for speaking of the conductor’s and the music’s moving as being the *same* movement, in the sense that the way the music plays can be the same way the conductor beats. And that is the next problem: the music’s movement and the movement of the beat can, so it seems, only be “the same movement” in the sense that one is analogous to the other? But if, for example, the hand which is raised is to be analogous to a heightening of the music’s intensity, we need a code for the reading of the analogous relationship? A code that allows us to read the slowly increasing intensity as being conform with the arm slowly being raised? - No, that is not how it is. *If* it is necessary to speak of a code at all in this connection, the codifying need not be more complicated than when, for example, (to use an illustration that should not be stretched too far) phenomena of one type once and for all are projected on phenomena of some other type, in that both are made measurable and hence may be inscribed in one system of co-ordinates. But a *staccato* in the beat and in the music are the same. The one is not a code – a code term, a code-value - for the other. It is not translated. A *legato* – that which is unceasingly bound - is the same in the beat and in the music. They are simply “doing” the same.

Perhaps Schopenhauer may give us a hint, where Aristotle is silent. What we are trying to say with words from the most elementary experience of life, is not far from what Schopenhauer actually says on the *will*. Will is what we normally best know as *someone's will to something*. But in Schopenhauer, the will has the status of a metaphysical principle, valid before it is ascribed to any subject: everything in the world exists in and by its very *effort* to exist, including developing according to its nature. And it perishes when it from something else meets a stronger, opposing will.<sup>11</sup>

Will in Schopenhauer is a *noumenon*, but a dynamic noumenon, where in Kant it is static. We usually recognise it as “representations”. Not visions for the inner eye or the like, but – in German idealistic tradition- as “Vor-stellungen”: it is presented to us i.e. is objectified as ideas. The arts copy the ideas. But music is the exception: it is not a copy of ideas, but of the will itself. The chord of the dominant seventh is not a message of, or an expression of tension: it *is* tension.<sup>12</sup>

For us it is not a matter of this or that living *being*. It is a matter of life as the first metaphysical principle: as *noumenon*. Indeed, it is experiences of this kind that bring Carl Nielsen to the striking formulation: “Music is life – *and as such inextinguishable*”.

Finally, let us attempt a schematic presentation. The first figure will show what the relationship between the beat and the performance is *not*. Let us imagine that it is a matter of a crescendo in *these* specific bars in *this* specific symphony. The arrows show a derivative relationship, e.g. that one is an expression of the other:



*fig.1*

The beat and the playing count here as equivalent, in so far as they are two expressions of one and the same linguistic-conceptual gestalt. So the path from the beat to the music goes through the concept. But it is not just a detour. It is an impossible path, since conceptualisation - whether it is brought to a linguistic expression or not – necessarily means a huge oversimplification of the matter. *If* there are three “languages”, then it is the spoken language, the words, that try to say the same as the other two when they merely speak for themselves. Neither is the relationship between the other two metaphorical. C does not mean or carry out “metaphorically” the same as B, or the reverse. The language of the conductor speaks for itself: it “works”, without our learning it. Which is not to say that everyone is

equally aware of it and equally good at speaking it. Music sounds very different in different cultures. But *if* someone from a non-European culture learns to play Schubert, so that it sounds like Schubert, then he will also “*understand*” the conductor’s beat, the *first time* he is faced with a conductor.

The following diagram is more adequate:

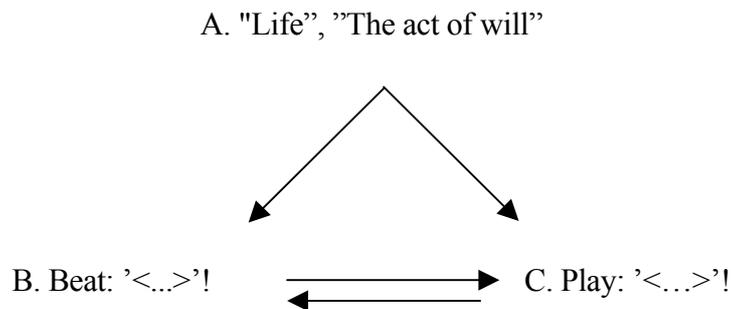


fig.2

Here, the conductor’s beat and the music are manifestations of the same act of life or will. In this way, they can go together. In this way the one can show what the other is to do, so they can go together. In this way they can accompany one another.<sup>13</sup>

Life is the *pulse beat*. The heartbeat, the pulsing of the blood. The maintaining of life by the most effortless and elementary of all repetitions. The heart is silent. When we play, the pulse is ours. The beat of the pulse must be the same, but we cannot all have our fingers on the pulse – not the same pulse. The pulse beat may neither be seen nor heard: it lies under any movement. The conductor’s beat is *our* pulse beat. We recognise the pulse in a number of *tempi*, which we call natural, in spite of the fact that natural science could not describe them as anything other than quantitative and relative. But *adagio*, *andante*, *moderato*, *allegro*, *presto* etc. are not arbitrary comparisons: they are characteristic expressions.

Life is *breathing*: the most elementary effort. The steady process in terms of tension and relaxation, in speech, in song, in the melody, in the phrase.

Life is “*going on*”: this, the most elementary expression for self-movement, relates to what just is, in so far as it is “in motion”. If things in the final instance do not go by themselves, they do not go at all. We can move them, perhaps make them go. But “*going on*” they have to do themselves, whether they go along with, go against, go ahead. The motor starts – and goes. Problems become too great – things cannot go on. - Time, too, can be conceived of as something that “keeps going” - even though there is no heart or breath – with the most inexorable certainty. Inexorable in so far as everything takes place and perishes “in” time - keeping time with the passage of time. - It is hard to imagine that anyone has ever learned our system of notes without first setting up the value of a note (e.g. the *crochet*) as a “go-note”/walking note.

Walking makes its own pulse in so far as it goes on – step by step. And running and standing are qualitative *modifications* of the same movement. Running is not just walking in a faster tempo. Chaplin does not run in his films: as we see him, he moves his feet as quickly as

any runner, but he walks. That is the comedy of it. But the very thinking which sees music as a succession of tones (or in a broader sense, of sound) becomes aporetic when confronted with the peculiar fact that the movement can stop without being finished: the music still goes on, even when the movement has come to a “stop-note” (e.g. a semibreve in the end of a phrase). And the music moves in the pause: deepest of all in the music is the pause – the sound of nothing - in contrast to the silence or noise to which the music leaves us when it is over.

It may well be an evolutionary “chance” that life, as we live it, goes on with heart, breath, and feet for walking. But these phenomena – and now I mean the phenomena themselves, not just the words – are for us some of the most basic of metaphors. They are so deep that I do not know what literalness could mean.

Aarhus, August 6, 1998 (rev.1999).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Some preliminary remarks on the terminology are needed too. So far I lack a term including the meaning of (conductor's) 'beat' as well as (conductor's) 'gesture' like e.g. the German 'Schlag'. The beat is the narrow function: beating marking the time - and no more. The gesture means, roughly speaking, any other thing, that the conductor may do with his hands. The very distinction as a distinction between *functions* is important to me. But so is the point that the functions in practice, in time and place, cannot be separated. A beat is always a legato-beat, a staccato-beat, a portamento-beat; it is more or less legato, legato in this way etc. And any gesture relates to the function of marking the time. Hence we need an inclusive term. Lacking it I shall stick to 'beat' and 'gesture' and occasionally leave it to one or other of these words to carry out the meaning of the - missing - inclusive term. Eventually I shall apply the artificial term 'beat/gesture'.

<sup>2</sup> This has nothing to do with the practice widespread among *some* conductors - not all, not always the best - of "lying ahead of the orchestra" with his beat. This is merely technical difference. Both can be done. Musicians usually prefer conductors, who do *not* lie ahead.

<sup>3</sup> One notes by the way, that Augustine is the first great Christian philosopher of music.

<sup>4</sup> It is not certain there is an "essence" for the Chinese house-sign, in the sense of something all occurrences of the sign at all times have had in common and distinct from other signs. Here or there the sign may even be difficult to identify in its occurrences. But in that sense identification means precisely "recognition". Decisive is that this sign here/now under certain conditions is the same as that sign there/then. In several different situations the sign is to be considered "the same sign", i.e. as an occurrence of one and the same sign, in so far as it is the same *function* they carry out in the middle of the diversity.

<sup>5</sup> In itself a quite impressive trick. So far as I know it has only been performed by the Cheshire Cat.

<sup>6</sup> Here the reader should insert the deaf sign language sign for "house".

<sup>7</sup> By "literal speech" we understand the *part* - or the *aspect* - of speech that supposedly may be put on paper as a sequence of letters, with no *loss* or *change* of meaning.

<sup>8</sup> The up-down movement in pitch has or at least once had the same structure (cf. the style of Palestrina). That is probably why we even *call* the tones 'higher' or 'lower'. We hardly hear this clearly in the music of newer time; but in any case, this up-down is carried out without the conductor as [being] the most elementary parameter in the [notation] score.

<sup>9</sup> I think, too, that we find it difficult to follow movements that appear in a system where the rule applies that light and heavy items fall equally fast. At least, if understanding is to be based on the experience of our own bodies- or maybe we should rather say that the words "heavy" and "light" have different *meanings* in Aristotle and Galileo?

<sup>10</sup> In a sense, language always thinks movement in terms of the living: even the falling stone moves *itself* toward the ground.

<sup>11</sup> The will to be is reflected as the will to will for all living things, plants, animals, and humans in the emphatic sense. With such a concept of a "Wille zum Wollen", we are, according to one interpretation, very close to Nietzsche's "Wille zur Macht". - History has shown that this can be given many twists. Depending on how you interpret the relationship between metaphysics and politics, it may even have – but need not to have - political implications.

<sup>12</sup> Schopenhauer's musical paradigm is *Classicism*. But his dynamic will-metaphysics makes Wagner all his own in *his* musical work. (He draws, by the way, the same pessimistic conclusions from it, but that is another matter.)

<sup>13</sup> More precisely, the arrow from B to C shows the relationship between the conductor and those who follow *him*, whereas the arrow from C to B shows the relationship between the music and those who dance to it.