

Messages in Art and Music:
***On Route to Understanding of Musical Works with Jerrold
Levinson***

So it will be no surprise, I hope, if I forbear to say definitively what "High Rollers" is saying, that is, what propositions or attitudes it would, on the basis of the song properly positioned in terms of genre and provenance, be plausible to ascribe to its maker as ones he is trying to get across. For the fact is, I am not entirely sure¹

What a Musical Work Says

1.

If musical works had messages what would they tell us? What are the messages that we find in the musical works and what is their aesthetic importance?

In "Music as Narrative and Music as Drama"² Jerrold Levinson suggests that all expressive instrumental music is either narrative or dramatic. The thesis in this text is that there is instrumental music that is expressive (understood as expressing some non musical content) and this music is either narrative or dramatic. By this author means that the music is heard as either telling a story and thus narrative or "depicting" some action, which seems to be happening directly as if on a stage and thus it is seen as drama. Of course Levinson admits that there is some instrumental music that is neither narrative or drama (non expressive instrumental

¹ J. Levinson, "Messages in Art", *The Pleasure of Aesthetics. Philosophical Essays*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1996. p. 237.

² J. Levinson, "Music as Narrative and Music as Drama", *Mind and Language*, Vol. 19, No 4, September 2004.

music). For the music that is expressive regardless of whether it is narrative or dramatic its content (the drama or narrative) is not necessarily easily put into words. The narrative may be very “musical” and very simple and thus extremely difficult to “translate” into verbal language. Yet in the case of some expressive music it may be easier to perceive its expressive content as lending itself to be told in words and not just in images or gestures (waving and modulating one's voice often helps to explain the narrative or dramatic content of the music). Levinson discusses such expressive music in “Messages in Art”³ alongside with all art that seems to be “saying something”⁴. And isn't it so that some art and some music as well seems to be communicating thought like content? Something that may be framed in words. A message. Often in an attempt to understand a work of art one is vigorously searching for identifiable messages, something clear and comprehensible. What is this work or this author saying? Did I get it? To see a musical work in terms of messages that it transmits seems wrong, yet there are situations in which work's interpretation depends on this. Maybe, as Levinson suggests, there are artworks that have messages and those that do not⁵. In this context some questions seem unavoidable. Firstly about the messages in art: how important and how constant are they? Is it really possible to construe a message out of the musical work - even the most expressive or narrative one?⁶ Is expressive art necessarily speech like? How vital is it to understand the messages of the musical works, when it is plausible to think that they may indeed convey some? I would like to explore the questions and suggestions presented by Jerrold Levinson in his text “Messages in Art”.

³ J. Levinson, “Messages in Art”, op. cit.

⁴ “many works are reasonably taken as saying something, in an extended sense, that is, as implicitly advancing some proposition, endorsing some perspective, or affirming some value”, J. Levinson, op. cit., p. 224.

⁵ In “Messages in Art” Levinson proposes a broad division of art into two categories: artworks that “have messages” and those that do not. As a matter of illustration he invokes a few artworks to represent each of the categories. As those in the first category (having messages) Levinson listed Ibsen's *En Enemy of the People*, Goya's *The Third of May* and Browning *My Last Duchess* and as examples in the second category he listed Magritte's paintings, Kaffka's *The Castle*, Wallace Stevens *The Jar*, the Beatles' songs *Blackbird* or *I am the Walruse*, Jayce's *Finnegans Wake*, Beethoven's *First Symphony* and Brancusi *Bird in Space*.

⁶ In “Music as Narrative and Music as Drama” Levinson suggest that there is instrumental music that is clearly narrative, but isn't there vocal narrative music as well?

2.

Acknowledging the division between the artworks that have messages and those that do not and the possibility of not being able to attribute any message to a given artwork, Levinson asks how does one define a message of an artwork. A message that cannot be missed if an artwork is to be understood at all. Let's see:

“a work of art says, what on the basis of the work contextually construed, it would be reasonable to impute to its artist as a view that he or she both significantly held and was concerned to convey”⁷

Levinson discusses this proposition and it seems to be the best until the very end of the text when in conclusion author changes it to the following proposition:

“An artwork may not be saying what its speaker or narrator is saying, nor what any represented character, including the hero or protagonist, is saying or thinking. An artwork says, roughly, what its author appears saliently to believe and to want to convey, judging from the work taken as an utterance in "thick" context, that is, with both the traditions and conventions of that form of art and the public, prior-work-informed, image of the artist in mind”⁸

It would be hard not to agree with Levinson on the above, especially in the context of further contention that author is also responsible for the possible messages construed out of and on the basis of the work in line with the above. Of course the problem with messages in art is that they are not as clear and comprehensible as we as readers take them to be. Most of the time, it seems, we “don't get” the right messages we “get” the other ones (the ones author is still responsible for).

“part of the problem, as you might imagine, was confusion about what the messages in works of art are, and how to determine them”⁹.

Levinson presents in “Messages in Art” two closely examined examples of art – each differently but in equally subversive way using the very idea of message. On one hand these examples show that the more we as recipients know or can imagine the more of the artwork we can understand. On the other the message may still be as illusive as before. In the first example

⁷ J. Levinson, “Messages in Art”, op. cit., p. 288.

⁸ J. Levinson, “Messages in Art”, op. cit., p. 240.

⁹ Ibidem p. 232.

of the “Rape Piece” - a student exhibition in the area of performance art - the „surface” reading of the artwork suggests the aggressive and offensive “simple” message while the deep or rather enlightened reading provides the more subtle and complex “multi-layered” (if not simply incoherent) message. In the presented example artists decided to give an artwork a message like form and used it to create artworks' multi-layered meaning. Levinson suggests that part of the problem with understanding of the artworks was the misreading of its message. However it could also be that part of the problem of expecting a message in the place of an artwork.

The second example discussed in detail by Levinson is the example of rap song by T. Ice “High Rollers”. Levinson acknowledges the fact it is most difficult to say for certain what the author in this case may appear *saliently to believe and to want to convey as the traditions and conventions of that form of art and the public, prior-work-informed, image of the artist in mind* are themselves confusing and also clearly not enough in this case¹⁰. He suggests some possible readings but in the end he is prepared to say the following:

“So it will be no surprise, I hope, if I forbear to say definitively what "High Rollers" is saying, that is, what propositions or attitudes it would, on the basis of the song properly positioned in terms of genre and provenance, be plausible to ascribe to its maker as ones he is trying to get across. For the fact is, I am not entirely sure though I have a pretty good guess”¹¹

3.

There is one more thing in “Messages in Art” that I want to discuss here. Having analysed two different examples of art that relay on understanding of their messages and also admitting to despite the efforts not being able to construe the message in the case of the second example, Levinson arrives at an unexpected realization that the work of art that suggests different and incompatible messages is a failure of expression:

“(…)if there is no one thing it is, in full context, most reasonable to impute to the author as both believed and worthy of being conveyed, but only several incompatible candidates for such, then there is likely nothing that the work says, in the sense we have been pursuing. Instead, we have just a failure of expression.”

¹⁰ Levinson suggests the need to examine further the origins of the genre of rap music and also the rapper himself/herself as well as the matters of vocal input and other performance elements. Ibidem, p. 237-238.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 237.

Before I come back to this last citation let me repeat after Levinson that in some cases

(...)it turns out that there is hypothesizable a higher-order, more synthetic or else disjunctive message, which enfolds the ones that are equally suggested by the work but at odds with one another, and which is more plausibly ascribed to the author than either of the first-order messages taken by themselves.”¹²

Well, now we have the full picture. Either the seemingly incoherent messages are reconciled in a higher-order message build upon them, or if not this work has failed in the area of expression and if it was an expressive work it just failed. I would like to focus on this last statement now. Although right after that Levinson suggests that it might be that a seeming incoherent message or messages that are seemingly incompatible are in fact just a part of a structurally more complex whole, this last statement seem to me ungrounded. What if the artwork really does generate messages that are incompatible and what if that is how the author intended it to be? What if the idea behind such a device is for the listeners to stay puzzled and to keep on asking themselves “what does it all mean”?

4.

In the beginning of his article Jerrold Levinson ask a couple of questions about messages in art that he would like to “touch upon”. The third and last one of which he says that he will 'supply an answer in closing' is this: how can an art be a bearer of messages and at the same time be artistic. In Levinsons' own words:

“...how can art remain *artistic* when in the business of conveying messages, and how can we attend to such messages and still appreciate the art *as art*, rather than as mere instrument of communication, dispensable once the message has been received? “¹³

As promised the answer to this question is contained in closing of the article. Levinson states that the *we value the message only as-conveyed-by-that-specific vehicle* where the vehicle is the artwork or its form. Our message – suggests Levinson – is really *the generically-expressible-idea-as-embodied-in-the-concrete-work*. The message is not separable from the

¹² J. Levinson, op. cit., p. 238.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 225.

artwork, even if it seems so just because we can say it without pointing to the artwork. Or can't we? I agree with Levinson. Moreover, I think that the concept of "message in art" is only valid in so far as this condition is fulfilled. That is if the message is taken to be inseparable from the artwork, as embodied, made evident only by this particular artwork. But this seems quite silly. If we are able to say this message it is already separable from it and we can (and in fact we are) 'take it to go' as Levinson says.

I think that in asking questions about the messages in art Levinson left out one more important question. This question would be: why do we expect message from the artwork or better yet why do we treat artworks as messages? The simple answer could be that we want messages from artworks because in this way we can prove to have understood the artwork and also because the projected anonymity helps to claim the universality of an artwork's appeal. Levinson says that despite that message in art we can still appreciate it aesthetically, but I think not. If it were that we can appreciate the artwork despite its message or if the message was there to be found regardless of the artwork's aesthetic appeal that simply would do. The only way to appreciate artwork is the aesthetic way and if in this way we are recipients are inspired to formulate messages that are linked to the artwork in questions than we see this message as being of this artwork but just as its being art depends on aesthetic appreciation, its generating message should too. Otherwise these messages would be completely superfluous. It is my opinion that the messages generated by the artwork may indeed be incompatible or incoherent, but if these messages are incompatible with the artwork's form it is then that the expressiveness of the artwork fails. The artwork's expressiveness (or expressivity as Peter Kivy calls it) may lead to many different feelings, images or even messages and it may lead to none.

The concept of the messages generated from artworks has to include the understanding of the aesthetic code. This aesthetic code as explained by Umberto Eco in his "Absent Structure"¹⁴ is characteristically unclear and thus highly informative forcing us to make multiple choices. It is also self-directed as it draws attention to its own form. From this explanation it can be

¹⁴ Umberto Eco, *Nieobecna struktura*, trans. A. Weinsberg, P. Brawo, Warszawa 1996, p.79-85.

assumed that the message in the artwork is not so much the message meant to communicate something to the „reader”. If indeed one was to take it for a message it would be a highly inconsistent and unclear one, close in its appearance to noise¹⁵. The message or quasi-message, as I propose to call it, is in fact the way to provide aesthetic fulfilment through „miscommunication” inspiring many different ways of understanding and drawing attention to the way in which this happens. The supposed anonymity usually, although I am sure not always, comes from sharing the same cultural, institutional and historical background. And even if this particular feature of responding to the artworks was as it was sometimes argued especially valued it doesn't follow that the artworks that have other effects are just ineffective. The feeling of immediate understanding of the supposed message of an artwork is – I must admit – quite exhilarating. And so is the pleasure of realizing the message of an artwork if it has any. But even when it seems with certainty to be “saying” something this very though should be alarming in its simplicity. A message? How?

Music as Narrative or Drama

1.

In Levinson's article “Music as Narrative and Music as Drama” mentioned in the beginning of this text the narrative in music as author explains it may be external or internal. In the first case of *external narrative* “the events of which music consist are themselves being narrated”. In fact any song is narrative in this sense. The *internal narrative* in music occurs when “something is telling about something else”¹⁶The difference between drama and narrative in music is not that easily established, yet Levinson maintains that to speak of music as narrating events one need to see it as being similar in character to a tale. As if the music was saying “once upon a time”. The examples Levinson gives are all of symphonic music, mostly openings: Bruckner's *Seventh Symphony*, Dvorak's *New World Symphony*, Frank's *Symphony in D Minor*. Later on I would like to suggest other examples to extend this wonderful list.

¹⁵ Umberto Eco, *ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁶ J. Levinson, “Music and Narrative and Music as Drama”, *op. cit.*, p. 432.

The musical drama on the other hand consist of enacting dramatic evens and so the “story” is played out more directly as if by a personae or agents inherent in music itself. According to Levinson it is more common and also more easy to construe music in terms of its being a drama with dramatic agents appearing to carry the music development forward. The sonata form, he insists, is an example of how easy and fitting the understanding of music in terms of the internal drama really is. Yet he also points out that what is called drama in here – not just in sonata form but in many other cases - can equally easily be seen as narrative in a broader sense¹⁷.

2.

Let me now try this idea of music as narrative and music as drama on two different musical examples that later on may also be fittingly used to discussed the controversial issue of message in music. My first example will be Witold Lutosławski's famous Concerto for Cello and Orchestra (1970) and my second one will be one of Steve Reich's early pieces “Its Gonna Rain” (1965). The Lutosławski's cello concerto is famous for its interpretation. In most cases the suggested reading is political. The music is said to be a dramatic portrayal of a war or a battle between an institution or a group endowed with political powers and an individual. In one of the note on the piece the reviewer has written that *the cellist plays the traditional but innovatively modified role of individual hero in conflict with the orchestra (representing the state or society)*¹⁸. In lecture on Lutosławski's *Cello Concerto* Adrian Thomas explains the drama elements in the opening bars of the piece with following commentary:

“When the solo cello seems to become stuck on the Ds, elaborating them with grace notes, there comes a violent interruption from the brass section. And this polarity between a meditative soloist and the brute force of that most warlike of instruments, the trumpet, sets up a conflict of one against the rest that informs the progress of the concerto to its very end”.¹⁹

The dramatic elements of this piece were undeniably present to the audiences in Poland

¹⁷ See *ibidem*, p. 437

¹⁸ E. Wright, *A Modern Cellist's Manual. Technique, Tips, and Musings for Every Student*, Lulu.com, 2010.

¹⁹ A. Thomas lecture on Lutosławski's *Concerto for Cello and Orchestra* in the Gresham College lecture series available on <http://www.gresham.ac.uk/event.asp?EventId=287&PageId=108> (05/05/2010).

and in Russia. As the work has been dedicated to Mscislaw Rostropovich it was often assumed that the cello and its 'predicament' is close relationship to that of Rostropovich himself and his difficult situation in the Soviet Union at that time.

”To Rostropovich's friends and enthusiasts, the message was that of a free and unbowed musical and intellectual spirit struggling to make himself heard against the din of cultural orthodoxy and in spite of official censure of his behaviour.”²⁰

Of the whole four parts of the *Concerto for Cello and Orchestra* the last one is the most dramatic and in turn the most likely to be seen as drama according to interpretative model explained in Levinson's text. The cello is playing against the noisy and aggressive playing of the orchestra and in the very end the remaining sounds are the repetitive long notes by the cello (Es). The relationship between the orchestra and the cello is that of a dual or a battle rather than that of a dialogue. The cello starts off with repeated notes, tries for a melody, presents itself only to be cut off by the sounds from the orchestra. Later on the relationship seems to change with attempts to harmonize and unify both parts yet in the end the warring element prevails and the cello is drawn out by the orchestra. There is certainly drama like structure in the Cello Concerto, but is it also possible to see it as a narrative (external or internal)? Is there a story being told? I have suggested earlier that there is. For a long time the piece (especially the fourth part) has been interpreted as narrating the story of an individual in conflict with the dominating group, where despite the efforts to control and subjugate it the individual represented by the cello soloist she is able to resist and perhaps even win the battle. This would be a positive story. It is also possible that the interpretation would see the cello as dominated by the orchestra in the end and the last notes as signifying the angelic sounds from the heavens rather than positive proclamation of a victory. It is said that Mscislav Rostropovich was very keen on seeing the concerto as narrating the positive and uplifting story with cello victory at the end, while Lutosławski often suggested that the ending notes were not meant to be the sounds of victory but the reflections of sounds from above.

²⁰ Hedrick Smith, *The Russians*, New York, 1976 quoted after: A. Thomas lecture on Lutosławski's *Concerto for Cello and Orchestra*, op. cit..

If we find it convincing that in the presented example of the *Cello Concerto* by Lutosławski the musical elements may indeed form a dramatic or better yet narrative structure, is it possible to say also that this work generates messages. Having in mind the definition of a message put forward by Levinson in “Messages in Art” it is possible to assume that there was a message (like the story about the conflict between the individual and political powers that try to subdue it explained a moment ago) that a thickly construed author could have intended to convey. All contextual information points to such possibility. Even more than that all historical information suggest such a reading. And even the protests of empirical author do not – as Levinson suggests – rule out this possibility or this particular message. And if this reading is indeed reasonably construed based on the broad context of the work it is a right message and right story. But is it? And which one? According to Levinson recipients should be able to find the coherent message for the artwork if it is successful as a work of art. If not it fails. This is I think where Levinson went a bit too far. Surely this particular work is not a failure of expression. Quite the contrary. The fact that audiences can't decide how exactly to hear the ending of Lutosławski's *Cello Concerto* says nothing about its aesthetic value or about its expressivity. Whether the story ends with the cello giving in and the message of the work is that of alarming indignation at the brute forces (political or otherwise) stepping on every truly independent individual or with the cello prevailing in the end and the message being that of saluting to the brave and victorious individual escaping from the system of control could not be resolved. Should then the audiences attempt to generate messages in case of such expressive music as this? Or maybe as Lutosławski seems to be saying the drama in music doesn't have to be translated into words or statements²¹.

²¹ This is what composer said first about the piece and than about its interpretation: “W moim utworze rola orkiestry jest nieco inna. Starałem się ją zbudować czerpiąc pewne analogie z innych sztuk, w szczególności z teatru. Jest to stosunek konfliktu. Od pierwszego dźwięku orkiestry sytuacja ta powinna być dla słuchacza jasna, gdyż orkiestra jest czynnikiem, który interweniuje, przerywa czy niemal przeszkadza. Potem następują "próby porozumienia" - dialogi. Ale i one są z kolei przerywane przez grupę instrumentów dętych blaszanych, która w tym utworze przyjmuje właśnie rolę "interwencyjną". Moim założeniem było znalezienie jakichś głębszych racji dla użycia dwóch sprzecznych z sobą niejako z natury elementów, jakimi są instrument solowy i orkiestra. Stosunek pomiędzy tymi dwoma elementami zmienia się w trakcie utworu, dochodzi nawet do momentu pełnego ich zharmonizowania (kantylena), ale to właśnie stwarza okazję do do najgwałtowniejszej interwencji, tym razem już wielkiej grupy orkiestry "blaszanej". [...]” and also “[...] Muzykę interpretuje się się bardzo rozmaicie i w tym jej siła i oryginalność. Gdybym chciał napisać dramat o konflikcie jednostki ze zbiorowością, napisałbym go słowami, to zaś, co służyło mi czasami jako rusztowanie w konstruowaniu formy muzycznej, nie miało pozostać w utworze jako jego immanentny element” , T. Kaczyński, *Rozmowy z Witoldem Lutosławskim*, PWM Kraków, 1972.

3.

It may be argued that all that I have shown so far applies only to instrumental music and that it is quite different in the case of vocal music. Levinson has argued in his text that there are some artworks that have messages and maybe *Cello Concerto* simply isn't one of those. This is why I would like to turn now to my second example, which is a composition "Its Gonna Rain" by composer Steve Reich²². The composition is based on spoken words recorded on a tape that is gradually looped and manipulated throughout the piece. It is also one of the early examples of minimal tape music typical of Steve Reich. What one hears from the beginning of the piece is the musical quality of the spoken words, which are then transformed during the piece into more and more fragmented elements until final phrase is reached and it becomes the focus point and the slow ending of the music. At first this music may sound not only minimalistic but quite abstract and disengaged having as its material a simple phrase that becomes more and more fragmented. Given the shape and structure of the work I don't think that it would be fitting to talk about the dramatic structure of the work. The narrative element on the other hand is something that is present throughout this piece. Two things seem to me important when interpreting "Its Gonna Rain". One is the history of the composition – its story. As it happens many of Reich's compositions have such stories. This one is about the preacher in New York who spoke about the end of the world recalling the story of the arc of Noah. Reich recorded this preacher taken by the music-like quality of his speech and later on decided to use it as a material for his composition²³. The other thing that should be taken into account when interpreting this piece is the very melodic quality of the voice in the recording and the powerful dynamics of the whole piece. The looping process in this particular piece, as Reich describes it²⁴, was rather spontaneous resulting from using two tapes with the same material in different time phases. What was created was the piece that starts with two almost completely synchronic

²² Steve Reich, "Its Gonna Rain", tape (1965).

²³ "Late in 1964, I recorded a tape in Union Square in San Francisco of a black preacher, Brother Walter, preaching about the Flood. I was extremely impressed with the melodic quality of his speech, which seemed to be on the verge of singing". S. Reich, *Writings on Music, 1965-2000*, ed. P. Hillier, Oxford University Press, New York 2002, p. 19.

²⁴ I am referring to the TV documentary "South Bank Show" directed by Matthew Tucker about Steve Reich (2006).

type recordings that go slowly out of sync in relation to each other creating very subtle but audible sound space of variations in between. Yet the most engaging element in Reich music is probably not the structure but the voice itself. Although the initial vocal material in the composition is cut and manipulated throughout the piece, the voice and its emotional overtones are very much the center of the piece. If the story of this music is about the preacher in the modern world and his powerful if undermined voice drowning in the sounds of the city, the message of the piece could be the very warning “its gonna rain” referring metaphorically to the situation of the city, the society or the whole world²⁵. Still, if this is message of Steve Reich composition, and I do think that this music is narrative in character and endowed with some sort of message in the sense described by Levinson in “Messages in Art”, one can't be sure what it is exactly. For as Levinson said in his text I too, “am not entirely sure” what it is. Perhaps than music, even narrative music in narrow sense (not just dramatic music) can only be said to generate messages if we allow for these messages to be not necessarily coherent or unified. Perhaps they could be seen as slightly out of phase to refer to compositional technique developed in the 60s by Steve Reich. Only than one could see the expressive and narrative potential of the music and even attempt to generate the message(s) that correspond to it from without reducing it to musical signaling.

Its Just a song

1.

Music shouldn't be reduced to signaling I am sure but how do we understand it then?

Assuming that there are musical works that are more likely to be interpreted through the messages they generate are these messages necessary to understand those works of art? Or more provocatively, is the message in art a right way to understand it?

²⁵ Steve Reich says: “So "It's Gonna Rain," especially the second half of it, is very bleak. You're literally hearing the world come apart. Technically, it's been said many times, the discovery of the phasing process was within that piece. It happened with those two little Wollensack tape recorders I had (also used on "Phase Piece"). I made identical loops and I thought I would line them up in a particular relationship. Mainly with "it's gonna fall" on top of "rain" with the two channel result being "it's gonna... it's gonna... rain... rain..." with 180 degrees separation “; Steve Reich in interview by Jason Gross (2000) at <http://www.furious.com/perfect/ohm/reich2.html> (06/05/2010).

For Levinson the artwork message should properly be taken as *message-as-conveyed-by-that-specific-vehicle*²⁶. Still there is something unclear in this description. Levinson talks about messages in art as forming part of the artwork's content and also seems that in his view the value of such works depend on formulating in words certain thoughts or images. That is why they are called messages in a first place. One should be able to phrase them, to put them into words and to understand them and grasp their meaning without confusion. As it is 'information in spoken or written form' or 'a basic thesis or lesson, a moral'²⁷ the message shouldn't be too vague. Otherwise it ceases to be a message. "Its gonna rain" would be a perfect message if it were a part of evening news, but as a message of a musical work it is rather confusing. Is art really saying anything? Is music saying anything?

2.

If our mode of understanding is truly linguistic²⁸ than perhaps we can't escape trying to turn the musical into words simply in attempt to grasp and familiarize it. Trying to see the moral of the sounding rhythms may not be the most foolish thing considering that the experience that allowed for its creation was mostly linguistic as well. But shouldn't we at last expect that concept of the message or moral will change in the process? That if the song has moral than it is a different moral and a different message than the one generated from not aesthetic and non artistic productions. Shouldn't we allow for the aesthetic code to set the tone, to blur the message as it were? For I would be prepared to argue – although it would have to be in another place and another time - that even the most "pronounced" musical messages (as in the case of music set the liturgical texts) turn to be almost incomprehensible when the music is truly listened to. Now for the most of musical works, I don't think that it is at all possible to speak of the messages they inspire and that can be generated from them. But perhaps one should not forget the music that is narrative in the narrow sense and here songs or vocal music are the best example. With songs we often get carried away looking for messages simply because they employ first person narration.

²⁶ see Jerrold Levinson, "Messages in Art", op. cit., s.426

²⁷ The American Heritage Dictionary.

²⁸ As suggested by many philosophers like Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Gadamer and various others before them.

But as Levinson admits at the end of his text:

“An artwork may not be saying what its speaker or narrator is saying, nor what any represented character, including the hero or protagonist, is saying or thinking.”²⁹

There are ample examples of songs (and vocal music in general) that sound quite different and inspire messages different than the text they are set to. There is one more example that I would like to end my explorations. I have always felt compelled to respond quite strongly emotionally to the song “Killing me softly” as performed by Roberta Flack. One of the reasons for my admiration for this songs, I think, is that its lyrics tell the story about why we listen to the music and how it makes us feel and it does it in its poetic words perfectly. In this song all the stages of engagement and fulfilment on part of the listener are portrayed with the help of music and lyrics with graceful simplicity. The emotional connection, the feeling of communion of thought, the immediate identification with the narrator (lyrical hero) and finally the cold realization that this is 'just a song' and not 'my song'. If we would transfer this 'story' to the subject of messages in musical works, which I think is most appropriate, it would appear that here as well we as listeners are subject to general misunderstanding that is perhaps both unavoidable and fruitful. On one hand the expected message(s) is neither clear nor coherent (as to whom it concerns for example) and it often appears that there are many messages instead of just one message or moral to be found. On the other hand trying to understand music as narrative and looking for messages within it just like with any other narrative art could sometimes be the best way to understand it. But thinking that we have found it and clinging to it certainly is not.

“He sang as if he knew me in all my dark despair

And then he looked right through me

As if I wasn't there

And he just kept on singing

Singing clear and strong

²⁹ J. Levinson, “Messages in Art”, op. cit., p. 240.

Strumming my pain with his fingers

Singing my life with his words

Killing me softly with his song,

Killing me softly with his songs

Telling my whole life with his words

Killing me softly with his song”³⁰

And as for the answer to the questions asked before several times whether music can be seen as generating messages and if so are these messages necessary to understand it I can only say again this time with more confidence that “I am not entirely sure”.

³⁰ “Killing me softly with His Song” by Charles Fox, Norman Gimbel (1971) as sung by Roberta Flack.

Summary

In his article untitled *Messages in Art* Jerrold Levinson discusses the idea of a message behind a work of art. He argues that despite certain disclaimers put forward by artists it is „hard to deny that artworks (...) very often do have messages, and far from inexpressible ones”. From given examples it would seem that Levinson assumes that musical work just as other artworks sometimes generate messages and that in order for a work of music to be successful in expression this message should be comprehensible and certainly not incoherent. The author of this paper draws on Levinson's “Messages in Art” as well as his “Music as Narrative and Music as Drama” to explore further the issues mentioned above. In particular the author argues that seeing musical works through the message it may generate is somewhat reductive and that musical work as well as other artworks are prone to abiding by an aesthetic code and therefore even when they allow for interpretation in terms of messages or morals these messages are incoherent or vague at best.

Keywords:

music aesthetics, music narrative, Jerrold Levinson, Witold Lutosławski, Steve Reich, Roberta Flack