

# Music as a Threshold Experience<sup>1</sup>

by Frederick Amrine

Even the simplest piece of music takes us right up to the threshold and across into a direct experience of the spiritual world.<sup>2</sup> Like all thresholds, music is a transition between two qualitatively different spaces. Thresholds resist movement into the new space by presenting a trial that must be met or a riddle that must be solved, after which the seeming barrier becomes a door. Like all genuine threshold experiences, music's first and all-important trial is for us to raise into consciousness the hitherto unconscious fact that music has carried us beyond a threshold. Then the stream of enigmas begins to flow.

My own entry into this topic began with a vague intuition that music is unlike any other sensory experience, which led, via Steiner and Zuckerkandl, to the Socratic prerequisite: the wisdom of knowing that I did not know music. The more I thought about it, the more puzzling it became, and only then did I begin to realize the extent to which music is not just a joy, but also a site for real meditative work. May this essay help guide others along the same path.

Music is exceptional within sensory experience in that it is only *apparently* sensory. Whenever normal consciousness tries to grasp music, it slips away. We realize that music has led us unconsciously into a supersensible realm, and that in order to understand that higher realm, we must first expand our consciousness. The best way to begin expanding is to grapple with the riddles. Thus I propose to explore five ways in which music is enigmatic: 1) music is initially and always a *supersensible* perception; 2) music is our only experience within normal consciousness of *real* as opposed to merely apparent motion; 3) music creates *its own space* within which the rules of the physical world do not apply; 4) music unfolds within *its own time* that is fundamentally different from "clock time"; and 5) music is a living organism—indeed, a direct experience of life itself.

## Music as Supersensible Perception

Reflection on musical experience leads us inexorably to the great paradox that *audible tones are not music, and music is not composed of audible tones*. Rudolf Steiner points to just this enigma in *Eurythmy as Visible Music*: "I could give you a somewhat peculiar definition of music . . . What is music? It is what one does *not* hear." [48] If eurythmy is "the invisible made visible," music is "the inaudible made audible." Victor Zuckerkandl distinguishes everyday hearing, which reaches out toward an object as it were, from musical hearing, in which there is no physical object: "Tones do not relate to things, do not express anything about things, represent nothing, betoken nothing, indicate nothing." [I, 16] On reflection, we realize that music *bears no relationship to the*

<sup>1</sup> This essay, based on talks given in Detroit, Wilton, NH, Toronto, and Chicago, is founded upon the insights of Rudolf Steiner, but also those of an extraordinary music theorist, Victor Zuckerkandl (1896-1965), especially his two-volume masterpiece, *Music and the External World* (1956) and *Man the Musician* (1973). (Henceforth "I" and "II" respectively.) Born and raised in Vienna, Zuckerkandl was the protégé of the eminent theorist Heinrich Schenker. Zuckerkandl does not mention Rudolf Steiner in his writings, but their spirit is uncannily anthroposophical, and I believe we should adopt him as one of our own. Indeed, no small part of my intention in writing this essay is to draw attention to his remarkable work, which is highly respected by music theorists, and hence a potential bridge from mainstream music theory to Steiner's even more esoteric pronouncements.

<sup>2</sup> *The Inner Nature of Music* (GA/CW 283) reiterates this point repeatedly, e.g.: "Unconsciously, the musician has received the musical prototype from the spiritual world, which he then transposes into physical sounds"; ". . . music produced in the physical world is a shadow, a real shadow of the much loftier music of Devachan" (3 December 1906); and melodies and harmonies are "a foretaste of the spiritual world" (12 November 1906).

*world of physical objects*. Romanticism focused and founded upon just this exceptional aspect of music. Coleridge, for example, described music as experience *ab intra*, and Schopenhauer asserted that, whereas all other experience must pass through the prisms of sensory representation, music is a direct expression of Being. “Inward leads the mysterious path” for Novalis, and it was precisely because of music’s radical interiority that the Romantics made music the centerpiece of their revolutionary aesthetics.

Another dimension of this mystery is that music resides not in specific tones, but rather in *the relationship between tones*. That is why a melody can be transposed into different keys: the specific tones change, but the melody remains instantly recognizable as the same. “What you do not hear but yet experience between the tones is music in the *true* sense.”<sup>3</sup> Here Zuckerkandl adduces the wisdom of the ancient Chinese *Book of Rites*: “It is music that gave birth to the tones.”

What this all means ultimately is that *you never have heard music with your ears*. But you also didn’t just think your musical experience. Rather, you *intuited* it, directly, as *something ideal within the real*. Music is in that sense a genuine IMAGINATIVE experience, raying into normal consciousness from beyond the threshold.

## Music as Real Motion

If we were more conscious, and more reflective, we would realize that physical motion as “perceived” in normal consciousness is already enigmatic. As with the interiority of music, here too there is a long history of philosophical argument, beginning with Zeno’s famous paradox about the arrow that seems to fly, but is actually standing still whenever one looks at it. Great thinkers have struggled for millennia to prove Zeno wrong, and all have failed. For normal sensory perception, *motion does not exist*. In the same way that you never have heard *music* (as opposed to audible tones) with your ears, you never have seen *motion* with your eyes. Intellectually, one can deduce that motion must have happened (at a later time, the arrow is in a different place, therefore it must have moved). But motion itself is not read out of sensory experience: it is an inner event. Motion is not derived from experience; rather, our sensory experience of apparent motion presupposes *pure* motion, and hence it is derived from that pure motion.

Like motion, music is something ideal intuited within the real. But Zuckerkandl goes further, arguing that music and motion are not just analogous. Rather, musical experi-

ence is privileged in that it allows us to intuit directly the pure motion of which apparent motion within sensory experience is but the shadow. And it is not just the ideality of musical motion that is mysterious. After all, Zuckerkandl reminds us, what “moves” in a melody is *not the audible tones*. Imagine any stirring melody, such as the rallying song of the French Revolution, *La Marseillaise*: even here, the notes themselves do not move; the melody marches on with élan, but the individual notes *stand forever in their places*. When the audible tones themselves move, as in the screeching *glissando* of a siren, melody is destroyed; we get something more like the opposite of music.

It follows that “musical tones can be interpreted as events in a dynamic field.” [II, 98] Apart from the octave, we experience specific musical intervals as inherently unstable, as needing and wanting resolution.<sup>4</sup> Hence music is not a structure built up out of pitch and duration, but rather *an intention to move*. To hear a musical melody is to hear directly *the will-in-hearing*. Tones are “dynamic symbols” [I, 68] Unlike words, which point at ideas or objects, the melody moving through the tones *points at itself*: “The meaning of a tone, however, lies not in what it points to but in the pointing itself. . . in the individual gesture.” [I, 68] Music is pure motion that signifies from the inside out, which is to say: *music is a series of inner gestures*.

And it is, of course, this realm of inner gestures generating the apparently static structure of music that Rudolf Steiner sought to make immediately visible through eurythmy. Zuckerkandl also takes us right up to that same threshold, and across. He reminds us again that music is, paradoxically, something one might call a “sense-free sensation”: “What is peculiar to the dynamic quality of tone is that nothing in the physical event which produces the sensation corresponds to it. The tone quality that makes music possible has no counterpart in the material world.” [I, 100] To prove this point, Zuckerkandl adduces the results of a remarkable experiment in which top professional musicians were asked to perform various pieces, while at the same time the actual tone pitches were recorded by an oscilloscope. Afterward, the musicians agreed unanimously that the performance had been perfectly in tune. But the oscilloscope showed otherwise: shockingly, many notes were more than a half-tone sharp

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this fascinating chapter in the evolution of human consciousness greatly exceeds the scope of the present essay. In GA/CW 283, Steiner asserts that nothing reveals the evolution of human consciousness as clearly as the history of music, and he gives a breathtaking account especially of musical experience in the remote past.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Eurythmy as Visible Music*, p. 48.

or flat, which means that the note performed was “objectively” closer to its neighbor than the intended note. And yet all the notes were *heard* as correct and in tune. The immediate conclusion to draw is that music is indeed fundamentally other than audible tone. But the experiment yielded a further result that was even more revealing: the “mistakes” were all forward-looking; they all were movements in the direction that the melody itself was headed. Music is not a static edifice, but rather much more like a force vector. Music is not built from the bottom up, tone by tone. Rather, the full melody is always already present and always already in motion, seeking the tones in which it will express itself. The *Book of Rites* got it right: it is the music that gives birth to the tones.

Thus it is that hearing music in the right way is already a transcendent experience. As Zuckerkandl argues, “what takes place here is a real breakthrough in the realm of perception...Hearing dynamic tone qualities... is direct perception of nonmaterial events...the tone transcends the auditory sensation within the audible, an inner transcendence.” Again, everyday hearing “reaches out toward” objects, whereas music is non-representational. But the dynamic qualities that are the essence of music *do reach out*: they reach out toward something inner, and they represent that inwardness indirectly.

Music reaches not towards an object or an idea, but rather *towards a feeling*. Yet, paradoxically, musical feeling is not merely private or subjective. “Tonal motion is motion of the type of emotion, self-motion, living motion, but not that of a ‘self.’” [II, 155] Musical melody is a *gestural image* of a *reality* that lies “over the horizon.”<sup>5</sup> If music is the expressive image of a living self, yet not of one’s own, subjective self, what can be expressing itself in music? It must be the gesturing of a supra-personal intelligence. *Music must be the gestural expression of a higher being*. And it follows that musical motion is a higher type of *emotion*, an objective, cognitive feeling—not our shadowy, moody, everyday feelings, but *real feeling*—that points over the horizon of consciousness to a supersensible world of higher beings. The non-representational motions of musical melody are “empty” gestures, into which a being can enter. To be able to experience this in full consciousness would mean having developed the higher faculty that Rudolf Steiner terms

5 Cf. Steiner’s stunning metaphor of the compass in the lectures on “Psychosophy” in GA/CW 115, *A Psychology of Body, Soul & Spirit* (SteinerBooks, 1999), describing how artistic feeling is truly cognitive: the needle of the compass points at something over the horizon, which remains invisible; but it points at something *entirely real*.

INSPIRATION, and describes as “a weaving in a toneless music.”<sup>6</sup>

## Music as Pure Space

Music is not a spatial experience in any conventional sense. Rather, music creates and dwells within its own, pure space apart from the space of sensory perception. We take entirely for granted many aspects of musical space that are actually, on reflection, enigmatic if not miraculous. Only one object can occupy any physical space at a given time, but musical space is not limited in this way.

Even the simplest experience of musical harmony implies the co-presence of different “objects” (in this case, tones) within the same space: otherwise, we would not hear chords. Or imagine the finale of an opera, in which the same musical space is simultaneously inhabited by an orchestra, a chorus, and multiple soloists—potentially dozens of separate voices, all sounding together. And in polyphonic music, of course, this experience can be even richer and more complicated. There were avant-garde musicians among Steiner’s contemporaries who sought to explore and expand music’s spatial “envelope.” Notable examples would be the tonal *plenum* (all possible notes in all registers) sounded at the end of Schönberg’s *Erwartung*, or Charles Ives’s *Fourth Symphony*, which creates a tonal space with traffic so dense that two conductors are needed simultaneously!

Musical space is pure space, which is to say: space as a living, growing reality *before it has been darkened and divided by objects*. One might even assert that music is an act of grace that grants us intimations of our experience of the world between death and rebirth, where we *live inside each other and inside higher beings*. Although we may not be conscious of it initially, in our experience of musical harmony, *we are already standing within the spiritual world*.

## Music as Pure Time

Music unfolds within a temporal dimension that is fundamentally different from the “clock time” of ordinary sensory experience. The metronome is the enemy of musical expression; indeed, expressive interpretation always involves judicious use of *rubato*, *accelerandi* and *ritardandi*. Moreover, almost all conventional musical forms are circular or cyclical in their use of repeats. High-level art music often employs formal structures that deliberately undermine singular, linear clock-time.

Hence musical expression is more like the opposite of

6 GA/CW 322, *The Boundaries of Natural Science*, tr. Amrine and Oberhuber (1983), revised edition with a new title forthcoming from SteinerBooks.

clock time. The great French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, has written: “We think naturally that the past secretes the future ahead of it. But this notion of time is refuted by the melody. At the moment when the melody begins, the last note is there, in its own manner. In a melody, a reciprocal influence between the first and last note takes place, and we have to say that the first note is possible only because of the last, and vice versa.”<sup>7</sup> Again, the melody is always already formed, and always already in motion, seeking the tones for its expression. Zuckerkandl asserts that the dimensionality and directionality of musical unfolding is not from past to present to future, but rather from depth to surface, from implicit to explicit, from latent to manifest: “...the temporal growth of the musical organism does not take place in time but in a dimension perpendicular to [clock-]time.” [II, 191] The musical melody is always already present to INSPIRATION, and the composer hears it before the first note is scribbled on paper. It must be the same kind of experience that the great avant-garde artist and profound anthroposophist Joseph Beuys was describing when he paradoxically asserted that “one *hears* a sculpture before one sees it.” In the same way, one hears the unfolding of the living musical organism before it emerges audibly within the clock-time of a specific performance of the piece.

Hence moments that are disjunct in clock-time must be simultaneously present as melody in a quasi-spatial array. Music is a Grail kingdom where “time becomes space,” as happens in the life-review after death. Those who have developed the higher faculty of IMAGINATION can experience this etheric world before death. Rightly understood, music gives us more than a premonition of this higher level of consciousness: it provides a direct experience of the etheric world in IMAGINATION.<sup>8</sup> Steiner describes true IMAGINATION as, among many other things, a deeply joyful experience. Is this the ultimate reason why for so many people music is the source of their greatest joy?

## Music as a Living Organism

Music enigmatically exhibits many characteristics of a living organism. Kant saw clearly that even the simplest biological organisms cannot be explained reductively, which led to his witty prediction that “there never will be a Newton of a blade of grass.” Kant also intuited that works of art are ultimately inexplicable in the same way: hence he paired art and biology in his Third Critique.

<sup>7</sup> *Nature* (Northwestern UP, 2003), p. 174.

<sup>8</sup> GA/CW 283 *passim*.

Pursuing Kant’s intuition, later thinkers have sought to understand the mysteries of biological life by meditating upon the mysteries of music. Indeed, there is an important alternative tradition within biology, beginning with the great embryologist Karl Ernst von Baer and running through Gestalt psychology, early ecologists such as Jakob von Uexküll to postwar phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty that attempts to explain biological organisms through systematic analogy to music. Steiner’s classmate Christian von Ehrenfels is widely credited with having founded Gestalt psychology on the insight that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” But even the few who realize that it was von Ehrenfels who coined this now-famous phrase, so often adduced to describe the life of biological organisms and systems, seldom recall that its original context was a description of *musical form*.

Nor should it surprise us to see many great music theorists seeking to unravel the mysteries of musical form by exploring parallels with biological organisms. Heinrich Schenker alluded systematically to Goethe’s morphology, arguing that the fully-developed musical structure which is performed grows directly out of *seeds* in the spiritual “background.” He terms this “living natural force” that has “given birth to living tones” a Goethean *Ursatz*. Music is like Goethe’s proliferated rose: a window through which one can view the underlying archetypes directly.

For Zuckerkandl, music is not just *like* an organism; rather, it is *a real outgrowth of nature herself*: “The composer of genius has the primal form not as a schema in front of him, but as a force behind him” [II, 178]; “Tonal motion is *audible* motion of this kind, it is audibly alive.” Again, we see music as pure gesture—“pure” in the Kantian sense, which is to say: *ideal* and *selfless*. What can be alive as an ideal, apart from a self? Only *life itself*, which Steiner calls the etheric realm. Tones are dynamic symbols because we *hear forces* in them—*formative forces*. Music leads us deeply into a direct experience of *life itself*.

Kant was right: there never will be a Newton who can explain even the simplest organism reductively. But if we follow the lead of Steiner, Zuckerkandl, and others in this nascent paradigm of musical aesthetics, someday there might well be a *Mozart* of a blade of grass!

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