

Introductory lecture, Symposium Music and Rhetorics

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen,

This day serves as a conclusion to the seminar on music and rhetorics of which various contributions have been captured on DVD. Up till now the emphasis has been on the period in music history that is most commonly associated with the use of classical rhetorical means. Today we shall focus on the question how to apply rhetorics to music from the period after 1800.

In this introduction I wish to concentrate on the fact that rhetorics is again being taken seriously in science as a means to analyse not only the spoken and written word but music, film, television etc as well. In this context we may hear the term “New Rhetorics” currently being used.

I wish to state that new conceptions concerning the working of language and the ways we acquire and process knowledge have, among other things, led to a renewed interest in rhetorics. The negative connotations which have accompanied rhetorics originate from Plato's time. Plato resisted the Sophist relativism which claimed to be capable of convincing the listener of whatever proposition through the use of rhetorical means. But – to quote from Wikipedia – while ancient rhetorical scholarship had focused primarily on rhetoric as speech, contemporary rhetorical theorists are interested in the panoply of (whole of) human symbolic behavior—both the spoken and written word as well as music, film, radio, television, etc. Thus Kenneth Burke, who defined the human being as the "symbol-using animal," defined rhetoric as "the use of symbols to induce cooperation in those who by nature respond to symbols."

I intend to demonstrate that there is no reason for relativism concerning analyses using the instruments of rhetoric. In this connection I quote Viola de Hoog's concluding sentences to her compelling lecture about “**Figuren**” in Bach's Matthew Passion. She gives very sound advice to musicians studying rhetorical principles, but at the same time she appears to tone down the importance. This seems sensible and wise but I claim that this relativism is unnecessary.

quote of Viola de Hoog:

“From the point of view of the player and especially the 21st century musician there must be no misunderstanding. Whatever the composer's intention may have been, he cannot foresee the way in which his music is being received or understood by the listener.”

When performing a composition knowing the exact name of each and every figure does not help the performer and is an individual matter and decision.

While practising it is good to analyse form and to be able to recognise figures, but in the end giving a musical figure a name is a very subjective matter. Something I might want to name anabasis, you may choose to name hyperbole.

Understanding a musical or verbal text will, for both performer and listener, always be a matter of interpretation.

To demonstrate this I steal an example given by Mozart contemporary Türk, from his piano method:

'Er verlor sein Geld nicht allein sein Leben' end of quote.

Viola supplies a German Text by Türk as an interesting example of poly-interpretation: by shifting the accent in the pronunciation the meaning is transformed. But does this prove that lingual expressions are ambiguous and poly-interpretable? Actually it only demonstrates that lingual expressions can not be understood if we do not know the context in which these expressions function. Translated to music this means we cannot understand music by itself but only within the context in which it functions. Viola suggests that Türk's sentence is in itself poly-interpretable, but when the speaker deliberately chooses an accent, a well-placed comma, the meaning of the utterance becomes unambiguous: "Er verlor sein Geld,,, nicht allein sein Leben."

In modern linguistics meaning is regarded as the result of a communication process, meaning arises from the context of action. I quote from a recent Introduction to Linguistics:

"Meaning in communicative terms is the result of an interpretation – or construction process. The meaning of utterances is determined by language users and is not an attribute of language".

If we translate this to music this implies: the meaning of music is determined by us, the users of music, and is not given in "the music".

I started off with the statement that, among other things, new conceptions concerning the functioning of language have led to a re-appraisal of rhetorics. Therefore I will indulge for a moment in a small digression into linguistics:

We have or had a too simplistic notion concerning the manner in which language or music is understood. The customary communication model is described as the pipe line metaphor: We have a transmitter, a speaker, a composer, a performer who transmits a message. The message is decoded, 'unwrapped', by a receiver. In

principle this is a one way system. The score as an absolute object with perpetual value, a message to be unwrapped firstly by the performer and secondly by the listener. But in reality the meaning of the score cannot be separated from the context in which the score functions. I quote once more:

“ You might say that the pipe line metaphor represents the communication process as a process that *starts* with meaning, to wit the intention of the transmitter (meaning the composer), while the representation of communication as an interpretation process sees meaning as the *result*. Language users interpret not only the content of expressions but also their meaning as actions”.

Active construction of an interpretative context in this way is termed “contextualising”.

In this view the fact that a text is poly-interpretable is nothing exceptional: naturally a text is poly-interpretable because it must be continually interpreted and understood anew by users.

I allow myself a short excursion into philosophy:

In the twentieth century analytical philosophy has had a profound influence on scientific thought: expressions in language had to be assessed on their objective truth content, statements about the objective world surrounding us had to be valid irrespective of time and place and irrespective of the incidental user. This led to a rigid division between so-called verifiable use of language and literary or figurative use of language: the latter was all very well for the arts but not of any scientific value. Rhetorics, metaphors, similes etc had no place in science. The artist does not have to justify his use of language and his interpretations because esthetics are reduced to a matter of personal taste: *l'art pour l'art*.

Nowadays the conviction has gained ground in so-called cognitive linguistics and psychology that metaphors play an essential role in the way we interpret reality and form our thoughts about it. This contributed to the title of a recent and very interesting study by Michael Spitzer: “ Metaphor and Musical Thought” which in turn is inspired by the famous book from the eighties: “ Metaphors we live by” by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson.

If concepts are formed in a much more capricious way than was formerly thought, if the relationship between a concept and a specific manifestation is not consistent but depends on the adequate fit of the manifestation on the concept in a specific situation in reality then meaning can not be pinned down: meaning originates in the context in which the users, the persons involved ‘create meaning’ time and time again. And is this not exactly what artists do: create meaning?

Let us return to Viola de Hoog's relativism concerning the importance of rhetorics:

What was discussed earlier demonstrates that Viola de Hoog is absolutely right in stressing that music seems to be in a certain sense poly-interpretable but I state that the same applies to all situations in which people communicate, especially for language. The fact that the meaning or interpretation of – for instance – a Beethoven sonata cannot be pinned down often leads musicians to say that music is intangible and cannot be caught in words etc, etc. This relieves the artist from the obligation to reflect on his interpretation for a mystery cannot be explained. But if we continually produce new meanings in a process of interpretation then we can say something tangible about how we arrive at an interpretation and with what aim: if I pronounce Türk's text differently the meaning is altered but I will be conscious of the fact that I have a different purpose:

“ Er verlor sein Geld nicht, allein sein Leben!

This modern idea – that meaning is the result of an interpretation process and depends on the context in which communication takes place has led to a re-appraisal of rhetorics: what we wish to convey to the listener, how we wish to convey it and why: rhetorical analysis forces us to make our choices more consciously.

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