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RESPONSE TO BEARDSLEY ON "A SEMIOTIC THEORY OF
AESTHETIC EDUCATION"

by

Ian H. Henderson

After several readings of Beardsley's paper, I have begun to attempt to interpret from the standpoint of a musician-educator just what the practical application might be of this thoughtful analysis of artistic and aesthetic processes. Not being a philosopher myself, in the formal sense, I find it necessary to grope for practical meanings among the terminologies. Metaphorical predicates, syntactic density and repleteness, exemplification, and semiotic symbol-schemes are not my usual bag. My ontological and epistemological needs are more readily satisfied when the referents are major and minor, binary and ternary, tonal and atonal, consonant and dissonant, even loud and soft, or sharp and flat (naturally).

I recognize freely that our apprehension of musical art works is at times cognitive (we think our way through a composition), at times kinesthetic (we clap and tap inwardly if not outwardly) and at times affective (we sense moods, emotions, and feelings as we perceive the musical performance). In how many, and in which ways we find meaning in the performance is variable too according to our past experience with the work (even the Beethoven Fifth can be labeled "war horse" if it is heard badly performed too often). We find meanings in music according to our present physical, emotional, and intellectual "set" (using "set" in the psychology sense); and according to the many conditions of the particular performance (whether live or recorded, whether performed in the dark or with "visual" accompaniment, whether the seat is hard or soft—someone once said, I believe it was my wife, at the end of an overlong concert, that "the musical mind can comprehend only as much as the listener's seat can endure"). All of these and other intrinsic and extrinsic variables are found to affect our perception, apprehension, and discovery or assignment of metaphoric meaning to the musical work.

As a musician, I find myself troubled by anyone's assumption or presumption that the Finale of the Beethoven Fifth is inherently *triumphant*. I am as willing as anyone to apply to that movement a number of labels (and one of them is the label *triumphant*—I don't particularly care whether the label is "is triumphant" or "evokes feelings of triumph" or "makes me think of triumphant" or "sounds triumphant"). I would make a few points about this application of label.

I think we assign as many meanings as our complex of perceptions demands: remembering that we hear, see, smell, taste, and touch, that all of these senses are or can be active at the same time that we think, feel, and react kinesthetically while a work is performed; remembering that for a particular performance one or the other or a combination of the senses might be more actively stimulated than others, that our "set" might motivate more thinking, less feeling, more physical reaction, less thought, etc., we will tend to assign labels of "sounds triumphant," "feels triumphant," "makes me think triumph,"

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or even “convinces me that it actually is triumphant” according to the relative configuration of the variables at work. As an aside, but close to this point, let me say that I do not have a highly developed sense of absolute pitch—a misapplication of the word absolute if there ever was one. The Beethoven Fifth could be performed in my presence in the key of C-flat minor instead of C minor and (though I might sense a different overall effect to the performance) I would be relatively untroubled. To many of my friends and colleagues that would be an unbearable and torturous experience. On the other hand, if I were to hear a performance of the work while following the printed score (in the case of this symphony the physical presence of the score is no longer required because I have followed it on so many occasions anyway) I will be obliged to assign labels of “C-minorish” as well as “foreboding,” “A-flat majorish” as well as “strongly assertive,” “scherzoish” as well as “challenging,” and “C-majorish” as well as “triumphant and fulfilling.” In other words, my labels will tend to illustrate what I know from the standpoint of musical understandings: there will be key labels, tempo labels, structural form labels, metric labels, nuance labels, historical and stylistic labels, etc. as well as what I feel for the music “I’ve heard it too often or too recently;” “it’s depressing because the brasses are out of tune tonight” or “because the hall is too warm tonight” or “because we argued over a parking space outside the hall tonight.”

I think too that there is more significance to the frame of reference than either Goodman or Beardsley has noted. I mean that in this sense: that those of us steeped in Western Civilization’s classical/European artistic traditions have those traditions as our peculiar frame of reference and that our willingness to assign a label of “triumphant” to a Mendelssohn Wedding March, a Beethoven Fifth finale or a March from *Aida* is in large part engendered by our conditioning. The frame of reference for classical Indian music is a different one, one we in the West have just begun to attend to. I used to wonder at my own inability to sense the referential meaning of an Israeli folk melody until the Yiddish text was translated for me. I had been so carefully schooled to associate minor tonality with sadness that I had trouble finding character of joyfulness in what was to me a “sadness”-endowed musical configuration. Strange it is that even the ancient Greeks ascribed strength to the Dorian mode (very like our minor) and femininity or weakness to our stalwart major tonality, their Ionian mode. In other words, I don’t personally believe that the ethos or meaning or character or metaphor is inherently in the art work. I think we assign a variety of meanings at various times in accordance with our set, our culture, our experience, and our particular perceptions.

That brings me to the point that I agree with Beardsley in his finding that art and the aesthetic experience provide us with a means for mediation, freedom of choice, and, to me, option of interpretation. In short, the art work allows for a multiplicity of meanings rather than a single meaning. The arts, being gloriously unpredictable, are not science; the arts utilize quantitative principles but are not mathematical; the arts reflect upon history but transcend the finality of past events. I greatly admire those who are motivated to perform cellular biopsies upon the art object’s left ventricle, but I prefer, myself, to

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drink to the unpredictability of art, to its wonderful vagueness. I revel in my freedom to find in each art object the distinctive and personal meanings that you and others may or may not apprehend. And I congratulate the artist who has the mysterious power to create one work with so many meanings, some unique and some universal.