

Atonal Music and a Schizophrenic Persona: Applying Robinson's Theory to Morton Feldman

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In the world of modern music, there is an inclination to play with atonality and compose without melody. Morton Feldman's work, *For Samuel Beckett* (1986), is a work toying successfully with atonality and non-melody. It begins suddenly without any development of a theme, elapses at a similar pace, never rising or falling. It is fleshed out by colorful tones, and ends just as it starts: abruptly. The mood does not change, nor does it develop or map out a scene or character. It hits us in the face, painfully absorbed into our skin without warning, even though the score calls for *pianissimo*. There is not a character to be found in the work, nor a story to be told. It is place of unmoored, incomplete persons in which no one persona can be assembled: a place for a schizophrenic persona. Even in Feldman's opera, *Neither* (1977), the human voice cannot give us a character or story to move with emotionally, only sudden flashes of repetitious notes entwined with silence.

In light of this example of musicality, a theory of music must account for atonality and anti-melodic works. Can such a work, lacking development and melody, be expressive or emotionally moving? In the later sections of Jenefer Robinson's book, *Deeper than Reason* (2005), she argues for a theory of musical expression. The theory she puts forth is one attempting to explain how certain musical pieces express emotions. She claims that music expresses not only through melody but also through a musical persona formed through the structure. In this paper, I will first explain Robinson's basic theory of musical expression, then explore if such a theory accounts for the examples of musical expression within the modern trend of atonality or lack of melody (a structure possibly unnatural to our cognitive temperament). Finally, I will propose that a strict structure is not an

essential part of the musical expression of a ‘persona’ or authoritative voice. The persona need not be completed, but can be expressed in fragments. To glimpse the persona and understand the musical work, we do not need melody. Sounds and noises (perhaps even silence) in the context of musical listening alone are sufficient for emotional response to an expression of what I call a ‘partial’ or ‘schizophrenic’ persona.

Robinson uses recent studies in physiological responses to music as part of her theory of expression, relating the bodily experience of music to the expressive and structural aspects of music. Following Krumhansel’s experiment, Robinson says,

...physiological changes induced while listening to complex music do map onto the dynamic emotions we feel as we listen...it seems likely they also map the structure and the expressiveness in the music. In this way our emotional responses guide us listeners through the music and help us identify important structural and expressive passages. (Robinson, 378)

This fits nicely into her theory of expressions, for it accounts for bodily participation in the work, i.e., through the ongoing affective appraisals in which we access the gut reactions we experience to the music. Music does affect us physiologically (this is what Robinson calls the Jazzercise effect), and it continues to affect us emotionally through that ongoing physical response, changing us physically, and repeatedly, so as to shift our point of view, thus our mood.

Mood and emotion are two different concepts that Robinson separates to validate her theory of musical expression. Mood is more “*global* and *diffuse*” and is lacking an object, thus fitting with the nature of music better because music (unlike literature and visual art) does not always have an object on which to focus (Robinson 393). We say “I am in a bad mood” not “I am in a bad mood at my car.” Instead, we would say, “I am angry at my car.”¹ Mood is what is really altered by musical expression, which makes sense because moods are of a longer duration and lower intensity than object-oriented emotional moments. Moods also, by their lacking an object, are not based in affective appraisals, but rise instead with our being physiologically shifted into a position. We say, “I am in a bad mood *because* of my car,” meaning that I had the initial appraisal of ‘BAD’ and the cognitive response of “I am angry at my car,” thus leading to a mood implying a ‘point of view in which the world seems a place where I am stuck with only BAD cars.’ Hearing something expressing frustration, perhaps the first movement of Beethoven’s *Kreutzer* Sonata (Violin Sonata, No. 9, op. 47, 1802), we are physically placed in agitation and then the mood of being disposed to agitation sets in.²

For Robinson, it is also important to note that emotions help us understand the music and what it is attempting to express. After we have had some sort of alert or appraisal, then we become emotional and thoughtful about the emotions expressed

in the work. Thus, our emotional response helps us understand the point of the piece (though it is not the whole story, for we can also research the composer and try and understand his purposes). Robinson writes, referencing Meyer's theory of expression, "the emotions that he thinks music evokes *alert* the listener not only to the structure of the music, but also to its expressiveness..." (366). Robinson seems to want a synthesis of her Romantic theory of expression and Meyer's theory of emotion through cognition of tonal aspects and rhythm, in which the *melody* and *overall structure* of a piece guides us through the *expression* throughout the piece, leading us to a full emotional response. These responses arise after the Jazzercise effect, which causes physiological changes and thus mood/world-view (cognitive) changes.

There appears to be a crucial role of melody in relation to these gut reactions in Robinson's theory. Melody is what helps us map the emotions during a piece; it acts as our guide. Melody gives the work its sense of "logical progression" (Slonimsky 311). But it is not just melody or mode, but "the overall musical content in which the expressive passage occurs" that also directs our emotional response (Karl and Robinson 405). The overall musical piece can be seen as "the unfolding of the psychological experience of the musical persona over time" and our feelings through the piece of music are our response to this musical persona's "gestures" of their psychological states. We could say the expression (to which we respond emotionally to through the musical persona) is wrapped up in the structure. They are not separate.

The most important idea I wish to discuss here is the use of structure (as the melodic musical map) and what it means for something to be a musical persona that expresses. I will first discuss what a persona is according to Robinson, and then relate the idea of the persona to musical expression. Robinson says earlier in her book that the expression of emotion in art is achieved if in the work there is "evidence that a persona (which could but need not be the artist) is experiencing/has experienced this emotion" (271). Therefore, it can be inferred that the emotional content expressed by the artist and experienced by the art viewer is shared by means of a persona. This persona can be thought of as being a fictional character in a novel or as the author themselves. The musical structure is like the words that the character and author employ with the goal of expression. Applying this concept of a persona to music, Robinson says, "a ... consequence ... [of the] idea that music can contain agents or characters or personae is that it shows how cognitively complex emotions can be expressed by instrumental music" (372). Postulating a persona in a musical work allows one to avoid the problem of whether we feel what the composer is feeling or feeling our own feelings in relation to our experience (thereby ignoring what the true emotional content of the music is meant to be), for it allows us to make out of musical notation a culturally conventional being to which a listener, like a reader, can respond. Robinson claims that we do not respond to musical notes or to the composer's feeling, but to this

persona.

But there is music without a building-up period, a narrative: music that is non-linear, even though it plays over a set period of time. It has no characters, no plot, not even an active dialogue between instruments (as in many live jazz performances). Can one have emotional responses to this kind of music which lacks conventional structures? Would it fail to create a full persona? I will now give a brief overview of the nature of atonal music and then discuss its relation to Robinson's theory of expression.

After Arnold Schönberg and Anton von Webern began questioning tonality, a string of American composers were anxious to write music that would break free of the three hundred year old European tonal tradition. Many musical works in the 20th century were made of "freely chromatic atonality and an essentially nonperiodic rhythmic structure" (Rochberg 2). These works also aimed to break down the idea of a musical 'story'. George Rochberg says, in discussion of the movement towards modern music, that the music has achieved, "its liberation from... 'the musical train of thought'" (4). American composer Morton Feldman (1926-1987) is one of the most notable figures to work without melody and the "musical train of thought" and to experiment with tone color (beyond the chromatic scale).

When Feldman's work *For Samuel Beckett* opens, the listeners find themselves in a "closed world ... and right from the first measure we find our selves in the midst of it" (Wilson 9). There is no introduction to the piece; we are just thrown into it and must quickly adjust to the uneasy tones. Feldman works outside the realm of story-telling and melody, but instead was focused on "a seemingly oxymoronic principle of predetermined indeterminacy" in which the listeners cannot predict the next note, or memorize the piece as a whole (barely as a portion!) but there is still a given range for the musicians to play in and work with, so it is not complete indeterminacy (Slonimsky 156). In *For Samuel Beckett*, "[s]ound layers...shift together" and notes move into each other to tell not a story, but tell "about itself: no 'program,' no 'plan,' no sounding drama" (Wilson 10). Feldman's music is linked to abstract expressionism, and often related to de Kooning and Guston's work. One might say that these artists make similar works of art in paint as Feldman does with sound: there is no place to begin or end, or narrative to follow, or person to relate to via their expression. Feldman also points to negative space (silence) in his work in the same way that one can point to the inside of a bell as part of what makes the bell *a bell*.

If there is no pathway for our cognitive process to follow, no certain voice to respond to, is emotive response possible? Does Robinson's theory fail to account for emotion in atonal music or does atonal music fail to give a coherent emotional experience? I claim it is possible for us to respond emotionally to the expression in an atonal piece even though there is not a clear persona within the works. Thus, Robinson's account needs to be altered to fit this musical genre. In the next section

I will attempt to do just that.

How would Robinson account for expression in such work as Feldman's *For Samuel Beckett*? We must consider again her thesis about musical expression: the expression (to which we respond emotionally through the musical persona) is wrapped up in the narrative structure. So can her theory still work without this structure? I think it can be saved by referring to her passing comments on the socially-prescribed meaning in musical notation and her needing to be accepting of the value from incomplete or "insane" personae.

Quoting Judith Becker, Robinson says that "[e]motional responses to music do not occur spontaneously, nor 'naturally,' but rather, take place within complex systems of thought and behavior concerning what music means, what it is for, how it is to be perceived, and that might be appropriate kinds of responses" (Robinson 404). Just as people have different social norms concerning the outward physical expression of emotion, so too does music have this social aspect. If music is meant in a certain society to be expressive of the plight of the people, it will be within the norms and rules of expression of sadness in music of that particular people. Our initial response to the emotions provoked by some piece of music is also shaped by our cultural context. How we have learned cognitively to monitor our emotions varies, and thus how we label the emotion felt varies.

Could we not then say that what we regard as being "structurally-based musical personae" change with the culture? So perhaps the narrative or persona's role may change as well. Consider the rise of stream of consciousness novels (Miller), abstract art (de Kooning), nonfigurative poetry (Artaud) and atonal music (Feldman). All of these movements disregard narrative and completely fleshed out characters (in general) but many readers, viewers and listeners claim they are still moved, some even moved more than if there were a narrative. Our modern culture may be one that allows for some personae to be incomplete and structures in which the expression of those personae can occur in works that are variable and non-linear. We listeners are moved physiologically with the grating sound of dissonance and the thwarting of our natural inclination to predict the next note, thus her theory of the 'Jazzercise effect' still holds. We are thus placed in a mood by Feldman or Artaud in which we are "lost," perhaps; or perhaps one that makes us "contemplative" of being lost or incomplete. There is still a persona present in modern works, but it is one that responds to the plight of modernism, and thus is fragmented and frustrated (it is itself such because of that fragmentation and elusiveness). If a persona (or the actual composer) feels such incompleteness in themselves, then the persona will be incomplete, and thus the structure of the persona will not enforce completeness. In this case, expression of the persona's emotion will be best served by atonality. Thus, tonality is not required for musical expression, just for certain musical expressions.

Robinson used mostly Romantic art to elucidate her theory of musical expression. This does not work in her favor because if she wants to make a

universal theory of expression, it would be best to account not just for all media but also for various movements in the history of artistic expression. In the end, her theory of the musical persona is not thwarted by musical projects that might appear at first to be lacking expressive properties. Even Feldman's work expresses a persona in a modern style, and by writing in a time in Western history has made atonality a recognizable music form (it is culturally related to our state of being). Qualified listeners can be moved emotionally by his work, and thus understand its expression.

The modern condition of a broken persona is best expressed by atonal music and stream of consciousness literature, and when we add this fragmented persona to Robinson's theory of musical expression, her theory becomes more complete and persuasive. Perhaps the next step one must take is to add a different kind of persona which considers the human being and its postmodern being and cultural realm.

NOTES

1. Which I actually am, most of the time.
2. Leo Tolstoy's short story, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, picked up on this theme of irritation, applying it to an unhappy married man mad that his wife performs music with another man. After hearing them play this particular sonata, he stabs his wife, maddened by the music and unable to stop his agitation at his wife's possible infidelity.

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