

Wittgenstein's Account of Music and its Comparison to Language: Understanding, Experience and Rules

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss Wittgenstein's conception of music, musical understanding and the sense of comparing music to language. I argue that for Wittgenstein, musical understanding is describable as a specific kind of experience that is public and sharable. I then reject any formalist view, which asserts that musical understanding is exclusively an ability to follow a set of established rules. Second, I illustrate the scope of Wittgenstein's comparison between languages and posit that music is useful for clarifying the concept of linguistic understanding in the case of certain specific language-games, such as making jokes or puns. I will finally show that no thesis on the nature of language parallels and follows such a comparison.

I. Introduction

There are innumerable remarks on music found disseminated in Wittgenstein's writings. An heir of the old Viennese upper middle-class taste and culture, Wittgenstein penned extensively about music and composers. Brahms, Mahler, Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn, Bach and Wagner: these are recurrent names in his scattered reflections on music. At first, it might seem that these remarks are merely personal and anecdotal notes through which Wittgenstein manifested his musical taste and opinions. For instance, he deemed Mahler's music to be "worthless."¹ However, this should not be taken as proof of their invalidity. In fact, Wittgenstein's comments about music consistently show that he tended to consider music as a kind of language. We find him praising "the strength of the musical thinking" in Brahms,² suggesting that music either involves

1. See Wittgenstein (1998: 76; referred to as CV in the subsequent mentions). See the bibliography for expansions of the abbreviations that I use for the titles of Wittgenstein's books.

2. CV: 27.

thought or maybe *is* a kind of thought itself. He once pointed out that Brahms and Wagner's music were never employed in silent movies, as the images could not accompany their music, as audiences could not distinguish the music from the movie alone, and vice versa.³ He also said that Mendelssohn is never hard to understand,⁴ that Bach is more like a language than Mozart or Haydn,⁵ that a man with no acquaintance with music can confuse a Chopin phrase with a kind of language, as there is "a strong musical element in language,"⁶ and that understanding a musical phrase can be "called understanding a language."⁷ Last, in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein clearly suggests that "understanding a sentence in language is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think,"⁸ a comparison that is drawn even more punctually between themes and sentences in the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*.⁹

However, the scattered and diverse nature of Wittgenstein's exploration of music allows for different interpretative approaches in understanding his insistence that music be considered as a kind of language. We might in fact wonder what it means to understand music, what it means for music to be a language, and what aim Wittgenstein had in mind when he drew a comparison between the two. These questions are interwoven, as the notion of understanding music presupposes a certain conception of what music as language must be, and vice versa. Hanne Ahonen, for instance, attributes a formalist concept of music to Wittgenstein, according to which understanding is "the ability to follow the specifically musical set of rules that constitute the system of music."¹⁰ Once we conceive music as constituted entirely by conventional rules, it follows that musical understanding is to be conceived as an ability to follow said rules. Subsequently, the comparison between music and language is implicitly taken to be positive; that is, it is meant to capture a common feature that music and language share. The shared commonality in this case is the fact that both are rule-governed activity. On the other hand, it has been argued that understanding music has to do with the mental realm. As indicated by Roger Scruton, music allows us to get in touch with the "states of mind" of the composer or performer.¹¹

3. CV: 29.

4. See CV: 27.

5. See CV: 40.

6. Wittgenstein (1967: §171; referred to as Z in the subsequent mentions).

7. Z §172.

8. Wittgenstein (2009a: §527; referred to as PI in the subsequent mentions).

9. See Wittgenstein (1980a: §1078; referred to as RPP I in the subsequent mentions).

10. Ahonen (2005: 513).

11. See Scruton (2004: 1).

Similarly, Oswald Hanfling points out that the feelings accompanying our hearing or playing define musical understanding,¹² whereas Gilead Bar-Elli argues that a certain kind of experience is the “objective feature” of musical meaning.¹³ For Scruton and Hanfling, the comparison between language and music cannot be substantial, insofar as they cling on to the idea that understanding in language is not and cannot be a kind of inner experience; whereas Bar-Elli thinks the comparison plausible and positive, and argues that there is a variable model for *every* kind of understanding in language, where experience takes the privileged role of a supposed general “precondition of our ability to mean.”¹⁴

In this paper, I will offer an overview of Wittgenstein’s arguments on music, and I will expound the answer to the following three questions: what it means to understand music, what it means for music to be a language, and why Wittgenstein compares music to language in the first place. I will begin by illustrating Wittgenstein’s characterization of musical understanding, whose description refers to the cluster of significant behaviour accompanying our hearing, performing, and even composing music (section I). I will then proceed to show how this kind of understanding can be conceived as a particular kind of experience. Contrary to any mentalist distortion, such an experience is not something inner that accompanies musical themes; it is rather something immanent to it that is to be read within the musical themes themselves and the said behaviour (section II). At the same time, against any strictly formalist view, I will show that one of Wittgenstein’s main targets was specifically the idea that meaning in music can be reduced to rules only (section IV). Finally, I will argue that the comparison between language and music is to be interpreted positively, insofar as the kind of musical understanding so described can be employed to clarify certain specific language games and certain uses of language overall (section V). Against Bar-Elli, however, I will demonstrate that we are not required to extend experience to every meaningful employment of language, or to attribute any thesis about the deep nature of language to Wittgenstein (section VI).

II. Wittgenstein’s Characterization of Musical Understanding

In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein introduces music to compare it with language:

12. See Hanfling (2004: 153).

13. Bar-Elli (2006: 245).

14. Bar-Elli (2006: 232).

Understanding a sentence in language is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one might think. What I mean is that understanding a spoken sentence is closer than one thinks to what is ordinarily called understanding a musical theme. Why is just *this* the pattern of variation in intensity and tempo? One would like to say: 'Because I know what it all means'. But what does it mean? I'd not be able to say. As an 'explanation' I could compare it with something else which has the same rhythm (I mean the same pattern).

(One says, 'Don't you see, this is, as it were, a parenthesis,' and so on. How does one justify such comparisons?).¹⁵

In this remark, Wittgenstein associates understanding with the *listener's* reactions to a piece of music. As listeners, we can be struck by a certain pattern of variation in intensity and tempo; we can say that we understand it in the sense that we feel it is appropriate, and that it *fits*. We can use such formulae to express what we mean, but we cannot offer an explanation in the same way that we can when asked the meaning of a word we do not know. Nonetheless, a form of explanation can be given. We can, for instance, draw a comparison with other passages illustrating the same pattern, or we can draw pictures to exemplify what we want to convey. We could also invent a story that 'fits' with the pattern. Wittgenstein suggests something similar while talking about understanding the smile of Mona Lisa: we can make up a story to really understand that smile, we can put some context behind her face, so that we can really get the meaning of her expression.¹⁶ In this way, we can see her smile as enigmatic, if we did not before.¹⁷

In another passage in the *Nachlass*, the effort to explain the meaning of a musical theme through a comparison is said to be an element of highly complex behaviour:

Understanding of music is *expressed* in a certain way, both in the course of hearing and playing and at other times too. This expression sometimes includes movements, but sometimes only the way the one who understands plays, or hums, occasionally too comparisons he draws and images which, as it were, illustrate the music. Someone who understands music will listen differently (with a different facial expression, e.g.), play differently, hum differently, talk differently about the piece than someone who does not understand. His appreciation of a theme will not however be shown only in phenomena that accompany the hearing or playing of the theme, but also in an appreciation for music in general.¹⁸

15. PI §527.

16. See RPP I §381.

17. The same sort of correlation among pictures, storytelling and music is shown by movie soundtracks, whose spirit is somehow manifested in the scenes they accompany (and vice versa, the phenomenon is mutual).

18. CV: 79.

In contrast to the previous remark, understanding here is not only a matter of listening, but also of playing the music. This does not mean that being able to play is a condition for understanding music even when we listen to it, but rather that the same sort of understanding requires a consistency between what we say of the piece while hearing it, and what we do when and if we play it. Understanding, as such, has a certain expression that is manifested in a plurality of things we do and say: the gestures accompanying the listening or the play, the comparisons we draw, or the pictures we use to illustrate the music, the facial expressions we make, and so on.

Notably, the spectrum of behaviour involved is broad; a gesture manifesting understanding might also be grinding one's teeth while listening to a piece of music. This is what Wittgenstein reports to be doing while listening to music. Strikingly, he also adds that without the grinding, his experience of music used to change: "then the notes are much more blurred, much less clear, less pronounced."¹⁹

The difference between understanding and not understanding a piece of music is thus a distinction in the things we do and say, a difference that is also connected with the other things we do and say regarding music more generally. This means that understanding is not only constrained to the specific moment we listen to the theme. Rather, it is manifested by our general understanding of music, as it relates to our preferences and all the other reactions we display while listening to the music we like or dislike. Understanding music is neither an inner experience, nor something private. Rather, it is rendered visible in a complex behaviour, a cluster of different things we can do or say to express our feeling – or impression – that a particular musical theme has a unique meaning. Intuitively, let us imagine someone listening to Beethoven and bobbing their head as if they were listening to heavy metal. Even if they head-bang to the right tempo, it could paint a ridiculous picture to onlookers, as it feels awkward and out of place. Different pieces of music require distinct understanding, connected and encoded in a whole cluster of contextual practices that is not *accidental*; rather, it defines understanding for what it is.

Importantly, in Wittgenstein's writings, there is a further characterization of musical understanding, according to which understanding requires and presupposes its surroundings, namely a certain number of ordinary language-games (Z §175).²⁰ When we describe a musical theme by drawing a comparison to features of language that we find fitting and congruent with our understanding, there is a need for familiarity with

19. CV: 32.

20. See §175.

said features. I cannot say that a particular passage in Bach sounds as if a conclusion has been reached, if I do not know what a conclusion is and sounds like. Music is, in this sense, a second-order phenomenon compared to language: we first need to be familiar with those language-games that one brings into understanding music. There is no musical understanding without such external factors inherent in language.

In another excerpt in *Zettel*, this reference to the whole background of our language-games is defined as a culture (*Kultur*) to stress the broader and more general connections our language-games have with our life.²¹ A culture quite different from ours might be full of gestures accompanying music that we could not expect or really understand. A curious example that Wittgenstein mentions to highlight this point is one such culture where music is made only through carillons.²² In this case, music would relate to these people's life in a way different – not necessarily more primitive – than it is in ours. We could not plausibly “find our feet with them,”²³ they will know gestures and explain music in a way different – maybe alien – to us, and vice versa.

Notably, the fact that musical understanding is conceptually dependent on different cultural milieus offers us a model on how differing views on music come into play. I could view and understand a musical piece as ironic, while a friend might disagree and take it as austere. Or, when I hear a resolute conclusion being drawn, a friend disagrees as he experiences a suspenseful comma. What produces this kind of disagreement? Disagreement here assumes the character of divergence in life: we understand music differently because our cultural world and reactions are slightly different. This could be because ironic discourse works differently for me and my friend (cultural reasons might be advocated here), or it works the same way, but my friend is simply not as familiar as I am with the tone with which an ironic statement is charged that usually distinguishes, for instance, irony from sarcasm, or jokes from seriousness and austerity. In the former case, my explanations to lead him to see the piece as ironic are likely to fail, whereas in the latter there is a margin to success, to fill the gap between me and him as speakers of the same language. The same considerations can be extended to the example of conclusions and commas, where a divergence in understanding can be rooted, for instance, in the different tonal structure of our mother tongues, if my friend and I speak different languages. In both cases, disagreement is the manifestation of a certain divergence in our life and cultural backgrounds.

21. See Z §164.

22. See Wittgenstein (1980b: §696; referred to as RPP II in the subsequent mentions).

23. RPP II §700.

III. Experience, Mentalism and Music

Now, there is a tendency in Wittgenstein's writings on music to use a certain vocabulary associated with his investigations into the experience of meaning, to describe musical understanding, as Wittgenstein repeatedly employs music as a means of comparison to clarify the conceptual status of experiential concepts, such as the if-feeling²⁴ or the atmosphere of words. The if-feeling, Wittgenstein says, "should be comparable to the special 'feeling' which a musical phrase gives us."²⁵ The following passage is, however, the most explicit in defining musical understanding as a kind of experience:

The understanding of music is neither a sensation nor a sum of sensations. Nevertheless it is correct to call it an experience inasmuch as *this* concept of understanding has some kinship with other concepts of experience.

You say 'I experienced that passage quite differently.' But still this expression tells you '*what happened*' only if you are at home in the special conceptual world that belongs to these situations.²⁶

It is evident that the kind of experience constituting understanding music is "of a different kind from those experiences which we regard as the most fundamental ones – sense impressions, for instance."²⁷ Sense impressions are likely said to be fundamental because you do not require culture to experience them (culture, intuitively, is not required to see a yellow basket as yellow). Experiencing music is not a sensation or a sum of sensations, as we can experience music even without having any accompanying sensations. Yet understanding music – *this* case of understanding, not *every* kind, Wittgenstein stresses – can be said to be an experience of some sort. We can say that something happened in us, although that is not in the same sense as when we feel pain or hunger.

Now, once we talk about understanding as an experience in the case of music, the risk is to relapse into mentalism, which intimates meaning as an independent entity, a mental process of the sort that accompanies words or sentences. Wittgenstein resolutely denies mentalism, for instance, when he claims that "meaning is not an experience we have

24. It is well known that this obscure notion, the if-feeling, comes from William James' *Principles of Psychology*. As often in Wittgenstein, a certain philosophical picture is examined to see what is true in it. In this case, as we shall see, the if-feeling becomes a conceptual tool for elaborating a different, non-mentalistic conception of experience and meaning in language and music.

25. Wittgenstein (2009b: §44; referred to as PPF in the subsequent mentions).

26. RPP II §469; cfr. Z §165.

27. PPF §269.

while hearing or uttering a word,”²⁸ or that “meaning is not a process which accompanies a word, for no process could have the consequences of meaning something.”²⁹ This, however, should not imply that we cannot really say that we experience music in a particularly defined way. It only means that we must conceive the experience involved in understanding music in different terms from those imposed by mentalism:

You might think intensive experiencing of the theme ‘*consists*’ in the sensations of the movements etc. with which we accompany it. And that seems (again) like a soothing explanation. But have you any reason to think it true? I mean, for example, a recollection of this experience? Is not this theory again merely a picture? No, this is not how things are: the theory is no more than an attempt to link up the expressive movements with an ‘experience.’ If you ask: how I experienced the theme, I shall perhaps say “As a question” or something of the sort, or I shall whistle it with expression.³⁰

Here Wittgenstein targets the mentalist prejudice that the experience of a theme is reduced to – consists of – the sensations we feel while hearing or playing it. Mentalism is, in this sense, a false theory that gives substance to our tendency to reify experience as a thing accompanying our expressive movements and gestures, and works as a “soothing explanation,” probably because it satisfies that primal philosophical need to put a substance behind every substantive that Wittgenstein mentions in the *Blue Book*.³¹ However, if mentalism is set aside, it is clear that we can ask how we experience a theme, and an answer is legitimately to be expected. We can, in fact, say that we experience it as a question, or we can whistle the theme with a certain expression. Comparisons with pictures, movies and other themes can be drawn to corroborate the fact that we experience the theme as a conclusion, or as a whole argument between two different voices, and so on.

It is evident, then, that Wittgenstein here wants to design a certain conception of experience that is not to be explained in mentalistic terms, according to which the experience in question is a thing – a feeling or a mental process – that accompanies (or is associated with) the musical theme. As such, we can say that experience is not an accompaniment, an association, or a correlate of the musical theme. Wittgenstein notices that he almost never uses the term ‘association’, insofar as it is often misused for different things.³² What is crucial for mentalism and its associationism is its dualistic framework, according to which a mental reality or

28. PPF §37.

29. PPF §291.

30. CV: 59.

31. See Wittgenstein (1958: 1, henceforth BB).

32. See RPP I §356.

experience is always distinguishable and identifiable, independently of the words and signs they are supposed to be associated with or accompanied by. Suitably, for mentalism, experience can be separated from words and signs, as it can exist independently of the sign it accompanies. In the case of music, however, experience is inseparable from the musical theme, the gestures and behaviour it is associated with; it cannot be identified independently of the actual theme and the way it is played. The experience is to be read within the musical phrase, so that there is no experience without its material embodiment:

But can this feeling be separated from the phrase? And yet it is not the phrase itself, for someone can hear it without this feeling.

Is it in this respect similar to the 'expression' with which the phrase is played?

"I sing it with a quite particular expression." This expression is not something that can be separated from the passage. It is a different concept.³³

The feeling is embodied in the things we do when listening to – or playing – music. It is manifested, expressed, through the complex cluster of behaviour that we disclose to show our understanding, such as humming, making certain gestures and whistling. These accompaniments are, however, empty; Wittgenstein adds that,³⁴ if we instantiate them in different contexts, they are expressively meaningful only when we sing the passage, when we follow it, perform it, and so forth. Curiously, the experience of music can still be said to be separable, in the sense that it is not necessarily shared by everybody listening to the theme. Music can always feel different according to the personal taste and inclinations of the listeners. However, delving deeper, the experience is inseparable, as there is no experience without its being encoded in the theme itself and the things we do in expressing it. Experience and its material embodiments are inextricably woven together; there is no experience felt without its physical manifestation, the gesture, the word, or the musical phrase it expresses.

So, while mentalism is dualistic, as it requires the mental aspect to be in a way attached to the words or musical themes it accompanies, and advances a conception of experience that is ultimately subjective and idiosyncratic, Wittgenstein highlights an alternative conception, by which

33. PPF §45, 46, 48.

34. See PPF §47.

experience is intrinsically immanent – there is no experience detectable independently of its embodiment – and ultimately public³⁵; experience is visible in the things we do and say, it can be shared (even though we can always fail in the attempt), we can talk about it, compare different themes, and argue that they have the same feeling and that they express the same thing to us. Furthermore, this kind of experience is at the same time a kind of understanding. By investigating the phenomenon of understanding music, Wittgenstein thus showcases an interesting case study to reintroduce experience into our comprehension of language, an experience that is, however, culled of any mentalistic distortion.

IV. Rules and Music

Once we establish that understanding music can be described as a kind of experience, it follows that agreement in musical understanding is dependent on the connections with the whole context of our language-games and the culture we happen to share. If we do not, and our experience significantly diverges, so will our understanding. The case of 12-tone music might be a good example to explain this point. Somebody hears Schoenberg's 12-tone music, and it feels odd to them: it seems that musical phrases do not fit, they are clunky, hard to follow, and do not harmonically match each other. A way to overcome this oddity is by looking at the rules of dodecaphony and familiarize oneself with those. Yet this could be not enough to understand the music, to really appreciate it. It is not simply that "the grammar of twelve-tone music is not a musical grammar," as Scruton claims,³⁶ or that Schoenberg's music is not "language-like," so that Wittgenstein was not really interested in it, as argued by Sharpe.³⁷ Rather, it would be more accurate to say that the system of rules governing dodecaphonic composition is not part of their world yet, as it does not resonate within the whole cluster of activities of our form of life; it is not yet felt as an organic component of their world.

As much as experience is involved in musical understanding, it is apt to say that there is more to it than simply following rules in music. Wittgenstein frequently explored this aspect, as the following remarks prove:

35. Bar-Elli comes to the same conclusion when he argues that there are two different senses of the term 'feeling' and 'experience' in Wittgenstein's writings, the one being mentalistic and the other objective. See Bar-Elli (2006: 227–231). In this respect, my account is consistent with his.

36. Scruton (2004: 4).

37. Sharpe (2004: 142).

Soulful expression in music – this cannot be recognized by rules. Why can't we imagine that it might be, by other beings?

If a theme, a phrase, suddenly means something to you, you don't have to be able to explain it. Just *this* gesture has been made available to you.³⁸

According to Wittgenstein, rules cannot capture the expressivity of musical themes, their soul,³⁹ they cannot explain why we react a certain way to one theme and not another.⁴⁰ Music can be described in terms of its mathematical properties, such as its variation of intensities and tempo, and can be learnt through a system of rules governing composition, yet such rules are not sufficient to explain the meaning we experience while listening to a certain theme.

Notably, Wittgenstein here describes our sudden understanding of a passage as if we acquired a gesture.⁴¹ Generally, gestures are often mentioned in the *Nachlass* when addressing the experience of meaning. When we feel that a name has a specific atmosphere, for instance, the name stops functioning only as an instrument of designation and becomes almost a symbol – a gesture, “an architectonic form” – imbued with a meaning it acquires from its context, the works and the deeds of its bearer.⁴² Even words are said to become gestures when they acquire a certain expressivity that cannot be explained by other words.⁴³ To say that a musical theme is a gesture is thus strategic to suggesting that the meaning of music is related to experience and expression, and together, that expressivity is inherent to the theme itself and to the whole cluster of reactions that follow our listening. Experience, we have seen, is inseparable from the theme in this precise sense. Whoever does not understand Schoenberg has not let those gestures “creep in their life”⁴⁴ yet; Schoenberg is not yet part of their forms of expression.

When a gesture is made accessible, we extend the repertoire of our forms of expression; in an important sense, we enlarge the domain of expressivity in music. It is uncertain whether this extension can be based only on rules or conventions. Rules can be created and implemented to explain meaning. However, no rules are stated when we examine the

38. Z §156, 157.

39. Soul, together with atmosphere, face, physiognomy, and character are terms frequently used by Wittgenstein to refer to the experiential dimension our words acquire in use. See Scotto 2019 for a full account.

40. See CV: 94.

41. See also CV: 52, grounding the same claim.

42. See RPP I §341.

43. In the *Big Typescript* Wittgenstein mentions the word ‘not,’ which is said to become a “rebuffing gesture.” See Wittgenstein (2013: 37).

44. CV: 83.

examples Wittgenstein expounds on. We can be struck by a certain pattern of variation in intensity and tempo and feel – understand – that this must be so, otherwise the whole theme changes character and loses its meaning. It can then be said that the theme has a meaning and can be explained to others by means of comparisons: this is as if a conclusion has been drawn, these passages sound like a question or an answer, as if it were both a parenthesis and digression, and so forth. These comparisons are meant to connect those sounds to their cultural and logical surroundings, and to make them resonate within the context of our language-games. More than working as stipulations of sort, these explanations are meant to give meaning and expression to our experience via comparison with the background aspects and features of our life. It might also be the case that we are not able to explain what we mean: Wittgenstein's exploration of music in *Zettel* starts by wondering precisely about cases of meaning and understanding that are not bound to the ability to offer an explanation.⁴⁵

It is then hard to reconcile Wittgenstein's exploration of meaning, music, and rules with any form of strong formalism. Hanne Ahonen, for instance, claims that “the meaning of musical expressions, such as chords, cadences and themes, should be taken to be constituted by the rules of music, and the understanding of music to be the ability to follow (conventional) rules.”⁴⁶ However, how are these rules to be followed if they cannot be outlined? We certainly learn to play music by means of rules, yet we do not learn how to play expressively, to make chords and melodies feel appropriate and necessary, in the right place.

There are at least two arguments used to back up a formalist reading of Wittgenstein. First, formalism is opposed to mentalism as the only theoretical option available to explain musical understanding. The discussion is framed in terms of a mutable alternative: either we conceive musical understanding mentalistically, or we need to appeal to rules. Since mentalism is untenable, as Ahonen correctly argues,⁴⁷ formalism follows. However, this alternative is questionable. The fact that mentalism fails to account for intersubjectivity and communication does not work as an argument in favour of formalism, it reinforces the need for an alternative, non-mentalistic conception of experience that is public, can be shared, and can be read from within our expressive practices.

Second, formalism sounds intuitive, insofar as music is a normative practice. Not only do we learn how to play instruments and acquire a musical vocabulary by means of rules and examples, but we also express

45. Z §156.

46. Ahonen (2005: 520).

47. See Ahonen (2004: 219).

what we believe is right or wrong in a performance; as we discuss what is necessary, inappropriate, superfluous, and preferable in a theme. That is, we employ a normative vocabulary, suggesting that rules of sorts need to be in place. In this case, however, we have seen that rules are hardly formulated; and explanations in music work more as an attempt to convey the same experience by means of comparisons through which we associate the piece with various aspects of our life in language and culture. Explanations here are not a stipulation of a rule, they are rather an attempt to make others join our own community of experience and understanding by evoking certain contexts where the same experience is paralleled. Musical gestures are thus normative, but not by virtue of any stipulated rule: they are normative *in themselves*, in virtue of the experience they are equipped with, making us feel that certain themes are necessary and appropriate. More than arguing for rules to be the ultimate explanatory device of normativity *tout court*, as formalism demands, the importance of Wittgenstein's discussion lies more in the fact that experience can be normative in itself.

V. Music and Language

Once we have clarified what it means for Wittgenstein to understand and experience music, we can now ponder over the goal of the comparison between language and music. How are language and music supposed to be akin? This comparison, at first, might strike us as odd. There are undeniable differences between the two, and we find some discussed among scholars. For instance, in the case of music we cannot explain verbally or “by indicating something external to language” what we mean,⁴⁸ and its understanding does not necessarily require the ability to play it, whereas understanding a language, a sentence, or word does. In music, we can talk about *different* understandings of the *same* piece; as Scruton points out, we can talk about differences in the performances of the same piece of music.⁴⁹ By contrast, it is hard to point out the same

48. Hanfling (2004: 154).

49. Mistakenly, Scruton here formulates this point in Platonist terms, as he distinguishes between understanding a performance and understanding the ‘piece in itself’ that is performed: “A comely, sentimental or insinuating passage can be performed naively; but another performer, who hears the pretence, will be unable to perform the passage naively.” This is misleading: to say of a passage that it is comely or insinuating is already to convey a certain understanding of the piece, an understanding we acquire while listening to an actual performance, not to an abstract object – music in itself (it is hard to see how we can listen to an abstract object, after all). Someone who naively plays the very same piece that we find insinuating, simply does not understand it as insinuating. See Scruton (2004: 5) for the reference.

feature in language: if I use the sentence “It is cold here” to mean the opposite in the context of an ordinary exchange in English, I am simply mistaken. Music is not a means of communication, either, at least not in the same sense as language. This is evident if we think of the example of understanding a theme as a question. We can, in fact, describe a particular theme as a question; however, we cannot make explicit *what* the music is asking; the question lacks a content that can be paraphrased. Music in this sense can only have the character, or the physiognomy, of a question, as Jerrold Levinson puts it, it is not *a* question.⁵⁰ To speak with Joachim Schulte, differently from music, “understanding a text is a matter of how and whether I understand its propositional content.”⁵¹

If we accept all this as indisputable evidence of a radical difference between language and music – as we shall see in a moment, I do not – then the whole sense of a comparison between the two cannot be but negative; that is, music and language are comparable to the extent that the comparison sheds light on what language and music, respectively, are *not*. This is the strategy adopted by Oswald Hanfling, who argues that the analogy with music drawn by Wittgenstein in PI §527 needs to be understood as “a negative analogy,” aiming to highlight the fact that neither is dependent on anything external to be understood.⁵² The comparison with music is then taken to have only the specific function to target and dismiss the idea that meaning and understanding are, respectively, a thing and a process accompanying words, something extraneous or external to language. This reading seems to be confirmed by the *Brown Book*, where PI §527 appears nearly unaltered, but with an important addition at the end, where Wittgenstein notices that “the content of the sentence is *in* the sentence,” despite the tendency to think – misled by a wrong picture – that understanding “points to a reality outside the sentence.”⁵³

However, this reference to the *Brown Book* is not sufficient to make Hanfling’s view plausible. The last part of the comment in the *Brown Book* was omitted in the *Investigations*, and this is not accidental. PI §527 should be evaluated in the light of its context, where Wittgenstein is rather focused on illustrating different cases of what we call ‘understanding’ in language.⁵⁴ As such, I suggest reading PI §527 as a positive comparison between understanding music and language; our concepts of language and music really share some common features beyond the

50. See Levinson (2003: 62).

51. Schulte (1993: 42).

52. See Hanfling (2004: 153). See also Hacker for an analogous claim (2006: 327).

53. BB: 167.

54. See PI §522 – 533.

merely negative characterization according to which neither is answerable to external reality. As abundantly shown so far, understanding music is a phenomenon that requires more than rules to be explained, as it is exhibited across a spectrum of experience defined as immanent and public. As such, the comparison with music can be seen as a strategy for emphasizing that there is a relevant area of what we call ‘understanding’ in language that is *not* based on rules or conventions, and that involves experience. It follows that rules cannot be taken as the only conceptual resource when clarifying our concepts of meaning and understanding in language.

There are, in fact, language-games where all those features typical of musical understanding are essential in clarifying how they function. Throughout the *Nachlass*, Wittgenstein makes the case of poetry, telling puns and understanding ways of speaking (*Redeweise*). It is no coincidence that Wittgenstein mentions poems as an example of language use that is not aimed to communicate, even though it is composed in the language of communication.⁵⁵ As in the case of music, we can talk about the lack of understanding of a particular performer (maybe they overemphasize the wrong words, miss the right tempos, and so on) and we can also comment on a different understanding of the same poetical passage (a difference that is likely due to the way they recite or read the poem, the intonation of their voice, or their accompanying gestures). A lot is required to compose good poems, starting from a thorough knowledge of the grammar of a language to the rules of poetic compositions, yet we can understand them regardless. This understanding is consistent with our gestures when reciting, our facial expressions, the comparisons we draw to explain its meaning, and so on.

Experience is involved when it comes to understanding the meaning of puns too. In the lectures of the ‘30s, Wittgenstein points out that “the question, ‘what is the nature of a joke?’ is like the question, ‘what is the nature of a lyric poem?’”⁵⁶ Arguably, Wittgenstein thought that the same kind of experiential understanding involved in poems is present in jokes too. He also explicitly writes that experience of meaning is required to understand puns.⁵⁷ Intuitively, puns presuppose the possibility for words to preserve an experiential trace of their regular contexts of use. To understand a pun, we need, then, to experience such a trace, we need to feel the ambiguity of the words involved, and we are driven to laughter insofar as we perceive the discrepancy between the new use made up by the pun trick and their past ordinary uses.

55. See PI §160.

56. Ambrose (1982: 32).

57. See Wittgenstein (1982: §711; referred to as LW I in the subsequent mentions).

In particular, puns are bound to the words from which they are composed. Therefore, for a pun to be designed, its words must be categorically immutable. In fact, if in a pun we solve the ambiguity through a synonym, it would lose its meaning *as a pun*. The same can be said about poems; we can try and switch words in a poem with synonyms and see that we lose and spoil it. Words have faces, as Wittgenstein points out, faces that are manifested in the way “we choose and value them”⁵⁸, and that make them irreplaceable to us in certain contexts of use. This explains why, according to Wittgenstein, a good “translation of a play of words is usually *another* play of words.”⁵⁹ Translating not only puns, plays of words, but also poems is a complicated practice that requires something more than merely knowing the literal meanings of the words involved. It is rather, I would say, a matter of reproducing the *sense* we want to convey that is based on acquaintance with the experiential world of the whole culture to which the language belongs.

Finally, Wittgenstein also mentions ways of speaking as specific cases of language use that are clarified by the comparison with music.⁶⁰ A way of speaking, whether it be a dialect word, an idiomatic expression, or even a tone or a particular accent, encodes the material conditions of its use. Some ways of speaking, for instance, are sometimes connotated in such a way that they mirror the class of people who use them. The shade of meaning Wittgenstein talks about is not something mental: it is shown or manifested through the “innumerable connections” the ways of speaking license, with other words, idiomatic expressions, puns we may conjure, as well as other people’s reactions and so forth. Even in this case, the materiality of words – their phonetic properties, tone and accent – are fundamental; a condition to grasp all the nuances of meaning, insofar as the paraphrase through synonyms makes us simply lose its specificity.

VI. The Extension of Experience in Language

We have seen what it means to understand music. It requires a certain experiential access to the themes we listen to. Understanding music can thus be said to be a kind of experience, and also perceived as a language because, similarly to language, there are cases of understanding that can be described through the notion of experience. The comparison Wittgenstein draws, then, is positive, insofar as it allows us to highlight

58. PPF §294.

59. LW I §278.

60. See RPP I §1078.

some constitutive features of what we usually call understanding, beyond any constraint to look at language only and exclusively through the lens of rule-governed use.

However, further questions arise: how much can we extend this comparison between language and music? Is experience only sometimes involved in understanding, or are the examples of poetry, puns, and ways of speaking designed to make us realize that understanding always requires experience? Is experience an important feature present in some but significantly not all cases of linguistic understanding, or rather, is it a precondition of language use in its entirety?

Gilead Bar-Elli argues that experience is “vital to understand the inherent intentionality of language.”⁶¹ Experience of meaning, he says, is “a precondition of our ability to mean, to intend and to use language intentionally.”⁶² Bar-Elli envisions what looks like a thesis about language, as he strives to formulate a general principle as a precondition of our ability to use language and symbols as such: experience itself. Such a thesis, however, requires more than what is substantiated by Wittgenstein. We can know what a way of speaking means, even though we do not catch its shades of meaning; a poem may well tell us nothing, and we do not rely on puns to do logic, chemistry or transmitting (ordinary) communications. Relevantly, all these language-games can be said to predicate the given meaning of ordinary words. From these examples alone, we can then draw the opposite conclusion, viz., it is experience that presupposes meaning as it is given in ordinary life, not the other way around.⁶³

I do not think, however, that we can attribute this opposite claim to Wittgenstein, either, and this is because he was not interested in arguing for some thesis or other. Wittgenstein’s aim is, if you like, less ambitious: he wants to give a perspicuous description of our concept of understanding in its complexity. This description wavers between the two poles fixed by rules and experience, as the following paragraph shows:

We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which

61. Bar-Elli (2006: 217).

62. Bar-Elli (2006: 232).

63. Wittgenstein himself sometimes suggests something along those lines. An example is RPP I §358, where it is said that whatever interest the concept of experience has, it does not involve the concept of meaning. The same suggestion is found in RPP II §245 and LW I §52. In the light of such evidence, scholars have often argued that for Wittgenstein experience was precisely a by-product, an epiphenomenon of our life with meaningful signs, rather than a necessary precondition for any language use. See, for instance, Schulte (1993), especially chap. 5, and Glock (1996: 38 – 40).

it cannot be replaced by any other (any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another).

In the one case, the thought in the sentence is what is common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem).⁶⁴

On one hand, understanding a sentence is shown by the fact that we can switch it with another set of signs and preserve its meaning. The meaning of the sentence here does not depend on the *signs* we use to express it. Even though Wittgenstein is not explicit about it, we can assume replaceability as a conceptual feature of meaning and understanding, exclusively based on rules. Signs are replaceable when they are mostly irrelevant to conveying a determinate meaning, as meaning is conceived as the role arbitrary signs play within a system of rules. As long as the role is fixed by the system of rules, we can switch signs without there being any tangible consequences.

On the other hand, we also speak of understanding in cases where the signs we use and the positions they occupy (in whatever linguistic medium) are essential to conveying a certain content, making them, in this sense, thus irreplaceable. This is the case with music and poetry, where meaning is always bound to the themes presented in a certain expressive way, or to the words that we carefully choose due to their acoustic or stylistic properties. Similarly, puns and ways of speaking in which literal translations inevitably miss their meaning are bound to the words we use and the experience we have of them. Notably, to say that signs are sometimes irreplaceable is another way to formulate the immanence of experience and understanding: if we switch an expressive poetic word with another, we lose its meaning; this is because its soul is not separable, as it is completely immanent in the poetic text.

Undoubtedly, this remark is purely descriptive. Wittgenstein does not claim that one kind of understanding is more fundamental than the other. Rather, the remark is meant to present two different models, intended to capture two different aspects of what we call ‘understanding’ in language. No thesis about the fundamentality of rules or experience follows from it, as Bar-Elli believes. Sometimes, we understand words in the sense that we experience them, sometimes we do not, and we talk about understanding as an ability to follow rules in communication. It is likely that ordinary language presents both cases of understanding together, as both rules and expression are involved when we use words in day-to-day conversation.

It is noteworthy that thinking of experience as a precondition of any language, as Bar-Elli does, would make any language-game where

64. PI §531.

understanding and meaning are exclusively expressible in terms of rule-governed behaviour simply inconceivable. According to Wittgenstein, however, we *can* conceive such languages, featuring only rules but no experiential dimension, cold systems of signs in which every word is replaceable without loss of meaning. This language would have no soul, a term Wittgenstein uses while discussing music: a language with no musicality, where aspects like intonation, sound, and pitch play no part.⁶⁵

In *Zettel*, Wittgenstein gives several artificial examples of soulless languages. They are cases of particular systems of words in which the meaning of expressions changes according to definite rules, like a word having a meaning in the morning and another in the afternoon, or, alternatively, a language where words alter every day according to a rule fixing the order of their letters.⁶⁶ In this case, language users always need to rely on tables to apply the words correctly. These languages, we could also say, do not come naturally, they feel clunky, unfamiliar in an important sense: they are without a “ring.”⁶⁷ If we look at actual languages, Wittgenstein thought that chemical symbolism was a case of soulless language.⁶⁸ Despite the fact that H₂O became the chemical alias for water, and is regarded as a universal symbol of life, conversely, CO₂ is associated with negative connotations due to its connection with the climate crisis, yet within chemistry those symbols are completely arbitrary and could be easily swapped with another system for practical purposes, whatever it might be. Finally, it is relevant to notice how much this whole discussion makes Wittgenstein’s seemingly puzzling remark on Esperanto perspicuous. Esperanto, Wittgenstein says, brings about a feeling of disgust, as its words “are cold, lacking in associations,” and yet “it plays at being a *language*.”⁶⁹ The artificiality of Esperanto makes it a soulless language, with no associations, no grip on our life, and renders it an inexpressive and mechanical language.

As such, the mere conceivability of cases of language use that do not require experience is helpful in diminishing the notion of experience as a precondition of language *tout court*, as Bar-Elli does. We should not, however, make the opposite mistake and use such languages as a basis for an alternative claim about rules as the precondition of language. Against such a notion, we can employ the same strategy to dismiss Bar-Elli’s claim: we *can* point at cases of language use where rules are

65. See PI §530.

66. See Z §148.

67. See Z §149.

68. See Wittgenstein (2000), in particular, manuscript 161, referred as MS 161: 6f.

69. CV: 144.

inessential, or at most reduced to a minimum, as Wittgenstein himself does when he says that we might “imagine people who had something not altogether unlike a language: vocal gestures, without vocabulary and grammar (‘Speaking with tongues’).”⁷⁰ If we ask what meaning looks like in such a language, we should first ask what it looks like in music, Wittgenstein says.⁷¹ Such a language would likely be a language of pure expression, untainted by any word affiliations with rules established in advance.

As an example, Wittgenstein mentions speaking in tongues, also known as glossolalia, a practice common in early Christian communities – and still present in some forms of the Christian cult – consisting in speaking a language unknown to the speaker but nevertheless “full of meaning,” so that it can pretend to be an actual language. As he mentions vocal gestures, another, more accessible example might be the word-like sounds exchanged by lovers, a private vocabulary expressive of their love.⁷² Wittgenstein describes those words as being “loaded with feeling,” thus hardly replaceable. We are dealing with an example that falls squarely within the second sense of understanding above. As in the case of understanding music, here too Wittgenstein uses the vocabulary of gestures that are “assimilated” or made “accessible:” learning these language-like phenomena means precisely to expand or extend the range of our expressive tools, and with them, the possibilities of expression in our life.

We can now see where the philosophical significance of such borderline cases of language lies, be it speaking in tongues or soulless languages: their design is helpful, not only for tackling claims by which understanding and meaning can be univocally accounted for via a single principle (may it be rules or experience), but for fully capturing those distinct aspects of our concept of understanding that Wittgenstein describes in PI §531. Arguably, these simple language-games can be seen as instances of what Wittgenstein calls “centres of variation”⁷³ or “poles of description”⁷⁴ in philosophical clarification; far from being the basis for a theory of language or meaning, they rather function as points of reference through which we organize our account of other complex cases of language use that can, in fact, be seen as variations on those simple instances. Different cases of language use will be akin to one of the two

70. PI §528.

71. PI §529.

72. LW I §712.

73. The notion is present in the *Nachlass*: see MS 115: 221–222; cf. MS 152: 16–17.

74. RPP I §633.

poles so designed, or even be akin to both, as they are not necessarily taken to be exclusive.⁷⁵

Music itself can thus be seen as a pole of description, analogous yet distinct from the case of speaking in tongues, intended to highlight those material aspects of language use that often require an appeal to a certain kind of experience; as when we talk about understanding a poem, a way of speaking, making a pun, and so on. Far from offering access to a new thesis about the nature of language where experience informs as a pre-condition of meaning and intentionality, the comparison with music should be taken as one of the many tactical moves Wittgenstein makes to account for the grammar of linguistic understanding, in all its irreducible complexity.

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75. For a detailed account of Wittgenstein's methodology of centres of variation and poles of description, see Kuusela (2008; see, especially chap. 4) and Kuusela (2019: 187).

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