

MUSIC: AN IMITATION OF THE HUMAN LIFE

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Abstract

This paper has explored the very many peculiar ways music imitates the human life. These imitations have been captured in vocal, choral, and instrumental music. They are also manifest in all the elements of music such as melody, harmony, texture, tone colour, etc. Nature has always been a source of inspiration to music and the human life has even been a more overwhelming influence on music. Human conception, gestation, birth, growth, and death are all imitated and echoed in musical inspiration, composition, development, and performance. This fascination for nature (the human life) is so strong that music, as an art, may never disentangle from it.

Introduction

Nature has always been a source of inspiration for creativity. Poets, musicians, playwrights, designers, and scientists have all been drawn to and overwhelmed by nature. The shape and flight of birds inspired aeronautics and aerodynamics. Computer scientists have created software agents that cooperate to solve complex problems such as the rerouting of traffic in a busy telecom network using ants and other social insects that live in colonies as models for cooperative transport and this is termed ‘virtual foraging’ (Bonabeau & Theraulaz, 2000). A music composer muses on ideas, sounds, notes, rhythms, and abstractions until they are churned into melodies or a symphony just like the pollination of flowers yields fruits. Komar (1980) intimates that ‘A composer may respond to nature by painting her in musical images. The wind, the sea, or a birdcall may be projected, even without the composer’s conscious intent’ (p.3).

Nature’s bind on music is clear but this paper explores in particular how music imitates the human life: from conception to death music amazingly imitates life. Composers, musical instrument makers, lyricists, poets, music conductors and performers have unconsciously been drawn into this irresistible sensuous art. Let us look deeper to see how much music owes to life.

The Nature of Music

Music is first conceived as an idea, imagination, or even fantasy before it is set to sound. Although music can be notated on paper using solfa, staff, mensural, figured, jazz-chordal symbols or any other form of notation but what actually becomes music is the ‘fertilization’ and ‘animation’ of those musical ideas with the sound element called pitch. Pitch which refers to the highness or lowness of sound can be sourced from the human voice or musical instruments or even electronic devices such as the synthesizer. Music which is animated with the human voice is referred to as vocal music and that of instruments is instrumental music even though we can have varied combinations of the two or varieties of each. Any piece of music that is not toned (that is, sounded) remains latent and inert no matter the level of creativity and ingenuity

embedded in the work. Also sounds from the voice or musical instruments do not make any music if there is no musical idea or a piece of music to sound.

Relating this analogy to the human life, we see that the female egg (ovum) remains dormant and dies after some time if there is no spermatozoon to fertilize it. Also, the spermatozoon remains inert and dormant if there is no ovary to animate.

The Structure (form) of Music

Just as the human life is naturally phased into conception, gestation, birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and death, so does music take its varied forms. The composer conceives an idea (conception), churns it over in composition (gestation), releases the composition (birth), the composition goes through some kind of test of censorship, acceptance, rejection, survival, appreciation etc (infancy to adulthood), and finally the composition is forgotten or it loses its taste (death).

Most music of all cultures have forms. Form is the shape of a musical composition as defined by all of its pitches, rhythms, dynamics, and timbres (Randel, 1986). Berry in Cooper (1973) defines musical form more succinctly as “the sum of those qualities in a piece of music that bind together its parts and animate the whole” (p.82).

In form, music shows so much imitation of the human life as we can see in the structure of the music of the classical period. Classical music is generally structured to take the form of movements. A movement is a composition that sounds complete even though it is part of a larger composition in a symphony, sonata, or concerto (Kamien, 1986). A classical symphony can have about four to five movements within the entire work and each of the movements takes a different form entirely. The first movement of classical symphonies is usually in sonata form with fast, slow, and fast sections. The general mould for the sonata form flows as *exposition* (presentation of theme or themes), *development* (variation of themes), and *recapitulation* (return to the original theme or themes). It will suffice to give a brief analysis of these three main sections of the sonata form here:

a. Exposition

The exposition introduces themes, usually two, that form the basis of the entire movement. In Mozart’s works particularly, the first theme is usually fairly energetic, and the second theme contrasts with it by being more lyrical. These themes are connected by a bridge (a transitional passage whose primary function is to connect two passages of greater weight or importance in the work as a whole). The first theme establishes the tonality for the movement; the second theme is always in a different key. The bridge serves the function of modulating from the key of the first theme to the new key of the second theme.

b. Development

The development concentrates on the themes that were presented in the exposition and manipulates them in a variety of ways. The themes may be fragmented into small melodic or rhythmic motives (short themes or parts of themes). These motives can be expanded, or the themes or parts of them might be repeated at different pitch levels.

c. Recapitulation

Recapitulation captures the return and restoration of the original theme and sequences of the composition. The recapitulation statement of the first theme group is exactly as it was in the exposition. After the developmental exploration of different tonal areas, the return to the original tonic key area is sensed as a triumphant homecoming (Pen, 1992).

These forms and their sub variants capture the phases and ephemeral nature of life. Life is in stages and the stages are ephemeral.

The Elements of Music

Elements of music are the intrinsic properties of music such as pitch, rhythm, melody, harmony, dynamics, tone colour, and texture. How then does the application of these musical elements imitate nature?

▪ **Pitch**

Pitch is the relative highness or lowness of sound that we hear in music. Just as people speak in peculiar and varied pitches, also, the pitches of sounds in music come in various gradations as low, medium, and high and this subtle manipulation of pitches gives a piece of music a balanced taste. If we are surrounded by people of low or high pitched voices; verbal communication would be boring just as listening to a low or high pitched music would sound monotonous.

▪ **Rhythm**

The first perception of rhythm by humans is unarguably the heart. The heart beats in rhythmic pulses which can be felt and heard. Doctors listen to or try to feel these pulsations to examine the life of the heart. If the pulsations are fast, slow or irregular they query heart palpitation. Rhythm also is a basic element in music. In music it is defined as the regular pattern of flow of music in time. Rhythm is actually what controls the speed or tempo of music. The manipulation of the notes of a composition using full, half, quarter, or eighth notes; dots, ties, trills, triplets, duplets, rests, syncopations, etc are all geared towards the realization of varied rhythmic patterns in music.

These shades of rhythm in music is typified in humans where you encounter people with various character dispositions such as jovial, upbeat, boring, sluggish, warm, etc.

▪ **Melody**

Melody is a coherent succession of pitches. Here pitch means a stretch of sound whose frequency is clear and stable enough to be heard as not noise; succession means that several pitches occur; and coherent means that the succession of pitches is accepted as belonging together (Randel, 1986). Melody is opposed to harmony in referring to successive rather than simultaneous sounds; it is opposed to rhythm in referring to pitch rather than duration or stress. Melody shares one peculiar feature with the human life: it takes off from a point, moves in some direction; and ends. Kamien (1988) vividly captures this, 'A melody begins, moves, and ends; it has direction, shape, and continuity. The up-and-down movement of its pitches conveys tension and release, expectation and arrival' (p.52). Melody can also move in conjunct pattern (step-wise), disjunct (by leap), or in contrary motion.

The nature and properties of musical melody described above are all intrinsic features of the human life. For example, human growth and development can come in various patterns of step-wise (gradual normal growth and development), by disjunct or leap (accelerated development), or contrary motion (retarded growth or development). Similarly, as melody can appear tuneful, unappealing, sombre, ornamented, plain, chromatic, distorted, or cheerful, etc, so the lives of humans effuse various idiosyncrasies and mannerism.

- **Harmony**

Harmony is the element of music that captures the vertical relationship existing between various notes. It has been defined as ‘a composite sound made up of two or more notes of different pitches that are played or sung simultaneously’ (Charlton and Hickok, 2007). Peculiar to musical harmony is the combination, correlation, and resolution of sounds. Some musical sounds or notes combine or relate well to yield a resultant concordant sound we call ‘concord’; some also combine to yield discordant sounds that are called ‘discords’ which can be resolved back to concord.

This is a true imitation of the human life. The cohabitation and coexistence of people of varied colours, races, sexes, temperaments, dispositions, and character is harmony. Harmony is the element in life that binds people together irrespective of their backgrounds. Just as we talk about living in harmony, peaceful coexistence, and the resolution of conflicts amongst people; so also music deals with the combination of notes and the resolution of the discordance of notes.

- **Dynamics**

Dynamics is the musical element that captures the degree of loudness or softness of sound. Musical dynamics are marked with special terms and abbreviations denoting various shades of loudness and softness obtainable with sounds such as piano (p)-soft, forte(f)- loud; mezzo-piano (mp) – moderately soft; pianissimo(pp)- very soft; fortissimo (ff)- very loud; etc. The presence and application of these gradations of dynamics create balance in a musical composition. A piece of music that sounds loud or soft all through would be boring and colourless.

These musical dynamics are all adaptations from the human life which is decorated with people of various shades of demeanour. Some people are soft spoken; some are loud; some are sober; some are noisy; some are taciturn; while some are talkative. It takes all sorts to make the world.

- **Tone colour**

Tone colour is that element of music that distinguishes one sound from the other. The tone of the trumpet differs from that of the clarinet by virtue of tone colour. Even among musical instruments belonging to one family, they still differ by their respective tone colours or timbre. In the saxophone family of the class of woodwinds, there are baritone, tenor, alto, soprano, and soprano saxophones with respective different tone colours.

This feature of musical instruments is inherent in human beings. No human beings are the same even members of the same family, kindred, clan, community, tribe, race, or nation. Even identical twins present certain distinctive features. An analogy with the human language makes this point clearer: within a given language spoken by a given people there still exist dialects (variants of the language) and within each dialect of the same language there exist ‘idiolects’ (peculiar way each member of the dialect uses the dialect).

- **Mood**

Mood generally refers to somebody’s state of mind which we describe in simple terms as happy, joyful, sober, angry, disturbed, cheerful, excited, sad, etc. Similarly in music, mood refers to the emotion expressed in a piece of music. Music conveys certain emotions by virtue of the manipulation of the elements of music in the composition. Just like humans, music can convey moods of sadness, joy, happiness, love, or melancholy.

- **Metronome**

The metronome- a device used to indicate the tempo of a composition by sounding regular beats at adjustable speed (Randel, 1986) – symbolizes the measurement of the tick-tock of the human biological clock. As humans have varied biological clocks so the metronome also ticks for music

of varied tempos of slow, moderate, and fast. Human beings experience slow, moderate (normal), or normal growths. Also every human being does not have the same pace. There are other possible and unusual gradations such as very slow, allegro-moderato, very fast, as fast as possible, etc.

The Musical Scale

Scale in music refers a collection of pitches arranged in order from lowest to highest or from highest to lowest (The New Harvard Dictionary of Music (1986). Various forms of scales exist among cultures and styles of music across the world such as the diatonic, gypsy, pentatonic, heptatonic, hexatonic, the twelve –tone scale, etc., but one feature is shared by all scales and that is, the pitches can flow from the lowest to the highest or from the lowest to the highest and this is technically called ‘ascending or descending order’ of scales. The Diatonic scale, for example, is usually presented this way: d:r:m:f:s:l:t:d’

Taking the scale from left to the right realizes the ascending of the pitches of the scale to the octave ‘d’ ‘’ and singing from the octave down to the last note ‘d’ gives the descending scale. This exercise subtly imitates the paradox of life. The Human life takes off from a point (d) which epitomizes birth, infancy, and childhood and goes through all kinds of interactions, modifications, transformations, and preparations (r:m:f:s:l:t) to get to the highest point (d’) which epitomizes adulthood, the height of one’s existence or career, the highest and last point one attains and from which descent is made back to the lowest point (death).

Orchestral Music

Orchestral or instrumental music is that form of music that manipulates different types of musical instruments at the same time and draws on their various sound qualities (tone colour) to yield coherent and beautiful music. This art requires unique skill, techniques, talent, and organisational ability. This genre of music mirrors the organisation of people with different experiences, skills, qualifications, backgrounds, and dispositions in a work place for productivity. This is typical of what goes on in a company or industry. Just as a company has different sections of workforce: security, data processing, production, delivery, etc.; the instruments in an orchestra are also in sections of strings, woodwinds, percussions, keyboards, and brass.

Musical Experimentation

The current state and stage of the human life and human beings regarding science and technology, medicine, education, communication, fashion, diet and civilization etc, are all products of various experiments and experimentations by people through time. Music has also taken the same path, particularly Western music. Every aspect of Western music such as the tonal system, harmony, form, compositional techniques, organology and instrumentation, choral texture, and performance etc, were all realized through concerted experimentation through history. The medieval period through the renaissance, baroque, classical, romantic, modern and the post-modern eras witnessed serious musical struggles. The introduction of a musical system and its improvement or rejection; homophony versus polyphony, vocal music versus instrumental music, sacred music versus secular music; the church versus the state; melody versus harmony, and the struggle went on.

It is natural that by experimenting one can stumble across a pleasant discovery or otherwise. Streatfeild (1906) enlightens us regarding Opera:

Opera, like so many other things, owed its foundation largely to accident. Late in the sixteenth century a small band of Florentine enthusiasts proposed to themselves the task of reviving the lost glories of Greek drama. Nothing was farther from their thoughts than the creation of a new art-form. They worked upon what they believed to be antiquarian lines; they wrote plays, and because they fancied that the Greek drama was sung or rather chanted in a kind of accompanied recitative, they decided to perform their plays in the same way (p.21).

The Composer and his Music

Music scholars and historians have surrendered to the fact that the study of a musical composition is invariably the study of the personality of the composer, because the temperament and personality of the composer is infused in his works. A composition is an x-ray of the personality of the composer. The way a composer, Beethoven for example, employs melody, rhythm, dynamics, and tone color etc, gives a total picture of his personality and his overview of the universe. This phenomenon is one of the subtle ways in which music imitates the human life.

Streatfeild (1906) informs us about Ludwig Van Beethoven:

A man of this stamp is so far superior to the common mortals among whom he moves, that the true greatness of his mould is often scarcely perceived; it is only the minor and comparatively insignificant traits of his character, his little eccentricities of manner and appearance and his carelessness of ordinary social conventions that impress his purblind contemporaries. In his music we can read the true Beethoven, with his sublime imagination, his noble view of life, his resolute endurance of disaster that would have crushed the spirit of an ordinary man (p.148).

Also, just as people are influenced by others in life or as people imitate others (a child naturally imitates the father or mother), musicians are also influenced by the works of others. In fact the Suzuki violin method works by a child's direct imitation of the mother. It is difficult to find any composer who does not draw from the deposits of another composer who is seen as a mentor, role model, contemporary, or genius.

The pursuit of perfection

Human beings are naturally engrossed with the pursuit of excellence and perfection. We are always, as it were, searching out new ways and techniques of improving our existence. Existentialism demands and accepts this fact. If we fail to find fresh paths; we get wearied by the old. This persistent pursuit for perfection has yielded so much to man with regards to technological innovations, scientific discoveries, breakthroughs in medicine and pharmacology, weather forecast, aeronautics, dietetics, and education.

Paradoxically and ironically we have taken this pursuit somewhat to the extreme in certain facets of life such as fashion, body building, commerce and trade, religion, entertainment, wars and genocides, etc. In fashion for example, designers have made so much aberration of the concept of fashion that we are all walking around naked with skimpy clothing. The pursuit of wealth has

led to capitalism, socialism, feudalism and so many other selfish economic and monetary ideologies. Religion has been used as a tool for hypnotism and brainwashing of the masses. The discovery of uranium and the development of nuclear weapons and other armaments of mass destruction have all threatened the very existence we all share.

Music, as an art, and by imitation, has also been enmeshed in this same pursuit. The demand for and discovery of new music, new performance styles, composition and recording soft wares, advanced digital recording, encoding, staging, lighting, props, sound systems, musical instruments and new instrumentation techniques has improved the lot of music over the years.

Also just as human beings have taken some aspects their existence to the extreme, music has also followed suit. The un-tempered demand and pursuit of newness in music has somewhat led to meaningless music, puerile compositions, drug abuse, nudity, sexually explicit music videos, vulgar lyrics, gangsterism, sexual pervasion, and violence.

George Fredrick Handel (1685-1759), who was one of the giants of Baroque era music, was forced to churn out so many compositions within short periods of time because of the demand for new music by the church and the courts. This affected his music so much that he has been criticized as having almost all of his compositions sounding similar.

The same Baroque era witnessed one of the most barbaric musical practices in human history. The castrato practice involved castrating young men before the age of puberty so that they could sing like women but with the lung power of a man. Many of the young boys were castrated against their will and they all lived with the physio-psychological trauma and stigma of being neither male nor female. They became adults trapped in juvenile bodies. Many of them committed suicide later even after singing operatic and heroic passages in the church and concert halls.

Drug abuse and illicit sexual mannerisms displayed by our pop musicians are all cases of this same pursuit taken to the extreme. The pop-musician erroneously believes that he needs a 'high' from drugs for his stage craft and the music managers and marketers believe also that music deserves as much sexual content as possible to push through.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to show that music owes a lot to the human life. The various aspects of music such as composition, instrumentation, performance, conducting, directing, and all the elements of music such as melody, pitch, texture, harmony, etc., all echo the various dimensions of the human existence such as conception, gestation, birth, death, character, mood, mannerisms, size, etc. This affinity to the human life has been found to be natural to music and this fact was succinctly captured by Dubos in Bond (2003) thus:

The ideal work of art must imitate nature in some way. Music, like painting, has but a single goal: to present to the mind the truth of nature. What art could project from nature was first and foremost the human passions (p.287). Nature (particularly the human life) is inalienable from music and music unavoidably imitates it.

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