
Phenomenological and Analytic Aesthetics of Music

On the Views of Susanne Langer and Roman Ingarden

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In his *Politics* (Book 8, Chapter 5, 1340a), in the book devoted to the elements of education, Aristotle writes:

Rhythm and melody supply imitations of anger and gentleness, and also of courage and temperance and of all the qualities contrary to these, and of the other qualities of character. These imitations hardly fall short of the actual affections, as we know from our own experience, for in listening to such strains our souls undergo a change.

In the eighteenth century Thomas Twining analysed the chapter containing this quotation in a supplement to his translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* entitled "Two Dissertations, on Poetical and Musical Imitation".¹ He tried to examine whether it would be possible to find in Aristotle's work any support for the most popular aesthetic theory of his time concerning the emotional content of music. According to this theory music is expressive of emotions due to the imitation of tones and accents, inflections and modulations of voice of a person moved by certain emotions (i.e. to the natural expression present in human voice). One of the proponents of this view, Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, formulated it in his *Réflexions critique sur la peinture et la poésie* in 1719 as follows:

the composer imitates the tones, the accents and the sighs, the inflexions of the voice and, in a word, all those sounds with whose help nature herself expresses her feelings and emotions... [Music's] marvelous power to move us [is due to

1. Thomas Twining, "Two Dissertations, on Poetical and Musical Imitation", in *Aristotle's Treatise on Poetry* (London 1789).

the fact that its notes are] those very signs of emotion which have been invented by Nature, from whom they have received their power.²

Unfortunately, Thomas Twining could not find what he was looking for in Aristotle's work. On the contrary, he found out—rightly—that Aristotle while speaking about similarities between music and feelings could not mean the similarities between music and the human voice under the influence of some emotion. In the same chapter of *Politics* we can find, after all, the following statement:

The objects of no other sense, such as taste or touch, have any resemblance to moral qualities; in visible objects there is only a little, [...] figures and colours are not imitations, but signs, of moral habits, indications which the body gives of states of feeling. [...] On the other hand, even in mere melodies there is an imitation of character, for the musical modes differ essentially from one another, and those who hear them are differently affected by each.

Twining comments this passage in the following way:

Whatever may be the meaning of this last assertion—for it seems not quite philosophical to talk of such a resemblance as being in the sounds themselves—whatever may be its meaning, it cannot well be, that the melody resembles manners or passions as expressed by speech; because this would destroy the distinction between Music and Painting: for words are exactly in the same case with colours and figures; they are not resemblances of manners, or passions, but indications only. We must then, I fear, be contented to take what Aristotle says as a popular and unphilosophical way of expressing a mere resemblance of effect.³

Now, it seems clear what Twining had in mind claiming that it is unphilosophical to talk of a resemblance between sounds and emotions. The problem has been formulated countless number of times as the following paradox: although music seems expressive of certain, maybe ineffable, feelings and emotions at the same time works of music (and of any other art for that matter) are not sentient beings and it is not proper to ascribe to them, in a strict sense, any predicates of this kind. Still the fact that we cannot find a more adequate way of reporting what we expe-

2. Quoted from Enrico Fubini, *The History of Music Aesthetics*, trans. Michael Hatwell (London: Macmillan, 1991), 184.

3. Twining, "Two Dissertations", 79.

rience when listening to music than by describing it in emotional terms (that is, we say that the music is sad, mournful, gay, joyous and so on) needs to be somehow explained.

The fear of being unphilosophical, expressed by Twining, resulted in the removal of the emotions from the music itself and locating them entirely and exclusively in the mind of the artist or of the listener. This gave rise to a whole range of theories interpreting the emotional content of music as simple self-expression and symptom of certain real emotions experienced by the artist—the composer or the performer. Or, on the other hand, theories placing emotions in the mind of the listener and interpreting them as empathy, i.e. attribution or projection of the listener's own emotions into emotionally neutral music. Needless to say, views of this kind were typical of the time when psychologism was rife in philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century.

As it is well known, Husserl's phenomenology went hand in hand with a thoroughgoing and vehement attack on psychologism. And in a sense parallel to this general counter-reaction against psychologism in philosophy, there was a reaction against the aesthetic theories (concerning the emotional content of music) just mentioned. It became clear that these purely psychological theories in aesthetics were too dependent on the domain of the subjective and misinterpreted what they were supposed to explain. And the philosophers started again to talk "unphilosophically", as we remember Twining claimed, about similarities between music and emotions and about emotions in music itself.

It is interesting to note that this anti-psychological attitude is shared by two philosophers as different as Roman Ingarden and Susanne Langer, a Polish and an American philosopher respectively; they belonged to the same generation and their major books on aesthetics began to appear in the thirties (Ingarden) and the forties (Langer). At the same time they represent two of the most important philosophical orientations of the twentieth century. Although, to be sure, only in the case of Ingarden is it easy to name this orientation unequivocally, and that is, of course, phenomenology. The case of Langer is a little more difficult and we can only approximately identify her philosophical affiliations. Her *Philosophy in a New Key* is dedicated to Whitehead. She declares that "[t]he logical theory on which this whole study of symbols is based is essentially that which was set forth by Wittgenstein [...] in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*"⁴ and makes a number of refer-

4. Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), 79.

ences to Russell and Carnap. These clues and of course, first of all, her general philosophical outlook indicate that it seems correct to place her in the broad field of linguistic philosophy, sometimes associated, through different cross-connections, with logical positivism and analytic philosophy. Even though the specification of Langer's philosophical affiliation is so imprecise,⁵ it is clear that her stance is quite distant from that of Ingarden. Similarly, we might have expected their positions in the philosophy of music to be no less different.

They both started their respective work in aesthetics with a critique of psychologism: Ingarden in *The Literary Work of Art*⁶ of 1931, Langer in *Philosophy in a New Key* of 1942, where she offered a thorough criticism of the idea that the expressive capacities of music can be understood as direct self-expression and immediate manifestation of the real emotions experienced by the artist. But of course those who exercise such a critique and talk about feelings in music, that is about feelings which are not felt, are confronted with a real paradox—the one mentioned earlier. (And it is understandable that so many, as e.g. Twining and the followers of psychologism, preferred to avoid this paradox.) Thus the two philosophers had to find some solution to this paradox within the framework of their quite different philosophical convictions.⁷

Ingarden, after the critique of the thesis that works of art are psychological objects and of the thesis that they are physical objects (because with respect to works of art we can make statements which are necessarily false about any physical objects and vice versa), focuses on the problem of the particular mode of their being. For its solution Ingarden makes use of one of the main notions of phenom-

5. In what follows I will refer to it in a generalizing manner by the term "analytic philosophy" used in the broadest sense of the term, i.e. encompassing all related developments from the beginning of the twentieth century.

6. Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderline of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

7. As a matter of fact Ingarden does not offer any solution to this paradox. What he does offer is a very detailed description of a musical work in his *The Work of Music and the Problem of Its Identity*, trans. Adam Czerniawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). This is, by the way, exactly in keeping with the basic strategy of phenomenology. With respect to the problem of emotional qualities of music he simply says: "I think that we must first, without prejudice, ascertain the facts as they appear in direct experience and only then seek to explain them in relation to processes and sense organs, so that, given a reality independent of the listener, there should emerge amid the data of experience just those objects with just those qualifications. It is these facts that controvert the thesis that it is impossible for sound and emotional qualities to appear together, in the sense here presented, as a single concrete totality." (p. 101)

enology, which he took over from Husserl, namely of the notion of the intentional object. According to Ingarden all works of art are purely intentional objects, and thus no real (autonomous) objects, neither physical nor psychological. In order to apprehend works of art as intentional objects one needs firstly to show that their qualities justify univocally that they are intentional objects and, secondly, to carry out a specific modification of the notion "intentional object" in order to obtain an appropriate tool for the description of works of art. Ingarden performed these tasks in his *The Literary Work of Art*; the problems of music are addressed by him specifically in *The Work of Music and the Problem of Its Identity*.⁸

The adherents of the philosophical orientation with which we associate Langer would hardly accept the existence of such objects. Let's suppose that we wanted to explain to them without appealing to any technical phenomenological notions, what Ingarden means when he says that works of art are intentional objects. Then we could say that a work of art is what the beholders perceive when they attend to the physical object which is the carrier of a work of art. According to this description a work of art is not a psychological object—not an act of perception nor an individual, subjective representation constituted in the mind of some particular beholder—but that which is perceived. Neither is it a physical object, which on no account can be equated with the work of art. Of course this partially negative formulation is not a real explanation of the issue, because it immediately provokes the next question: Well, but what is it then? And this question can only be answered on the basis of a comprehensive presentation of the theory of intentional acts and objects.

But when we give this informal and nontechnical formulation of Ingarden's stance, we notice that Langer could accept it, too. And she also has an answer to the question which inevitably follows from this formulation. Langer's answer is that it is a sign or a symbol. That is also an object whose being unfolds when it is attended to as a sign and when its meaning is perceived. At the same time a sign is identical neither with its physical carrier nor with any of its particular interpretations emerging in any particular act of its perception, i.e. a psychological object.

At first sight Langer's answer may seem more direct and clearer than Ingarden's. But it does not take long to realize that this impression is due to the fact that Langer uses a term which has meaning also in ordinary language use, unlike Ingarden's technical notion of the intentional object. But just as we were inclined

8. Ingarden, *Work of Music*. First Polish edition in *Studia z estetyki* [Studies in aesthetics] 2 (Warszawa: PWN, 1958).

to ask, "What is an intentional object?" it is equally legitimate to ask, "What is a sign?" This is so because, first, the essence and mode of existence of a sign is by no means clear and constitutes a serious philosophical problem itself and, secondly, when Langer uses this notion, at times she crosses the boundaries not only of ordinary language use but also of the use this notion received within her philosophical orientation.

In this way we arrived at another important statement about Langer's way of proceeding. Although her answer to the question what a work of art is remains in keeping with the spirit of analytic philosophy, in which the notions of sign and symbol belong to the most important tools, it does not mean that she remains entirely within the limits of this orientation and merely takes over the notions and the main tenets of it in order to use them as a general philosophical foundation for her specific work in aesthetics. Rather, analytic philosophy imparted to her only the basic idea concerning the general way of proceeding. She formulated this herself in the introduction to her second book on aesthetics, *Feeling and Form*:

In *Philosophy in a New Key* it was said that the theory of symbolism there developed should lead to a critique of art as serious and far-reaching as the critique of science that stems from the analysis of discursive symbolism. *Feeling and Form* purports to fulfill that promise, to be that critique of art.⁹

Thus, as this quotation implies, Langer believes that the theories of symbolism developed by early analytical philosophy (e.g. by Russell and the earlier Wittgenstein) are not suited for the description of works of art. These theories deal with symbols which Langer calls discursive and which occur e.g. in the sciences or in certain parts of our ordinary language in its literal use. The source of a different theory of symbolism developed by Langer and suitable for the description of art is at the same time another source of Langer's philosophy in general, it is *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* by Ernst Cassirer.¹⁰

This kind of symbol—as opposed to a discursive symbol—to be found in music and in the arts in general is called by Langer presentational symbol. According to her distinction the discursive symbols are represented fairly accurately by linguistic symbols. Fully conventionalized, they are based on elementary, "atom-

9. Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), vii.

10. Ernst Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1923-1929).

ic” units of meanings out of which complex symbols are constructed, with meanings that combine the meanings of the basic units and of the rules of syntax applied to them. The presentational symbol on the contrary, best exemplified by a representational picture, does not consist of independent elements with discrete, fixed meanings. A picture is but a set of coloured marks. Their meaning emerges only in the context of the whole. Consequently, the configuration rules of a picture cannot be identified with rules of syntax (which determine, for example, the ways in which elementary meanings are combined to create complex meanings). According to Langer, the meanings of the elements of the presentational symbol “are understood only through the meaning of the whole, through their relations within the total structure”.¹¹ It is the structure as a whole—and not any of its elements endowed with conventional meanings—that is a carrier and generator of meaning in the presentational symbol. The similarity of the structure—or “logical form”, as Langer sometimes calls it—of the symbol and of the object it symbolizes is the essential factor in the creation of the meaning of the presentational symbol.¹² A symbol of this kind receives its symbolic power thanks to—among other things—its structural congruence with what it symbolises. If in addition no convention guides the relation between the symbolizing and the symbolized (and this seems to happen quite often in music, especially in the instrumental works of so-called pure, absolute music) the whole symbolic power of such a symbol lies in its structure. With respect to music Langer grounds her theory on the similarity—ascertained in psychology¹³—between the dynamic and temporal patterns of development of human emotions and analogous patterns to be found in music. Because of this music can be a presentational symbol of emotions. The emotional meaning of a musical work is its temporal and dynamic structure mirroring a similar structure of the flow of emotions. It has been beautifully expressed by the

11. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 97.

12. To be precise, Langer—following the early Wittgenstein’s picture theory of meaning—maintains that the logical form of all symbols, both presentational and discursive, is similar to the form of the object it symbolizes. However, since such a wide-ranging proposition inevitably gets entangled in a number of paradoxes, the only way to salvage the essence of Langer’s theory is to restrict its applicability to the sphere of presentational symbols. Once this is done similarity of form becomes a constitutive feature of those symbols and a criterion enabling us to distinguish them from discursive (linguistic) symbols.

13. In particular Langer recalls the works of two Gestalt-psychologists: Wolfgang Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology* (New York: H. Liveright, 1929) and Kurt Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1935).

German Romantic, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, in a statement very accurately capturing the gist of Langer's view:

I shall use a flowing stream as an illustration. It is beyond human art to depict in words meant for the eye the thousands of individual waves, smooth and rugged, bursting and foaming, in the flow of a mighty river—words can but meagerly recount the incessant movements and cannot visibly picture the consequent rearrangement of the drops of water. Just so it is with the mysterious stream in the depths of the human soul; words mention and name and describe its flux in a foreign medium. In music, however, the stream itself seems to be released.¹⁴

In a sense a work of music *is* the feeling it symbolizes—the two are in fact joined together. The objective structure of music on the one hand and the dynamic structure of emotion it symbolises on the other are just two sides, two aspects of one thing. i.e. of a musical work considered as a symbol.

Now, when we consider how Ingarden describes the emotional qualities of music in his treatise *The Work of Music and the Problem of Its Identity*, we notice numerous convergencies with Langer's view. The following quotation seems almost to repeat Langer's critique of the theory of music as direct self-expression of some real emotions of a composer or a performer:

content [of a pure musical work] does not connect *causally* [this word omitted in the English translation but present in the Polish original] with real processes or events in the world. Even where certain works or their parts have the function of expressing mental states [...], then what is expressed [...] is not [...] experience occurring in the real world but a fictitious construct.¹⁵

In this respect a musical work is contrasted by Ingarden with an acoustic signal: "the very occurrence of the signal points to the actual occurrence of another real fact".¹⁶ The similarity not only of the conclusion but also of the way of thinking about the problem becomes conspicuous when we recall that also Langer argues against the self-expression theory by invoking the notion of signal (as opposed to

14. W. H. Wackenroder, *Phantasien über die Kunst* (1799); English translation in Oskar Walzel, *German Romanticism*, trans. A. E. Lusk (New York and London, 1932), Part I, 122–123.

15. Roman Ingarden, *Work of Music*, 56.

16. *Ibid.*, 55.

symbol),¹⁷ meaning a sign that stays in an actual existential correlation (of which causal correlation is just a special case) to its object and “indicates the existence—past, present, or future—of a thing, event, or condition”.¹⁸ The theory of direct self-expression is interpreted by Langer as consisting in the claim that a musical work is a signal of the emotions of the composer or the performer. She rejects this theory by showing that music is not a signal but a symbol of emotions. And for Langer,

[s]ymbols are not proxy for their objects [as signals are], but are *vehicles for the conception of objects*. [...] In talking *about* things we have conceptions of them, not the things themselves; and *it is the conceptions, not the things, that symbols directly “mean”*.¹⁹

Unlike a signal, a symbol of an object does not by itself make any statement about the actual existence of this object.

Furthermore the emotional qualities of music are not—neither for Ingarden nor Langer—the psychological reactions of the listener but certain specific elements of the music itself. The most important point, however, is that according to Ingarden the emotional qualities and sounding elements of music do not belong to two different strata of the musical work. In the musical work—unlike in the literary work—there is only one single stratum. To be sure, there are non-sounding elements in every musical work—emotional qualities being only some of them—but they are strictly and intrinsically connected with the sounding elements: “They are so closely tied to sounds and sound-constructs that the musical work forms an extremely compact and cohesive whole and in this respect outshines work in the other arts, especially literature.”²⁰ We could say they melt into one organic whole. Consequently emotional qualities are not merely associated with the musical work, ascribed to it or projected into it but are its real, inherent qual-

17. In *Philosophy in a New Key* Langer’s distinction was “sign” versus “symbol”. In her later book, *Feeling and Form*, she says: “Charles W. Morris, in *Signs, Language and Behaviour* [New York: Prentice-Hall, 1946] distinguishes between ‘signal’ and ‘symbols’. This seems to me a better use of words, since it leaves ‘sign’ to cover both ‘signal’ and ‘symbol’, whereas my former usage left me without any generic term. I have, therefore, adopted his practice.” (pp. 26 f.) In this paper I have proceeded accordingly, even reporting Langer’s views from *Philosophy in a New Key*.

18. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 57.

19. *Ibid.*, 60–61.

20. Ingarden, *Work of Music*, 51.

ities. This clearly corresponds to Langer's proposition that emotional meanings of music lie entirely in and are fully dependent on its temporal and dynamic structure: the emotional meanings of a musical work are its temporal and dynamic qualities mirroring similar qualities of the flow of emotions.

In contrast to the musical work, in the literary work of art we find—according to Ingarden—the separate stratum of word sounds, the second stratum of meaning units and meaning entities of various orders²¹ (as well as two further strata which are not essential in this connection). The levels of sounds and of meanings are not as intrinsically connected as to form one organic whole, one single stratum, as it is in music. This observation allows us to identify Ingarden's stand with respect to one of the perennial questions traditionally connected with musical aesthetics, namely with respect to the much debated issue whether the analogies and similarities between musical and linguistic meanings are so far-reaching that we can explain and analyse the phenomenon of musical significance invoking the paradigm of linguistic meaning. Or, to put it succinctly, whether music is (can be understood as) a language of emotions.²²

If Ingarden were ready to construe music as a kind of language, it is clear that he would have to see (at least) two separate strata—of sound elements and of meaning units—in it, similarly as in a language. The conception envisaging the musical work as consisting of only one single stratum clearly opposes music to any linguistic phenomena. The mere fact that Ingarden chooses to speak about emotional qualities of music and not about its emotional meanings already shows unequivocally that he did not even consider seeing music as a kind of language.

This is again fully in keeping with Langer's stand. In chapter VIII of *Philosophy in a New Key*—"On Significance in Music"—she argues explicitly against the view that music is to be understood—in any literal sense—as language. This conviction is inherent in her distinction between discursive and presentational symbols described above. She says:

Yet it [music] is not, logically speaking, a language, for it has no vocabulary. To call the tones of a scale its "words", harmony its "grammar", and thematic development its "syntax", is a useless allegory, for tones lack the very thing that

21. Cf. Ingarden, *Literary Work of Art*, 30.

22. A typical formulation of this position is found in Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959) and Wilson Coker, *Music and Meaning* (New York and London: The Free Press/Collier-Macmillan, 1972).

distinguishes a word from a mere vocable: fixed connotation, or "dictionary meaning".²³

This means that music lacks the essential property of language (and of any discursive symbolism), i.e. some basic units of meaning used in combinations to construct the meaning of larger, compound symbols. As a presentational symbol, its meaning is only constituted in the context of bigger structures and is dependent on those structures. While an identical musical element can have different meanings in different contexts, in a single given context it cannot be replaced by another element without a change in meaning. Such statements by Langer which stress the contextuality of meaning of presentational symbols show again a remarkable resemblance with the following statement of Ingarden:

The B-minor sonata is not individuated via a *particularization* characteristic of real modes of existence, but via a specific, unrepeatable selection. Harmonization of qualities appears in such a context of auditory or other qualities that it experiences a certain specific, qualitative modification that it would not have undergone, were the selection of qualities even slightly different. In this modification the quality simultaneously modifies its surroundings, which would not have been what they are had the qualitative modification undergone change in relation to the shape that the quality has precisely in that uniquely coalesced consonance of qualities.²⁴

Of course it is not possible to elaborate all the similarities in Ingarden's and Langer's treatment of music within the limits of a single paper. But I hope the points presented here are sufficient evidence of quite considerable convergencies between their views.²⁵ It seems that they constitute sufficient ground for the claim that—in spite of quite considerable differences in Ingarden's and Langer's philosophical outlook—their views on the aesthetics of music resemble one another closely. The differences between them consist in the basic philosophical assumptions and in the notions they use in their discussion of music. But if one brackets these philosophical basics, their purely aesthetical views—i.e. what they in fact say about music in one philosophical language or another—are quite similar. And, to refer

23. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 228–229.

24. Ingarden, *Work of Music*, 62–63.

25. This was, I admit, a surprise for me when I compared their views for the first time, especially given the quite considerable difference in their philosophical background.

to the opening quotation of my paper, their views are at the same time similar to Aristotle's view that music is not an indication but an imitation of emotions.

This conclusion can be seen as a partial confirmation of the general claim made by another Aristotelian, Józef Bocheński, about the relation between phenomenology and analytic philosophy. Considering himself an analytic philosopher he once said about the phenomenologists: "Sometimes I have the impression that we are digging the same tunnel from two directions—sometimes, as a matter of fact, we have the same thing in mind."²⁶

26. Józef M. Bocheński, "Filozofia analityczna" [analytic philosophy], in Bocheński, *Sens życia i inne eseje* [The meaning of life and other essays] (Kraków: Philed, 1993), 145.