

Speech in Music

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Music and instruments are used in many cultures to convey meaning, from the simplest, 'Oi!', to the most complex complete sentences. The simpler ones include warnings from a motor horn or bicycle bell, alarms from a bell or bar, summons to prayer from a church bell or a muezzin's call, and many others with which we are all familiar, wherever we live.

Many composers have written music with which, in their minds at least, some meaning is implied, though this is not always so apparent to the listener. With some, a funeral or a wedding march for example, diametrically opposed as they are, the meanings are obvious; others, a spring song (without the words or title), may be less so.

Some pieces of music have acquired an added meaning quite separately from the composer's intention. An example, during World War II, was the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The first four notes were replicated by the Morse Code for the letter V, · · · -, and this became a symbol, for all those under the Nazi Occupation, for the eventual Victory from their oppression. The BBC broadcast incessantly to occupied Europe during the War, a recording of Jimmy Blades playing that rhythm on an Ugandan kettledrum, muting the head with one hand for first three notes and lifting his hand for the fourth.

Others are incidental to the way an instrument is played. A jews harp or trump will sound the overtones of its fundamental when the player alters the shape of the mouth in the way that one sounds each vowel. Lovers in many places have used the instrument to serenade the beloved in secret, and even without the consonants, one might understand '(-)ou are (-)eau(-)i(-)u(-)', and other similar phrases in the appropriate languages.

Others, like the Morse signal above, are simply codes, re-iterations of longs and shorts that are known to both player and hearer. Examples of this are New Guinea codes, blown on a conch, to signal the results of returning war parties, and also for other messages. Other Oceanic codes have been more elaborate, using different pitches by hand-stopping the open bell of a conch, as Raymond Clausen taught me from the island of Malekula in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu). More examples of these can be found in my book on *The Conch*, available on the Books page of this site. Slit drums have also been used on the same or other islands for the same purposes. On some slit drums, playing at different points on the lip, or on the other side of the lip, will produce a different pitch; it depends on how the drum is made. But on any slit drum, partly occluding the slit will alter the pitch, for slit drums are Helmholtz resonators, and changing the area of the open slit will affect the pitch.

The greatest use of instruments to talk, and to do so in words and complete sentences, is found in those parts of the world where the language is tonal, mainly in Africa south of the Sahara and in the borderlands of China and its near neighbours. I have been assured that in the main area of Han China this is not done, but there seems to be some evidence that there is nevertheless local use of such language.

A tonal language is one in which inflection, the use of different pitches, affects the meanings of words. A word whose spelling in letters remains the same, can have quite different meanings depending on the relative pitches of different syllables. We do this in English to some small extent to convey differences between a statement and a question, but we do not change the actual meaning of a word, nor where there are several words with quite different meanings (eg saw as the past of see and saw for cutting wood) do we differentiate between them other than by context – whether they do so by tonal difference in German I do not know; certainly I have never heard of using instruments to replicate that language.

But in Africa and in the Chinese areas, they do just that.

One of the problems is that there are many words that share the same pitch pattern and the same syllabic format. One answer is context. Many years ago

I was at a ceilidh during an IFMCIUK meeting and there was a West African drumming group playing. I heard the leader beat out --' - on the hourglass pressure drum, and Azubíkye, who was sitting beside me, got up and walked over to the group. But the commonest solution is redundancy. One builds up a pattern, a short phrase, then repeats that phrase and adds a few words, repeats all that with a few more words, and gradually the meaning becomes clear because as each phrase is added it clarifies the phrase before. This is why, if one hears what used to be called the bush telegraph, one hears a lot of repetition.

Messages can be sent over great distances very quickly in this way because sound carries far with instruments such as slit drums or large membrane drums, and when other drummers hear a message that seems to be more than local, they will repeat it, and so the area that a message covers expands with each relay.

The great advantage of such languages is that any sound source can be used. Father Carrington, whose book *The Talking Drums of Africa* was one of the first to explain how it worked, tells of how he forgot the number of his room in an hotel, and so walked down the corridor quietly whistling his wife's name. When he heard her response, he knew which was his room. Side blown horns were often used, and their sound also carries well over distances. This why many horns have a small hole in the tip of the horn – covering the hole lowers the pitch, opening it raises it, and so copies a pitch pattern; more or less covering the end of the bell also lowers the pitch, useful in combination with the fingerhole, to cover a three-tone language. The iron double bell is used to speak as well as to play basic patterns in music; so are the Hausa long trumpets. The hourglass pressure drum of course is ideal. The leader, while maintaining the rhythm of the music, will also break off to make remarks about the dancers, or ask for more beer, or will 'talk' about the politics of the day.

In Burma, among the Karen people, they have a horn with a free reed in the side and a hole in the tip. Whereas the African side-blown horns are blown by trumpeting, these are blown via the reed like a mouthorgan, but again by using the fingerhole they can talk. The Miao and the Hmong people of the Chinese borderlands are mouthorgan players and they can use the instruments to speak.

Among all these people, not everyone can understand ‘drum language’, just as not everyone here can understand French as well as English, but those who can understand it can pass on a message where it’s relevant, and can keep it to themselves when it is private.

There are many other ways of talking by music. The Basques have a whistle code as do some other peoples. A basic use of an alphorn is to signal to the folk in the village below that all is well with the flock of sheep high on the mountains, or to ask for food or drink to be sent. Islanders off-shore when herds are pastured on those islands can signal with conchs to the mainland. Lowland alphorns such as the Dutch *midwinterhoorn* or the Polish *ligawka* can signal across the marshes to each other or to the nearest village.

All around the world, instruments and musical sounds are used, whether by tonal language or by signal code, or just by a loud noise, to convey information from one person to another.

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