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## COMMUNICATION, MUSIC, AND SPEECH ABOUT MUSIC<sup>1</sup>

*by Steven Feld*

Music has a fundamentally social life. It is made to be consumed—practically, intellectually, individually, communally—and it is consumed as symbolic entity. By “consumed” I mean socially interpreted as meaningfully structured, produced, performed, and displayed by varieties of prepared, invested, or otherwise historically situated actors. How does this happen? What does it mean? How can one know about it? These questions focus on the nature of the music communication process, and to rethink them I turn back to the question posed often by Charles Seeger: what does music communicate? To answer he also needed to ask: what does speech about music communicate? Through diagrams and dense prose, Seeger (1977:16-44) argued that to address the issue of what music communicates requires specifying what it could not communicate. The logical preoccupation with differences between the speech and music modes led to the notion that speech is the communication of “world view as the intellection of reality” while music is communication of “world view as the feeling of reality” (ibid.).

In this essay I want to argue both for another way to approach these questions as well as for another set of answers. Specifically, I am concerned less with the logical and philosophical distinction between the speech and music modes, and more with the question of communication, that is to say, with the process of meaningful interpretation explicitly conceived as social activity.

Seeger devoted great efforts to point out the potential distortions of music in verbal discourse about music. He felt that the “operational idiosyncrasies” (1977:7) of speech biased the study of music, and he endeavored to promote metalanguage and definitional postulates that were ontologically precise. He was concerned that speech about music overemphasized musical space while underemphasizing musical time, that speech about music ultimately valued event over process, product over tradition, and static over dynamic understanding. He found the linguocentric predicament of music scholarship cause for lament and continually reminded us of its pitfalls. Rather than further lament these pitfalls, I want to address some of the consequences of studying how people routinely talk about music. But first I will take up Seeger’s query about what music communicates, and extend it to talk about how this process takes place, how we participate in it, and how our participation invents, validates, circulates, and accumulates musical meanings.

*A communications approach*

Seeger concerned himself with rigorous definitional postulates, with a precise and logical series of terms and denotata. As an overarching concept for music/speech Seeger (1977:10) invoked the term *normenon*, for any "class of manmade products that serves primarily a function of communication," and further defined communication as "transmission of energy in a form" (1977:19). We can first refine this notion of communication by moving it from physicalist exposition to more firmly social ground. Being fundamentally relational, communication is process and our concern with it should be a concern with the operation of social determination-in-process. The focus is always on a relationship, not on a thing, or an entity. In the case of human expressive modalities, it is a relationship between the origin and action of sensations, and the character of interpretations and consequences. Communication in this sense is no longer ontologically reified to a transmission or force; it can only exist relationally, in-between, at unions and intersections. To the extent that we take this notion as the serious grounding for an epistemic approach, we must claim that the origins and conditions of communication are multidimensional. Communication then is not located in the content communicated nor in the information transferred. At the same time it is not just the form of the content nor the stream of its conveyance. It is interactive; it resides in dialectic relations between: form and content, stream and information, code and message, culture and behavior, production and reception, construction and interpretation. Communication is neither the idea nor the action but the process of intersection where objects and events are rendered as meaningful or not through the work of social actors.

The term communication instantly evokes process and activity, and rightfully so, but I would also like to concentrate on two other notions it evokes: meaning and interpretation. Communication is not the "thing" or "entity" from which people "take" meanings; rather, social engagement in the process, through interpretation of symbolic forms, makes it possible to imagine ongoing meaningful activity as subjectively experienced by social actors. In other words, we cannot speak of meaning without speaking of interpretation (whether public or conscious). By communication then, I mean a socially interactive and intersubjective process of reality construction through message production and interpretation. By socially interactive I mean that whether events are face-to-face or mediated in some way, we each apprehend the symbols and situations before and around us through various schemes of typification. We further assume that these schemes are not whimsical or idiosyncratic but that they are social, shared in large part, at least until evidence to the contrary is in hand.

We apprehend the surrounding scene as organized, meaningful, and intersubjectively so; in other words, we assume that our daily realities as well as our more specifically situated and finite sensibilities are shared. At the same time we each recognize that we might not all have the same idea, the same "take" on "what is going on" and "what it means." Some things we take for granted; they require no action or verification beyond

physical presence or existence. Other things invite engagement and choice; we guess about what others are up to, what is on their minds, what they are trying to project to us, have us project to them. We guess about what they intend or guess about whether they mean to intend, or mean to feign disinterest in intention (Worth and Gross 1974). We become involved in making choices that extend typifications. In so doing, we penetrate an object or event to take it in knowingly, that is, to consume it.

Whether we are dealing with objects and events that are familiar or exotic, whether it is a matter of frequent exposure or contact, or anonymous abstractions, humans interpret the scene as either obvious and direct (indeed, transparent and banal) or requiring attention and action of some concerted sort. Whether or not we think we know what things, events, or sounds are about, we assume, not infrequently, that they display the subjective intentions of others, and that these subjective intentions may or may not be explicit and refined in the minds of the others. They may be equally vague and ambiguous to producer and consumer alike, equally transparent and obvious to both, or occupy various unbalanced middle grounds of partially explicit intentions and receptions. What is important from the perspective of communication are: (a) the primacy of the social, interactive, intersubjective realm of these processes; (b) the fact that engagement in the processes shape, define, maintain and bring forth tacit and/or explicit subjective realities for participants in the scene; (c) that meaning fundamentally implicates interpretation; (d) that a production code and producer's intention are complexly related to the consumer's interpreted messages; and (e) that this complexity (i.e., non-isomorphism) cannot be understood in purely logical or normative terms but requires socially situated investigation.

### *Communication or Semiosis?*

Some recent models of musical and sociomusical analysis that follow semiotic terminology and questions (Molino 1975, Nattiez 1975, Boilès 1982, Tagg 1982) occasionally invoke the concept "communication" in the course of theoretical exposition. To help focus my concerns, let me briefly distinguish their approaches from mine, while at the same time emphasizing that many of these ideas are indeed complementary and perhaps share larger goals.

The most well known, and perhaps the most substantial proposals for rethinking the process of musical signification are raised (not entirely explicitly) by the tripartite model of musical semiology associated with Jean Molino (1975) and Jean-Jacques Nattiez (1975). Recognizing the non-isomorphism of code and message, of artistic "intent" and produced "effect", and of producer/consumer or sender/receiver, Molino and Nattiez propose a model of musical signification which considers the vantage points of code production (*poiétique*), message perception (*esthétique*), and posits a *niveau neutre*, an autonomous level of material structure where music is "text." Nattiez's book (1975) is largely an exploration of the "neutral level"; it is an attempt to justify its autonomy and empirical validity, holding the other two levels back for future exploration. Some

commentators have found this cause for strong criticism. David Lidov, for example, claims (1977:17) that in function and in practice, the *niveau neutre* can only mean a retreat from musical meaning, as well as from communication. He asks: "If all descriptions of music have their origin in the facts of production and perception, how is a neutral description possible except as a vacuous hypothesis?" (Lidov 1977:19).

Lidov's question is harsher, though related to my own, namely: do semiotic approaches really analyze communication? To answer, I think it necessary to distinguish communicational analysis from logical, philosophical, or other normative analyses that seek typologies of signs and sign functions. For semiotics of music, much activity seems to stress the taxonomy and form of sign types. Meaning is subjugated to logical relations, hence Nattiez's "intrinsic signification" and "symbolic signification" take over where Meyer's (1956) "absolutist/expressionist" and "referential/expressionist" left off. While these notations tease our concern for a real semantics and pragmatics, the issues of use and interpretation are never addressed socially and directly. I cannot escape the sense that the dominant concern still is with "cracking the code", with formalization, rather than with the code as a *fait social total*.

The analyses of Boilès (1982) and Tagg (1982) are more satisfying in some respects, but can also be differentiated from my views. Boilès sets up a calculus of interpretive possibilities based on a relationship of interpreter, interpretant, sign-object, designatum, and thing-object. The benefit of such a calculus is clear: it is a convenient way to map logical relations. The problem is also clear: the image of listening experience projected by such a model is extremely simple. One can quickly and intuitively falsify it. Listening experience involves things that happen in time; such things change often and rapidly. To construct a model of this experience and a sense of its relation to how signs signify and how musical symbols mean, one must confront the dynamics of changeability, the interaction of form and content, the interaction of specific and general experience, the interaction of background expectations and generalized interpretive routines. Once again it seems that form dominates content, taxonomy dominates real worlds of users and use, and logical types dominate ambiguities, heterogeneity, and lived meanings.

Tagg (1982) eschews some of this formalism to situate his object socially within real worlds of audiences whose interpretive investments are clear. But I still find his notion of communication bound to the idea that a certain "something" exists within a music, and it can outwardly project itself onto its audience ("receivers"), who are affected by it. This "effects"/"reinforcement" approach to musical affect tends then to focus Tagg's analysis on music structural features and reified minimal units ("musemes") rather than on engagement or on the diversity of ways the sounds are consumed. Tagg presents an ideological critique (1982:62-63) of the macro effects of the musical messages he analyzes, and admits that he has not integrated this level with the "textual analysis". This strikes me as the crux of the problem: one cannot stay at a syntactic level of analysis and then project its results to micro- or macro-semantics as if

these were determined by a musical text. Meaning cannot be reduced to a textual level of structural associations between "musemes" of one piece with phrases, motifs, or musical patterns from others. While such associations may be part of the micro-structure of listening experience, they do not necessarily fix any or much of a piece's meaning.

While these proposals are of great utility and value because of their clarity, formal explicitness, and concern with general theory, Geertz's (1983:118) recent critique of the semiotics of art seems to apply in degrees to their real or potential problems:

For an approach to aesthetics which can be called semiotics—that is, one concerned with how signs signify—what this means is that it cannot be a formal science like logic or mathematics but must be a social one like history or anthropology. Harmony and prosody are hardly to be dispensed with, any more than composition and syntax; but exposing the structure of a work of art and accounting for its impact are not the same thing . . . If we are to have a semiotics of art (or for that matter, of any sign system not axiomatically self-contained), we are going to have to engage in a kind of natural history of signs and symbols, an ethnography of the vehicles of meaning. Such signs and symbols, such vehicles of meaning, play a role in the life of a society, or some part of society, and it is that which in fact gives them their life. Here too, meaning is use, or more carefully, arises from use . . .

In the perspective that follows I will try to illuminate a model that is compatible with some of the formal concerns illustrated in the work of these semioticians. My focus however is not on logical or neutral analyses but on what I see as the more specifically communicational processes of musical meaning and interpretation. In order to develop the complementarity of these perspectives, I will approach the music communicational process largely from the point of view of the listening process rather than from the entry point of the score, composer, or code *per se*.

#### *Dialectics of the music communication process*

Let us begin with the assumption that the presence of sounds in our social field will invite conventional patterns of attending, disattending, foregrounding, or backgrounding. The invitation proceeds dialectically through the structure of sound and its placement in historical or physical space and time. If I walk out of my office and cross the street I need attend to car horns in a particular way. I may or may not attend them otherwise if their sounds come in through a closed or open window, or if they emanate from a record or tape recording. I will attend to them another way if there is no sound source to be heard but some spectral charts of sonagrams labelled "car horn" that I must use.

Similarly, at a concert or club I can attend to the details of a piece in a certain way. I can do the same at home with a recording or with a score, if such a thing exists for the piece in question. These levels of experience

can also be combined. Moreover, having attended to the piece in any one of these ways, I am not able to attend to any of the other experiences in exactly the same manner as I did once before. Experience is not only cumulative; it is interactively so. We rarely confront sounds that are totally new, unusual, and without some experiential anchors. Each experience in listening must connote prior, contemporary, and future listenings. We consume as we produce, out of and based upon meaningful pattern and experience.

Meyer's work (1956, 1973) on musical meaning and communication argues that our ongoing predictions of musical structures—in tension, drama, fluctuation, development, changes, constants, deflection, implication, suggestion, delay, and such—will be satisfied, frustrated, or surprised through the listening process in time. He argues that affective and emotional states in the listener are responses to these musical stimuli. Based on gestalt perceptual principles, Meyer finds inhibition or gratification of anticipated structures to be the basis of meaningful musical communication. Keil (1966) argued that Meyer's emphasis on syntactically recoverable dimensions of music left out an entire dimension of performance dynamics which (particularly in improvised, spontaneous, or non-written musics) were deeply linked to expressive and emotive feelings and responses on the part of the listener. Shepherd (1977, 1982) and Lidov (1977, 1980) have discussed other difficulties of treating a score as the musical signifier, and specified other problems in Meyer's framework that have communicational implications. For instance, Meyer's theory does not distinguish the meaning of one musical item from another, does not concern the meaning of "pieces" or "musics" but *music*, and does not probe structural domains besides drama and tension. Furthermore, the framework does not account for varied meanings of the same piece to different listeners, or the same piece to a single listener over time. One must, in other words, differentiate the syntactic features which might be said to arouse a listener, from the range and variety of musical feelings the listener has in the experience of the piece.

Rather than posit only psychological constants as the deep source enabling music to express emotions, we must posit also the centrality and complementarity of social experience, background, skill, desire, and necessity as the constructs which shape perceptual sensations into conceptual realities. To do this is to recognize the social character of the musical communication process: the listener is implicated as a socially and historically situated being, not just as organs that receive and respond to stimuli. For this reason, a description, and a theory of the musical encounter must be sensitive to the biographies of the object/events and actors in question. The encounter is not simply one between a musical text and the gestalt processing of patterns of tension, anticipation, fulfilment, and resolution. Rather, the encounter involves consuming and making sense out of music through interpretive procedures which are deeply linked to, but not synonymous with, the structure of concatenated sound events (Shutz 1951).

Each listening is not just the juxtaposition of a musical object and a listener. It is the juxtaposition of a dialectical object and a consumer. By

dialectical object I mean that one cannot engage a sound object or event without recognition of a simultaneous musical and extramusical reality. The experience is mental and material, code and message, individual and social, formal and expressive. In short, any musical object embodies and provokes interpretive tensions. One cannot encounter the object without making associations; the character of the associations are musical and extra-musical. One cannot encounter the object without turning percepts to concepts; the character of those concepts are musical and extra-musical. In short, the musical object is never isolated, any more than are its listeners or its producers. The cause of this non-isolation is doubly social: the object exists through a code, and through coding/decoding. Neither of these processes are pure or autonomous; neither are encountered at a strictly physiological level of experience (see Baudrillard 1981).

*Enter the listener: from dialectics to interpretive moves*

All musical sound structures are socially structured in two senses: they exist through social construction, and they mean through social interpretation. Both kinds of engagement are socially real regardless of the ultimate importance or value of the musical sound, and regardless of how consciously it is formed, attended to, and understood. Interpretation of a sound object/event (that is, of a construction), is the process of intuiting a relationship between structures, settings, and kinds of potentially relevant or interpretable messages. When we first listen we “lock in” and “shift” our attention, so that the sounds polarize toward structure or history in our minds. The immediate recognition is that sounds are contextual and contextualizing, and continually so. We attend changes, developments, repetitions—form in general—but we always attend to form from a vantage point of familiarity or strangeness, features which are socially constituted through our experiences.

When I hear piped-in muzak I am first aware of it as muzak, over and beyond whether it is a known or unknown tune or a known or unknown performer. But I know this neither from sound nor setting only. I must draw upon a range of typifications. If I am in the bank or elevator I will be surprised if I hear piped-in Kaluli music, even if it is soft and obeys perfectly other structural features of muzak. At the same time, I would be quite surprised if I hear what I structurally know to be appropriate background music or muzak, but played at a loud volume.

Interpretation always requires an active process, however unconscious, intuitive, or banal, of relating structure to ranges of potentially appropriate or relevant messages. In other words, the sound event draws my interpretive attention to the circumstances of meaning through the general features of being contextual and contextualizing. These features of the way we listen involve a form-content, and musical-extramusical dialectic.

Consider an actual example (actual in the sense that it describes my own interpretive experience). What happens in the experience of a selected “piece?” In the simplest sense what we do is work the features of momentary experience into the context of prior and plausible experiences

to interpret what is going on. Take the example of listening to (and, here I am choosing both an actual object and one you will have no trouble imagining) the American national anthem, the "Star Spangled Banner", performed in minor. The actual recording I have in mind is the Carla Bley Band composition, "Spangled Banner Minor" (Bley 1978). What happens in the process of listening?

First and foremost one makes some attentional shifts and adjustments in the listening experience, movements within the dialectic I noted of musical and extra-musical features. As one listens, one works through the dialectics by developing choices and juxtaposing background knowledge. I call this process "interpretive moves." Interpretive moves involve the action of pattern discovery as experience is organized by the juxtapositions, interactions, or choices in time when we encounter and engage obviously symbolic objects or performances. These interpretive moves—regardless of complexity, variety, intensity, involvement—emerge dialectically from the human social encounter with a sound object or event. (See Figure 1.)

Without prejudging an order, sequence, or hierarchy of such moves, we can initially categorize something of their possibilities. For instance, one kind of move is *locational*, relating the object that one is hearing to an appropriate range within a subjective field of like items and events or unlike items and events. Such a move would, in this case, vary significantly if the listener were an American.

One might also have certain more specific *categorical* interpretive moves, relating this to a class of things—anthems, and patriotic songs—or an even more specific set—parodies of "important" texts. Moreover, one might additionally make various *associational* moves, relating or analogizing this item to particular visual, musical, or verbal imagery. For instance, one may conjure the image of an American flag, or a Jasper Johns painting of the American flag, or perhaps some image of anti-American propaganda. One may hear the particular recording while at the same time also imagining or even hearing the "correct" rendition of the same tune. One might equally imagine or hear the text that goes with the melody as it passes by. Some, all, or a variety of like possibilities may take hold initially, after some exposure, or with longer listening experience.

Additionally one might make a variety of *reflective* moves, relating this item to some personal and social conditions, (like political attitudes, patriotism, nationalism) and related experiences where things like and unlike this can be heard, mediated or live. One could reflect upon something as specific as a live performance of the very same thing by the same band. Or reflect on the Jimi Hendrix, Grover Washington, or Aretha Franklin versions of the national anthem, or other versions performed at mass events (like sports). More generally one might reflect upon the range of standardization or aesthetic license different performers can take and have taken with this piece.

Perhaps one also makes some *evaluative* interpretive moves, instantly finding this funny, distasteful, inappropriate, or immoral. My students occasionally question the seriousness of my choice of this example, tak-

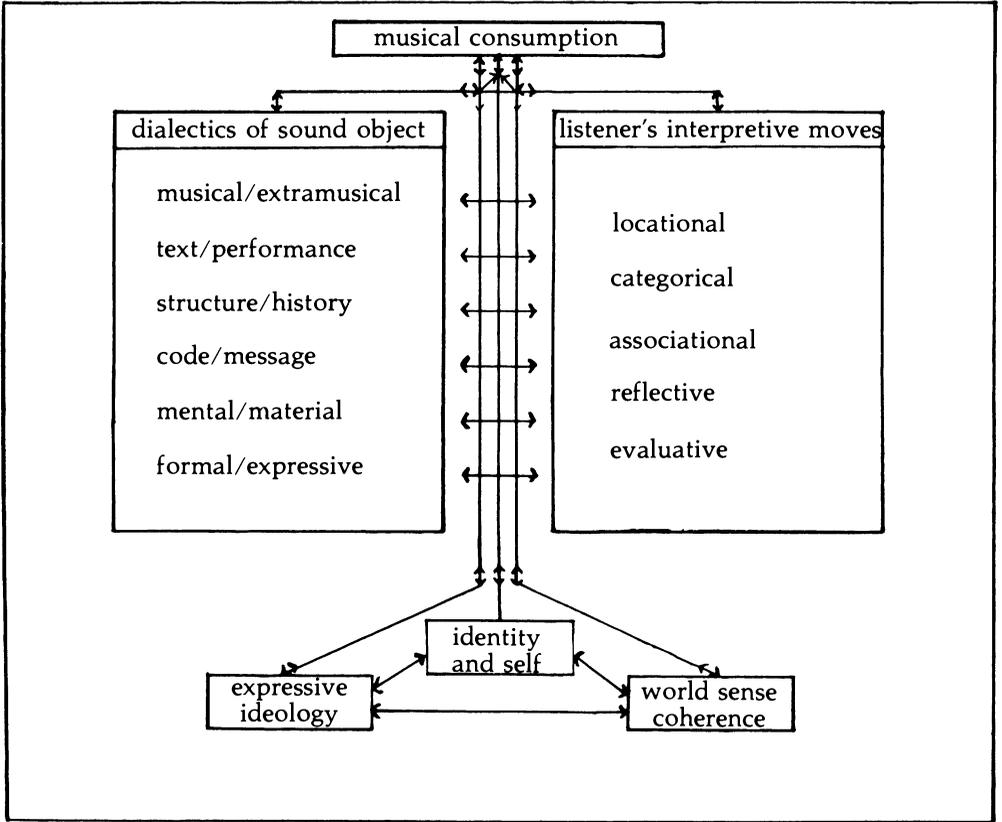


Figure 1

ing offense at making an academic exercise out of something that some of them consider abhorrent and unpatriotic. Others feel no animosity toward me for the choice (and for forcing them to listen to it in class), but feel real animosity toward the performers for making it.

Cross-cutting these varieties of interpretive moves—*locational, categorical, associational, reflective, evaluative*—certain other things happen as one listens. One must decide if this is an intentionally incorrect version of something that is usually experienced in a slightly different form. The competence and seriousness of the performers can be questioned. One might find the rendition sloppy and unskilled, and thereby question the deliberateness of the piece. Maybe the performers cannot play “correctly” or “in tune”. One might conversely decide that the articulation is skilled and crafted carefully. If so, one has no difficulty deciding that the heard object was deliberate and intended to be “different”: a parody. Then there is the problem of the seriousness of the parody. Is it just a cute joke, mild fun, and so forth, or is there some deep political message or critique implied? We might consider why a joke has been made out of a song that, while not sacred, could be easily classed as one of certain songs that have a semantic parameter more fixed than many other common tunes known by the vast portion of Americans and associated by others with America. In other words, it would be a different “kind” of joke if the same technique were applied to “Mary had a little lamb”.

It is therefore not surprising that more than other tunes, parodies—whatever their initial text or reference—involve certain additionally fixed and set musical semantic parameters; parodies not only involve conscious and intentional manipulations but also require certain analytic prowess in the processes of conceptualization and production. One must grasp the importance and tacit generality of the major mode to Western patriotic songs, anthems, and the like, in order to alter just that single code feature while preserving almost every other typical code feature of the genre (brass instruments, stately pace, clear articulation, etc.) in a serious performance.

In all of this activity, however much took place at the moment of listening and however much I have reconstructed, more specifically for purposes of laying bare the range of possible social engagement, the fact that must be confronted is that work, essentially social, is brought into the situation. In a sense then, interpretive moves act roughly like a series of social processing conventions by locating, categorizing, associating, reflecting, and evaluating at and through moments of experience. Such conventions do not *fix* a meaning; instead they focus some boundaries of emergent and fluid shifts in our attentional patterns as we foreground and background experience and knowledge in relation to the perceived sound object/event. Meaning then is momentarily changeable and emergent, in-flux as our interpretive moves are unravelled and crystallized.

I do not mean to suggest that there is a specific or rigid order or hierarchy to these interpretive moves as they pertain either to specific pieces, genres, styles, cultural repertoires, or to listeners. I also do not suggest

that all interpretive moves are significant all the time in equal proportion for specific pieces, genres, styles, cultural repertoires, or occasions. Further, there is no implied isomorphism between the density and involvement of interpretive moves and factors such as the importance, greatness, aesthetic valuation, or enduring quality of pieces as socially placed and understood. I am also aware that this example is a convenience; a loaded one at that. Many (most? Who knows?) pieces or musics do not involve the range and variety of interpretive activity I have described here for "Spangled Banner Minor." But what is always similar is the quick, instantaneous, momentary impression from dialectic, which then is unravelled and developed, or fixed and held through listening time. These caveats suggest that various social, cultural and historic processes and constraints operate to provide these skeletal interpretive moves with nerves, muscle, veins, blood, and clothes—that is, many layers of internal and external variability. An ethnography of musical communication, which concentrates on musical meaning and interpretation, should largely be concerned with learning, experiencing, and explicating some of these various, lived epistemologies, these ways we layer and intertwine form and substance, these complicated practices so full of coherence and contradiction.

To summarize: interpretive moves involve certain dimensions of communicative action. Recognition of certain features of code, genre, stylization, and performance instantly identify boundaries of the musical object that exist in a tension of ideational and material structure, of musical and extramusical features. What the code articulates through—acoustic pattern—is part of what it can potentially communicate about—sound as structured and performed with organized patterns of anticipation. But notice that for this last example, what is communicated is potentially much more than "a parody of the national anthem" or "the national anthem rendered in a minor key." A range of social and personal backgrounds—shared, complementary—stratified knowledge and experience, and attitudes (about anthems, songs in general, parodies in particular, politics across all cases) enters into a social construction of meaningful listening by interpretive moves, establishing a sense of what the sound object/event is, and what one feels, grasps, or knows about it. At the same time some very specific decisions (about seriousness, non-seriousness, intent, performer or artist's attitude and meaning) can also be plausibly surmised by the listener drawing on interpretive moves and other kinds of social knowledge.

Some of these might relate to factors far outside the specific hearing, like knowledge of the performers and all their work. Others might relate to factors closer to the situation of the hearing, like the conditions surrounding a recorded presentation, or the other sound objects heard immediately before and after the one in question. In short, each hearing has a biography and a history, and these may be more or less important to the actual momentary single hearing in question at a specific time.

#### *From interpretive moves to boundaries and frames*

I have argued that the central core of a music communication process

involves two components. One is a dialectic or tension when we recognize and engage a sound object/event. The other is the interpretive moves we employ to situate, entangle, and untangle this engagement/recognition and turn it into a kind of practical consumption. These two components are dynamically linked, and I think that typically the linking produces a boundary, or what Gregory Bateson (1972) and Erving Goffman (1974) called a "frame", namely, the conceptual sensing of organizational premises, and a drawing to attention of the operational dynamics of a situation. It is this "boundary" or "frame" which represents the notion that potentially very general and very specific messages emerge simultaneously in the consciousness of the interpreting listener. The "boundary" or "frame" is both a closed and open door to this process; it can lock in or compact a summary of all interacting interpretive constructs, or it can let them scatter and draw more attention to its own position amongst those elements. If interpretive moves provide the possibilities for digging deep into referential and expressive dimensions of music hearing as well as for more surface engagement of a limited sort, the notion of boundary or frame is meant to suggest the instantaneous possibility of abstracting the dynamism of the sound object's dialectics and the listener's interpretive moves to a general level, which can then be redirected back toward specifics or more immediately fixed where it is. The question then is: what sorts of constructs or tendencies are set up by this boundary-making and framing process? I think there might be three kinds of general contextualizing music frames.

One variety of such frames has to do with *expressive ideology*. Through framing, musics or pieces can involve the communication of highly patterned aesthetic orderings for a setting, style, performance or musical moment. In this sense one kind of boundary-making or framing involves value. The meaning as interpreted amongst others draws attention to one organizational premise—the extent to which the form/content is a *preferred one*.

A second variety has to do with *identity*. In and through framing, music communicates identity, sameness or difference of character, as it exists amongst makers, makers and listeners, persons and groups. It draws interpretive attention to the character, the signature, of its "self." Typically, musical practices can either emphasize context by high redundancy of code, or emphasize code through a combination of contextual neutralization and low redundancy. Given the possibilities for very redundant codes in music, it is often the case that interpretive action moves elsewhere; the redundancy and what it puts into focus can become a sort of signature of identity (see Jacobson 1960).

A third variety of contextualizing frame has to do with *coherence*, a term suggested by some recent writings of Judith and Alton Becker (1981). The coherence of a frame refers to the extent that it is indivisible from other ways of relating to the subjectively real world—a notion close, I think, to what Seeger had in mind by "world view as the feeling of reality." In this kind of frame, the musical mode may present the same message orders that are presented (simultaneously or otherwise) in other modes. I am referring then to tropes, cross-modal abstractions, those

figurative wellsprings that lend unity to experience across natural, cultural, physical, and aesthetic fields of reference. Coherence systems involve organizing principles that are not unique to one social domain, symbolic system, or social practice, but principles which are broadly epistemic and unifying, principles which are culturally axiomatic, principles which generally animate behaviors, and social praxis of all sorts.

Of the many things Seeger stressed, he often held that music is interesting because of the way generality entails many levels or overlaps of conscious discovery in listening. Here is where our views are most compatible. I would stress that the significant feature of musical communication is not that it is untranslatable and irreducible to the verbal mode, but that its generality and multiplicity of possible messages and interpretations brings out a special kind of feelingful activity and engagement on the part of the listener.

It is in this sense that we might speak of music as a metaphoric process: a special way of experiencing and knowing and feeling value, identity, and coherence. If our interpretations of musical sounds are general and floating frames and boundaries that exist simultaneously and instantaneously, it is because we momentarily apprehend value, identity and coherence through the "thisness of a that or the thatness of a this" (Burke 1945), difference through, in, or as relationship. Because metaphors operate on meaning over form, they generalize in ways no taxonomy might, while specifying in ways descriptions rarely achieve. Instantaneous recognition of shared connotative and denotative features is the motion from interpretive moves to frames and boundaries.

### *Speech about music*

Recently, in a lecture series bearing Seeger's name, Klaus Wachsmann (1982) spoke to the problem of speech about music. He suggested that talk about music is a fact of life, worth turning into a study object in its own right, rather than a continual cause of musicological embarrassment. He argued, alongside Hugo Zemp (1979) and me (1981, 1982), that ways people talk about music can be a significant datum of concepts and musical theory, and can be studied systematically. He pursued some ways in which talk about music is a window out to metaphoric processes, and to synaesthesia, and therefore a potential way to find out—through the verbal mode—certain parameters of the musical mode often stressed by Seeger's notion of music as the communication of "world view as the feeling of reality."

When Charles Seeger talked of the qualities of speech about music, he talked of one character of verbal language, the referential or lexically explicit semantic character of speech. It is true that musicologists and analysts use a very technical and referentially explicit lexicon to talk about music. But often this theoretical or technical language is closely related to metaphoric process—whether (as in the case of many metalanguages) this is a more limited kind of polysemy, or a more broad kind of linguistic creativity. But let me put that aside for now, and argue that at the very least, the "talking about music" that most people do, however little, whatever their technical knowledge, involves lexical and

discourse metaphor. This is at once a recognition of the non-translatability of musical and verbal modes, and perhaps a recognition of this central musical fact: simultaneous multiplicity and generality of what is communicated. Metaphors are the human achievement of instantaneous recognition that things are simultaneously alike and unlike. And when most people talk about music, like and unlike is what they talk about.

This takes me back to interpretive moves. When people talk to each other, talk to themselves, or talk to music analysts they often draw upon the same stock of interpretive moves that I identified earlier. They locate pieces by relating them to like and unlike ones. They associate things with pieces and pieces with each other by relating them to like and unlike ones. They reflect on the piece relating it to like and unlike imagery. And they evaluate the piece relating it to like and unlike preferences.

When people say "it's different from . . .", "it's a kind of . . .", "it sort of reminds me of . . .", and things of this sort, they are creating discourse organization that has locational, categorical, and associational features. When they say, "Well, if I had to name it . . . I mean . . . on some level, . . . for me at least, . . . you know, I really can't say but, do you know what I mean? . . ." they are not just tongue-tied, inarticulate, or unable to speak. They are caught in a moment of interpretive time, trying to force awareness to words. They are telling us how much they assume that we understand *exactly* what they are experiencing. In fact, we *do* understand exactly what they are experiencing. We take it as socially typical that people can talk this way about music, stringing together expressives, and we assume that this confirms what we are all supposed to know: that at some level, one just cannot say with words what music says without them. Finally, when someone says of a piece, "it's not as good as . . ." they are making an evaluative move that draws on simultaneous recognition of other texts, other experiences, other performances.

These sorts of common structures of verbalization tell us something about the nature of interpretation and the possibilities for speech about music. One engages and places an item or event in meaningful social space through ongoing interpretive moves. Again, these moves don't fix or freeze a single meaning; meaning is emergent and changeable in relation to the ways the moves are unravelled within situated constraints on the speakers. If one examines these moves in interview data two things emerge: the importance of lexical and discourse metaphors for verbally expressing something about musical experience, and confirmation of invoking lexical and discourse metaphors to represent such abstractions as value, identity, and world sense.

Here is where I disagree with Seeger. By equating the referential domain of speech mode with primary verbal communication, he left aside much of how we really talk, and thus talk about music. It was his emphasis on the referential sphere that led him to the assertion that speech about music communicated "world view as intellection of reality." On the contrary, I think speech about music tells us more about ways we attempt to construct metaphoric discourse in order to signify our

awareness of the more fundamental metaphoric discourse that music communicates in its own right. What is to be gained by attention to speech about music is information about the construction of interpretive moves as a kind of metaphoric engagement. Locational, categorical, associative, reflective, and evaluative discourse, as varieties of interpretive moves, tend to be attempts to identify the boundaries that sound objects and events present in their structure and social organization. Interpretive moves in talk, then, are attempts to recreate, specify, momentarily fix, or give order to the things that take place so rapidly and intuitively when we experience musical sounds.

For clarity, let me emphasize that verbal representations of these sorts are in no way necessary or essential to musical communication. Musical communication is a primary modeling system, to use John Blacking's (1981) phrase, with unique and irreducible symbolic properties. These must be experienced and approached in their own right, and as Seeger said, empirically and conceptually freed from any notion that they translate or copy the speech mode. My point then about speech about music is that it constitutes an interesting source of parallel or exploratory information about metaphoric processes, discourse, interpretive moves, and conceptual ideas or theories about sound.

## CONCLUSION

To summarize the main ideas: The question, what does music communicate?, places an emphasis on music as a contained universe that evokes meanings from an inner form to an outer social realm. To rethink this question I have replaced it with several others, namely: What is the shape of a music communication process? How are music communication processes activated? How do music communication processes implicate interpretation? For these questions I have tried to explicate the role of the listener as a symbolic consumer in order to redress the usual imbalance in analytic perspectives that equates musical communication with the extent to which a receiver totally receives a composer or performer's intentions, or receives what the music analyst can uncover in the score.

By communication I have meant a socially interactive and subjective process of reality construction-through message-making and interpretation. Communication is process in dialectic. The musical structure-extramusical history dialectic is one that is central to the study of human musicality in evolutionary, cross-cultural, and symbolic perspective. A communications epistemology addresses this dialectic not by choosing sides but by focusing on its consequences. I believe those consequences concern boundary-making, framing, and contextualizing as universal features of dialectical process. Further, I believe that framing involves simultaneous recognition of generality and specificity, form and reference, through interpretive motions using some combination of locational, categorical, associational, reflective, and evaluative moves. I sense that investigating the substance of these processes leads to the notion that music's major messages are general and multi-leveled, and con-

cern expressive ideology in value, identity and character, and coherence of world sense.

I have argued that what makes this possible is the process of boundary-framing, the contextualizing turn that proceeds from the conditions of dialectically simultaneous musical and extramusical features of the human experience of engaging the sound object. I think that these constructs are available to a variety of degrees through intuitive and empirical investigation, while represented in other ways and at other removes, at the level of verbal interpretive moves that metaphorically locate, categorize, associate, reflect on, or evaluate music experience. A key to this is the differentiation of music as metaphorical expression of one symbolic order that is instantly and primarily feelingful, and speech about music as metaphorical expression of another order that reflects secondary interpretive awareness, recognition, or engagement.

#### NOTE

1. This article is a revised version of a paper read August 9, 1983 at the meetings of the International Council for Traditional Music as an invited key paper for the session titled "Rethinking our object of study: concepts, definitions, and new strategies for explanation". I apologize in advance for the lack of a serious case study analysis from my Kaluli material to go along with these general theoretical notes. Some of my recent work elsewhere (Feld 1983, 1984) provides pieces of such a case study; a full treatment must (for reasons of space and imminent departure for more fieldwork) wait. As a caveat, but not an excuse, I should mention that the paper was largely stimulated by reading Charles Seeger's essays on musical communication. His ideas are major ones and I have no doubt that we will need to read, reread, think and rethink them for a long time.

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