

Virtual Time, Music, and the Sublime

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Music is part of our humanity: It is connected to our emotional repertoire, to our cognitive skills, and in it we can give expression to that urge to transcend that gives birth to the most sublime art. (Bicknell, 2009, p. 149)

Introduction

In this essay, I utilize the song “She Weeps Over Ragoon” arranged by Eric Whitacre (2008) to demonstrate how Langer’s expressivism can be understood to fulfil Burke’s account of the sublime such that certain music is aesthetically experienced as an instance of the sublime. I focus on Langer’s concept of virtual time, where the listening experience of music is unique from chronological time, in that it is multidimensional and accessible for our complete comprehension (Langer, 1953). I will first give an account of Langer and Burke’s philosophies, and subsequently apply them to “She Weeps Over Ragoon,” originally a poem by James Joyce written in 1913 (see Appendix) inspired by a woman visiting her lover’s grave in Ragoon, Ireland, to demonstrate how the objective experience of listening to music can elicit the same affective responses as the sublime and be transcendental for the listener.

Background

On Langer’s (1953) account of expressivism, music is about feelings and symbolizes the structure of emotions in virtual time, where we lose our sense

of ourselves. She argues that musical expression is ambiguous, not expressing named emotions, but representing how our emotional lives develop over time, revealing and presenting knowledge about human feeling. As I will be arguing that music can be experienced as sublime, I will focus on music that expresses negative emotions for the listener, which are then taken as pleasurable. My analysis of the sublime in music rests heavily on the musical concept of virtual time, which can be understood as the progression of a sequence whose experience is more potent than simply listening to its structure; in other words, the experience of listening to music is more intense than the formal concepts it is based on. Rather than listening to distinct chords in music, we focus on the evolution, ebbs and flows of the piece, in an aesthetic way whose affective response would be diminished if the music was seen as just a succession of chords. To only notice the formal aspects of the music would be to miss the point of the song, to miss out on the transcendental experience created by sublime qualities and immersion in the music. Virtual time is perceptible, heard, and characterized by a loss of clock time, but it is also analogous to virtual space: “musical flow embodies the flow of time...the musical present contains time in some sense. This entails conceptualizing time as a substance and also as a space” (Guter & Guter, 2021, p. 50). In Langer’s words, “Music makes time audible, and its form and

continuity sensible” (Langer, 1953, p. 110). When listening to music, hearing is an added dimension of felt time on top of the duration of the music. Virtual time cannot be discretely measured, and the experience of engaging with it implicates being out of time while something else is continuing in time, as tension and emotion develop; “it creates an image of time measured by the motion of forms that seem to give it substance, yet a substance that consists entirely of sound, so it is transitoriness itself” (Langer, 1953, p. 110).

On Burke’s account, the sublime is characterized as a terrible delight, “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (Burke, 1990, p.49). Burke’s theory of the sublime denotes that pleasure and pain are positive and negative passions, movements away from our default state of indifference. The major source of the sublime are things that prompt ideas of pain and danger, when not pressing too closely, produce delight; thus, at a distance or when modified, terror or pain promotes pleasure and a feeling of transcendence. The expression of pain at the loss of a lover in “She Weeps Over Ragoon” is conveyed to and felt by the listener in virtual time. This song conveys eeriness and sadness, through a myriad of voices singing at different volumes, all offset slightly from each other in cannon. Music can cause a feeling of the sublime also through the painful frustration the imagination undergoes in an attempt to comprehend the sonorous mass of the music, where the pleasure comes from the imagination becoming cognizant of its limits and the prospect of transcending them (Wurth, 2012). “She Weeps Over Ragoon” imitates this transcendence in piano crescendos in high tonal ranges, and an unsettling combination of flat and sharp notes. This is similar to another idea of the sublime, namely Kant’s (2008) judgment of the mathematical sublime, where the mind realizes its mental limits, but gains a feeling of de-limitlessness on the level of reason in the process

through the contemplation of the idea of infinity, or something incomprehensible. Burke himself believes that sounds can be sublime, if they are loud, sudden, or repetitive, because they create tension similar to pain (Bicknell, 2009). “She Weeps Over Ragoon” utilizes this tension to jolt the listener, as in the middle of the song there is a long silence, followed by a sudden, loud, and high-pitched resumption of all three vocal parts.

However, some would argue that the pain experienced in listening to music is not a strong enough feeling to facilitate an experience of the sublime. For example, you do not need to be strapped into a chair while listening to “She Weeps Over Ragoon” in the same way that you must be strapped into the Booster on Brighton Pier so as to not escape the terror of the ride. Burke gives terror a central role in the sublime, but Bicknell argues that there are objects that arouse feelings of the sublime that we are not terrified of, and thus argues that the sublime is not always experienced as pure terror, but can be produced by lesser feelings (Bicknell, 2009). I will appeal to the sublime in the same way Bicknell does, allowing ideas of pain to be a source of the sublime. I argue that the pain conveyed in “She Weeps Over Ragoon” is enough to constitute a sublime experience, as listeners experience a negative emotion at a distance which elicits the positive emotion of pleasure. In addition, the highest degree of the sublime is astonishment, where all motions of the soul are suspended in a degree of pain or terror that stops our reasoning, and the “mind is entirely filled with the sublime object” (Bicknell, 2009, p. 29). This is exactly how music encapsulates us in virtual time, and how the chosen song captivates its listener with uncomfortable sadness and beauty. In what follows, I will examine each of the sources of the sublime in turn to demonstrate how “She Weeps Over Ragoon” embodies them: obscurity, power, privation, vastness, and infinity.

Sources of Sublimity

Obscurity is one of Burke's requirements for sublimity, for when we know the full extent of something, or can "accustom our eyes to it," our apprehension disappears (Burke, 1990, p. 80). Here, Burke is referencing visual obscurity; however, obscurity is not just visual. When listening to a song for the first time, you do not know where the music will take you. Even after repeating it a hundred times, I believe there is still obscurity in the way you will be immersed in virtual time, and you cannot know what emotions the music will elicit in you this time you listen to it. There is also obscurity in the meaning of the song; you cannot ever fully know what the artist's intended meaning was, and the song can be interpreted in many different ways. Burke (1990) believes music is inherently obscure, because it cannot clearly communicate full ideas, and that "words have little or nothing to do with the ideas they represent"; thus, the lyrics and song could mean anything, raise image-ideas in the mind or not, and are obscure in themselves (Wurth, 2012, p. 28). Even the title of "She Weeps Over Ragoon" displays obscurity. Why is it that the woman is weeping over Ragoon, and not her dead lover? This song uses light and airy soprano voices, coupled with low and melancholy piano music, where in some places the lyrics are nearly incomprehensible. The lyrics themselves are incredibly sad; however, the tone of the voices is almost the opposite, arousing emotions of hope, as in the repetition of love/love/love at the beginning of the second stanza in the poem. The mismatch in the tone of the lyrics, the piano, and the resulting confused emotion further functions to add obscurity to the piece. Langer (1953) also posits that musical expression is ambiguous, not expressing any specific emotions (Robinson, 2005). Is this ambiguity not an instance of obscurity?

The next requirement is power, as it moves us away from our standard state of indifference

towards the passions. Burke argues that we cannot make objects of great power or strength subject to us, as that would remove its influence; the terrible of the sublime does not follow our will (Burke, 1990). Engaging in virtual time is to allow ourselves to be swept away in the movement of the chords; we are always subject to music, it is never subject to us. Similarly, Longinus explains that the sublime "subverts reason and takes us out of ourselves" and affects the listener if they will it or not (Bicknell, 2009, p. 26). Music takes us with it, uses rhythm to prepare us for a future we do not know, sets up our expectations for the future, and creates feeling. Therefore, music is powerful, but has none of the contextual elements of emotion (such as an intentional object about which to feel sad about, per Levinson (2019)), so we can allow ourselves to get swept away in it but not affected by it in a real-world context. This is an instance of Burke's sublime, as the pleasure from the experience of a painful object comes when one faces that object, and realizes that the pain is not real, and thus a tension is released; there is delight in the relief. Under Burke's reasoning, the power of music is that it "does not transfer ideas [of pain] but passions that may be analogous to certain ideas...music can even anticipate ideas insofar as it can rouse passions to which ideas correspond that have not yet been pronounced" (Wurth, 2012, p. 33). Thus, "She Weeps Over Ragoon" allows listeners to experience death and grief at a safe distance, and gain relief and delight in the process of listening to the hauntingly beautiful music.

Privation is another requirement for Burke. He states, "All general privations are great, because they are all terrible; Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude and Silence" (Burke, 1990, p. 95). Even though music can be experienced by many people, that experience is always a solitary one; never will two people experience the same piece of music in exactly the same way. I would also argue that music utilizes

silence, in rests and breaks, in order to convey emotions just as the formal notes do. In “She Weeps Over Ragoon,” the silences employed convey the great pain of the woman weeping over the death of her lover. Langer addresses silences in music, claiming that even though a sustained rest indicates silence, the music continues moving, and its forward drive “may even carry it rhythmically beyond the last sound” (Langer, 1953, p. 108). There are ten whole seconds of silence at the end of “She Weeps Over Ragoon,” allowing the listener to continue to feel grief and loss. In the middle of the song, there is a long silence followed by an abrupt resumption of voices, in which the listener feels lost, on edge, and made to impatiently wait as the music continues without sound. Although Burke is referring to visual darkness in his privations, darkness can also be conceptual, and this is presented quite clearly in the morbid lyrics of “She Weeps Over Ragoon”: Dark too our hearts, O love, shall lie and cold/As his sad heart has lain/Under the moongrey nettles, the black mould/And muttering rain (Joyce, 2008).

One of the most easily recognizable instances of the sublime is vastness, “greatness in dimension” (Burke, 1990, p. 97). Here I return to the idea of virtual time as an analogue of virtual space, which is infinite, incomprehensible, boundless, and grand. One cannot experience vastness in music as Burke describes visually; however, there is great vastness in hearing music, as there are no bounds to virtual time, or virtual space. In music, space functions to “develop the temporal realm in more than one dimension” and provides orientation for our hearing (Langer, 1953, p. 117). If one is to take vastness as a lack of bounds, music represents an openness that feeds a feeling of the sublime through the “felt presence of an absence,” where an openness “constantly suggests the possibility of something other,” beyond limits, something like immensity in the virtual time and space created by music (Wurth, 2012, p. 37). Here resides a strong parallel between the experience of music and

the sublime, as in music one is overwhelmed by the totality of the experience, just like how one is overwhelmed by the grandness of the sublime. When we are immersed in music, there is a sense of “letting go,” as we are “consumed by, or somehow taken up into, the musical soundworld unfolding around us” (Krueger, 2018, p. 2). In Langer’s theory, “music spreads out time for our direct and complete apprehension, by letting our hearing monopolize it—organize, fill, and shape it, all alone” (Langer, 1953, p. 110). In other words, music fills up virtual time and space; however, we have the ability to comprehend it all at once. This is similar to Kant’s idea of the mathematical sublime, where the infinity and magnitude of a scene render us incapable to fully comprehend it at once; however, the free play of our imagination is moved to think about it in its totality, so that we can imagine and comprehend the whole, which creates the affective response of uplift when experiencing the sublime (Kant, 2008). Langer herself describes music as a “sonorous beauty taking over the whole of one’s consciousness,” where we lose our own continuity in the vastness of virtual time (Langer, 1953, p. 104). “She Weeps Over Ragoon” uses conflicting notes, voices, rhythms, and messages to fill up virtual time and space, demonstrating how one piece of music can stretch across the elements of formal music that the listener transcends in comprehending the piece as a whole, not just the sum of its parts.

Burke also believes that infinity is a requirement, which produces the most genuine effect of the sublime: “delightful horror” (Burke, 1990, p. 99). He writes that as we cannot perceive the limits of many things, our minds create the same effects as if they were infinite, and we experience pleasure as an effect. “Whenever we repeat any idea frequently, the mind by a sort of mechanism repeats it long after the first cause has ceased to operate” (Burke, 1990, p. 99). This maps very well onto the experience of listening to “She Weeps Over Ragoon,” where the last notes echo over and over in

the mind as the song dies away, and continues in the allotted silence at the end of the piece. Music has an interesting quality in this way, as one does not need to hear it to experience it; one can 'play' a song in the mind, which does not employ the conventional sense of hearing, but simply utilizes the operations of the mind. In addition, Bicknell (2009) argues that very beautiful things, like a beautiful song, have such a powerful hold on the listener that when it disappears, there is a sense of loss akin to pain, and thus the feeling of the sublime arises. Even though songs might not elicit terror, "the reality of their transitory nature can be sobering, if not painful" (Bicknell, 2009, p. 124). "She Weeps Over Ragoon" is such a full-bodied piece of music that the listener cannot help but feel not only the grief in the loss of a loved one presented in the song, but the loss of the song as well. In Burke's infinity, the imagination looks forward to fulfilment in a piece of music and looks backward to suspend tension in a repetition in open space (Wurth, 2012). This oscillation between progression and regression allows the listener to hesitate in between pain and pleasure, and experience the sublime in music. Returning to the concept of virtual time, because it is outside of chronological time it can be called boundless,

and infinite in itself. The rhythm of "She Weeps Over Ragoon" clearly conveys these ideas, through the intentional slowness of some notes and the quick movements of other passages, the conflicting combination of high and low, sharp and flat notes, offset vocals, and inconsistent messages of hope and despair, beauty and death all invite the listener to get lost in the oscillation between pain and pleasure.

Conclusion

Langer's (1953) concept of virtual time and musical expressivism can be understood in conjunction with Burke's (1990) account of the sublime, demonstrating that music and the medium in which it operates, virtual time, can be sublime. In virtual time, the listener is overwhelmed by the music as it expresses tension and emotion, allowing the listener to transcend the formal elements of the song to experience the sublime. The song "She Weeps Over Ragoon" (Joyce, 2008) exemplifies Burke's requirements for the feeling of sublimity, exhibiting pain, obscurity, power, privation, vastness, and infinity as the listener experiences it in felt time. Thus, one need not face a bull to experience the sublime; one must simply listen to music.

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Appendix

She Weeps Over Ragoon

By James Joyce

Rain on Ragoon falls softly, softly falling,
Where my dark lover lies.
Sad is his voice that calls me, sadly calling,
At grey moonrise.

Love, hear thou
How soft, how sad his voice is ever calling,
Ever unanswered, and the dark rain falling,
Then as now.

Dark too our hearts, O love, shall lie and cold
As his sad heart has lain
Under the moongrey nettles, the black mould
And muttering rain.