



Brad Mehldau Trio Progression: Art Of The Trio (Volume 5)

Music and Language

The truism that “The essence of music is unexplainable in words” is self-contradictory. The speaker who utters these words is, after all, giving a kind of explanation. The statement seems to acknowledge the irresolvable aspect that’s always inherent in an understanding of music, but simultaneously forces a resolution. The task of this truism is often to blow the whistle on a discussion that has grown futile, or to call one off ahead of time, admonishing us that it is pointless.

A basic tenet of a democracy is that no discussion should be deemed pointless ahead of time. There is a non-stop process among its members, aimed at reaching a consensus on any given topic. The philosopher Michel Foucault spoke of an “endless need for discourse” among members of a democratic society. If the truth-value of a proposition is historically contingent, as Foucault (following Nietzsche) maintained it was, then a consensus can never be reached with absolute finality. Nor should it be. When someone claims to be having the last word on some matter, we had better take heed. That last word might fossilize into something like dogma and remain on the scene long after it’s bereft of any positive social utility. My claim at truth is posited into a yet unforeseeable future that never arrives, because there is always a better future that can be imagined. As an (ideally) emancipative politics, democracy operates on a paradox in the sense that it thrives on endlessly unresolved problems. They are its fodder, and insure that its process will continue.

Music is cherished in part because it supersedes the need for discourse ahead of time. The consensus that people often reach is that they can’t reach a consensus — in words at least — on what they just experienced. Our very muteness towards music, though, is often the precondition of a deep solidarity that its listeners experience amongst each other. It involves a preternatural kind of group knowledge, a resounding “I know that you know.” I don’t know what you know, but that’s not important. I’m satisfied by the mere knowledge that music pushes your buttons like it does mine. There is something in the world out there that correlates with both of us immediately, albeit in different ways.

That solidarity suggests that music gains a communicative advantage over words precisely because of its non-linguistic character. Speech-language, by comparison, is crippled from the outset, a waterlogged form of communication. If we spend a lot of time on back and forth discourse that never reaches its goal anyway, music seems to already be there, wordlessly beckoning us. The implication is that there is indeed an “exit from language.” Discourse reaches the finish line, and music waits on the other side.

In one sense we have a symbol of freedom. Music could be viewed as a model of complete self-sufficiency, generating itself out of itself, with no outside (linguistic) authority hovering around. The underlying desire for self-sufficiency, like so many kinds of desire, has an anti-social aspect. It would be nice if I had no one to answer to, but then I couldn’t really include myself in society. A shared musical experience denotes a very different kind of paradox than democratic discourse: The solidarity that listeners experience together is a strangely anti-social form of sociality.

If the “complete-unto-itself” aspect of music is a given, then likewise, all discussion about it is always already completed — permanently. In this appraisal, music has a dead bolt lock built into its design, protecting its fortress against any future linguistic predator. When I grasp my own desire for that kind of permanence and strip it down, it traces back to fear, specifically, fear of endlessness. It’sunsettling to honestly ponder the idea of your own consciousness lasting for an eter-

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nity. Likewise, it's disturbing to think that a democracy's woes might never be resolved — that there might be something built into society itself that keeps us forever short of a utopia. The subtext of a desire to exit from language, then, is the more elemental desire to exit from temporality altogether, by finding some kind of permanent resolution. Music, in its forever non-discursive state, promises to answer that desire.

It is possible, somewhat darkly perhaps, to understand that initial “endless need for discourse” as being brought on by fear as well. It would be the basic, deep fear of the final end — the flip side of a fear of endlessness. A permanent end to one's consciousness is at least as disturbing as no end, in its sheer incomprehensibility. Why is it so taboo to die in my own dream? I don't fear for the world that will lose me; the solipsistic nightmare is that my own consciousness will end. Once it ends, I have no way of resuming it. Again, though, that fear can be politicized into a form of hope: One hopes in a democracy that no voice is ever permanently silenced. That's what keeps us talking, so to speak.

An unceasing impulse to talk things through runs contrary to an equally primal thirst for resolution. Each craving plays on the other, and the way in which they normalize each other makes life bearable. Life, though, should be more than just slinking between two cliffs, avoiding the infinite. Music promises something more emancipative. Being forever beyond discourse, it supplies a preliminary, immediate resolution, but also points outward to something that (magnificently) never finds an end. As long as that end is ungraspable, there will always be a conversation about music that sublimely never gets off the ground.

There I am, happily mute and excited about what I'm going to tell you all at once. In this suspended, pre-discursive state, music can momentarily quell the need for that permanence that I also fear. Need and fear are the false apparatus of a duality that has been temporarily dismantled. In the space that's cleared, music offers what Freud called “repose” — a momentary closure that mitigates that overwhelming aspect of temporality, a miniature end played out within the life-process. We get a taste of something permanent far just a moment, and it's strangely sweet. Music repeatedly suggests that while we run from death, we also solicit it in a number of ways.

This musical model of autonomy is as dialectical as the desire it mirrors. For in order to really maintain a condition of sublime, fearless permanence, nothing more can be said. Freedom abounds, but only within a necessarily speechless realm. To speak of music is a folly, a futile attempt to break through its wordless fortress.

“Nothing can be said of music” is more accurately “Nothing is allowed to be said of music.” Speech becomes an act of rebellion against an iron law that prohibits discourse. From a democratic point of view, to regard discourse itself with such across-the-board disdain is squarely fascist. The only way to really withhold free speech is to repress it — possibly with brutal force. The door is closed to further inquiry or potential complaints from an oppressed party.

Freedom from discourse doesn't hold up so well outside of its musical model, but does that matter? Presumably whatever fascist tendencies one perceives at, for example, a rock concert, are largely neutered of any real destructive potential, because they've been delegated to a purely aesthetic realm. Fascism takes its cue, though, from this very idea of a “pure” aesthetics. The State itself fictively resembles a piece of music: It is there with music, beyond the finishing line of discourse. What makes fascism such a potent, coercive form of domination is this picture of freedom it uses as ideological bait: You are free from ever having to ask any more questions. All questions are permanently answered.

An idealistic view of music as “better” than language yields up an unsettling vision — a sort of fascist wet dream of democracy. I am offered an inverse mirror image of democratic freedom when I go to a concert to listen to one of my favorite performers: the freedom to relinquish that endless discourse, to cut all that back and forth talk in favor of a more

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visceral, immediate shared experience. Whether that experience has any analogue in the real world is unclear. Can music tell me why, for example, my fellow music-worshippers and I shouldn't go and oppress some other people? What does music look like to the fascist who stares back at me from the other side of the mirror — the same?

The great essayist Isaiah Berlin explains how the rhetoric of Romanticism privileged art above politics for the first time. "Morality," he writes, "— and politics so far as it is a social morality — is a creative process: The new romantic model is art." Goethe's Faust character sets the stage, scandalously altering the opening text of the Bible. Faust cannot accept that "In the beginning was the Word." For him, it is not the Word of God that has primacy. There was an act of creation prior to that Word. So he proclaims: "In the beginning was the Deed." We have had it backwards all along, says Faust. The creative act is anterior to whatever text it may bring forth. Words that we perceive as having existed before us, written in stone, can potentially become dogma - we are not free to question them. At its worst, the dogmatic language expresses itself tyrannically, and although Goethe had the Church in mind, he might have included its sister institution, the State.

Placing Deed above the Word means privileging art above politics. Politics becomes just another whim of the fertile imagination — a form of art. Like art, politics will celebrate its freedom to create, independently of any antecedent linguistic authority. The danger in this new climate is that politics can lose its normalizing, regulating role as a "social morality." What is accepted as "moral" for a group of people must be established through some form of consensus. Usually there will be an appeal to a discourse or text concerning morality that already exists. If that pre-existing law is ignored, however dogmatic it may be, there is now the potential for a whole other kind of tyranny. The criteria for a good politics is now based solely on how aesthetically pleasing it is, how exciting and alluring it sounds and feels. Politicians are not accountable for their actual policy, but are judged more as artists — judged on their rhetorical finesse, on their ability to transport their listeners. In this environment, they can (literally) get away with murder.

Wholesale rebellion against linguistic dogma can mean rebellion against the specificity of language: rebellion against the notion that the speaker should specify his or her actual intentions. If the speaker is longer accountable for his intentions, then he is not responsible for their consequences. As an artist he merely creates. As previously mentioned, the desire for this artistic autonomy includes the fictive dream of something temporally closed, but the permanent end to discourse that music provisionally supplies spells out fascism in the realm of politics. "Art for art's sake," or any such jargon of autonomy, is no longer viable. It becomes difficult to separate the wordless appeal of music from the linguistic rhetoric of politics, because the very desire for that separation implies, if not a political stance, then at least a precondition for politics that are solely aesthetically driven.

Bracketing out politics from music is not just foolish idealism, then, but potentially an act of complicity. I now face the disconcerting prospect that my very enjoyment of music is always charged with political implications, whether I like it or not. My immediate reaction is, "No way!" If I'm somehow politically accountable when I listen to music, then it instantly loses its emancipative thrust for me, i.e., its temporary freedom from the specificity of language. That desire for music to remain autonomous from political discourse, though, inadvertently implies a political stance — a kind of leave-me-alone, lazy libertarianism: "I don't care what they're marching about on the streets. I just want to listen to Coltrane!"

Music is an ideological whore. She will play for any team, as Burgess/Kubrick showed so well in *A Clockwork Orange*: The famous "Ode to Joy" theme from the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony — that paragon of Enlightenment ideals, with text from Schiller — is the soundtrack that accompanies the sociopath protagonist of the story, Alex, as he rapes and murders. When Pavlovian therapy is administered in the second part of the film, he cannot

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listen to the Beethoven without becoming violently ill. Disturbingly, I always feel pity for Alex at this point. However evil his actions, we share one thing in common — the simple, unfettered joy that comes from listening to that Beethoven. Despite my own horror of this character, I enter into complicity with him.

Alex is the dictator, and his mates are his army, mindlessly following him and assisting him on his rampages. Kubrick's vision grimly parodies the characteristic pageantry of fascism — the campish sadomasochism of their repressive military outfits, the brutal pornographic images, and the strange matriarchal symbolism. So there I am, staring at the fascist in the mirror. The mirror is Beethoven's music. Such a beautiful piece of music, one that celebrates so much that is good for me, can be used to celebrate death and destruction for someone else, instantaneously. But we both celebrate, regardless. I must concede that Beethoven's music has no fixed moral stance in and of itself, and "art for art's sake" becomes appropriate again: Art seems to win a victory here, reclaiming its autonomy.

But music made it possible for me to enter into that wordless complicity with Alex for just a moment. Perhaps I've been taking the wrong approach all along. For in order to begin speculating on the relative autonomy of music, I'm already viewing music as some kind of object, an object that could possess or lack that autonomy — like an eggshell or a sealed envelope, an object with something inside of it that is shut but might have an opening somewhere. Maybe music can be construed as an opening only, nothing more. If I understand it this way, it is not an object at all.

As an opening, music is the clear space that I cross over to achieve that solidarity with someone else. The opening is not fixable to any particular locus that I can map with language, so in a sense one fails by assigning the quality of "space" to music. Once one starts using spacio-temporal terms to describe music, it collapses into an object again. This is the pickle that Kant got himself into: How can we begin to talk about any object at all, without taking space and time into account? Surely one reason why language always seems to fail in an account of music is that, as an idealized kind of non-object, there is nothing I can predicate about it. So a non-object necessarily becomes a kind of object, or else I will never be able to finish a sentence about it.

Language wants to have it both ways: It wants to posit judgments on music, yet keep it in a transcendent realm where these judgments are useless. This whole idealistic picture of music paradoxically hinges on the language that it's "free" from. No one really cares about music's unexplainable aspect until they start trying to explain it. Only then does it take on a numinous aura of otherness. That otherness is twofold: If language privileges music in one sense by assigning it a transcendental status above and beyond itself, it also suggests its own failure as a mode of communication. Without language to describe it, music simply is — it exists independently of whatever propositions are made about it.

Thus the elitist subtext behind the jargon of autonomy: Music does not need language in order for us to comprehend it. Does language "need" music? "Music," as an uttered word, is a particularly strong trope existing within language that speaks of language's never-ending failure to meet its object directly. It is a kind of über-metaphor that symbolizes our very need to create metaphors in the first place. "The essence of music is unexplainable in words" avoids a more disturbing question: Truly, how well can words explain the essence of anything? The upshot is that in trying to talk about music one winds up talking about language.

One could argue, then, that music and language share a distinctive characteristic with each other, and one is not particularly privileged over the other. If language reaches a descriptive wall when confronted with music, then music likewise cannot appeal to language to vindicate itself. Yet they both try, nonetheless. This is the case with my complicity with the character of Alex. That complicity cannot step out of the musical locus it inhabits. There is only

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Beethoven's music, mutely referring back to itself. It is this failure of music to cross over into language that makes my complicity with Alex possible. Our joyful solidarity in the Beethoven cannot fix itself to any reasoned statement; it reaches a dead-end paradox. The paradox takes the form of an unanswerable question: How can he and I share this joy together, when he is a fascist, and I am not?

Music and language thus share a certain idealism: They both posit exactly beyond what they can master, but in that failed attempt, reveal something obliquely. It is not a grounded object that's revealed — nothing is predicated, nothing is fixed, certain, or completed: "Idealism" here addresses the whole realm of possibility, in itself. Music, precisely in its lack of identify, throwsthat possibility into relief — that aforementioned incomprehensible duality of finality and endlessness. Language does that as well, but when language diagnoses a non-identity, it addresses it negatively. It finds a paradox, something that must be resolvedbut cannot. For Kant, this kind of paradox was inherent in the act of reasoning itself. How could we conceive, for example, that time has no beginning or end, and at the same time, conceive that all things must begin at some point? One lesson from him is that even though we cannot grasp endlessness or finality in a direct, head-on sort of way, we should not dogmatically deny their possibility. We posited them in the first place.

An idealistic form of communication, then, involves isolating possibility from the specificity of its outcome. Then I am allowed to look at something more directly for a moment. In this case I look at Alex directly through the music. We are communicating with each other, he and I. If there is this solidarity in the music, there is the possibility of some other form of solidarity. The Beethoven will point to infinite possibilities between us: Maybe we'll just sit and listen, maybe we'll go beat someone to a pulp, maybe we'll fight for democracy together. But in and of itself, that opening that is the music carries no force, no gravitational pull. The force, if there is one, will come from us. We will decide where we go together, what we do, if we do anything.