Speech acts and music acts

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In the abstract for the first of his William James Lectures at Harvard University in 1955, J. L. Austin sets out what is surely a provocative premise when he begins, ‘Many “statements” were shown to be, as Kant perhaps first argued systematically, strictly nonsense, despite an unexceptionable grammatical form.’ This observation, oddly and of course unintentionally, seems to me to place language and music in the same bracket. This is important to my discussion, since it is not perhaps so obvious that music and language are ‘in the same bracket’. Indeed, Peter Kivy notes that when he was invited to speak at a colloquium entitled Music, Language and Cognition, his first response was to be ‘reminded of the game in which a child is shown, for example, pictures of an apple, a banana, and a trumpet, and asked “Which one doesn’t belong?”.’ For Kivy, the odd one out is language, whose relation to music he regards as merely confusing. Austin’s argument, however, provides what seems to me to be an interesting point of contact between the two. Austin is trying to show that language does not actually do what we might think it does; that is, ‘to state some fact’: to provide us with a complete, coherent and pinned-down meaning within the logical structures of words and syntax. When Steven Pinker - to take only the most extreme and notorious example - describes music as ‘auditory cheesecake’, he is perhaps making a similar observation that, despite its obvious, delineated materials
and structuring processes - arguably in their own way as ‘grammatical’ as Austin’s statements - music also is ‘strictly nonsense’; that is, it also has no complete and coherent meaning that we can identify logically, especially in words; and perhaps similarly, some of our difficulties in thinking about music may stem from the fact that it also is not doing what we think it does. Austin’s point is that language, to be as central as it is to human culture, must be doing something else besides stating: recent commentators on music, incensed by Pinker’s put-down, have similarly tried to find ways in which music could be doing something else, other than providing aesthetic pleasure - whatever that is. Perhaps, in both cases, the something else is ‘effecting an action’?

The resistance music has to explicit meaning - its quality of ‘ineffability’ - is one of the properties that makes its possible relationship to language puzzling. Austin’s argument, of course, is that language is not an end in itself, but rather a medium through which many kinds of actions are performed, and this fits, for example, with Michael Arbib’s view, in the Introduction to his recent book *Language, Music and the Brain*, that both language and music are not just patterns of sound, but must be considered in terms of the action-perception strategies of a living organism. Now, Austin’s ‘actions’ and Arbib’s ‘action and perception’, while related, are not quite the same thing. The action-perception strategies of an organism are individual to the organism and psycho-biologically internalised, while Austin is looking outwards from the organism to notice the effects words have in the socially determined contexts within which they are uttered. For an organism to speak requires similar action-perception mechanisms as those required for it to make music, but the acting of language discussed by Austin is of a different sort. What I want to consider here is to what extent Austin’s notion of the speech-act might also be applicable to music. Are there ‘music-acts’, and what would such a possibility tell us about music, its evolution, its relationship to language, and its social functions?

Since Austin’s acts are socially instantiated, I want to begin by considering the social configuration of the actors involved in the activities we refer to as language, and as music. In Austin’s first examples, it is clear that various individuals and social groupings are being addressed directly. In the ceremony of marriage, for instance, the statement ‘I do (take this man to be my lawful wedded husband)’ is addressed, multiply, to the celebrant of the
marriage, to the husband, to any social onlookers, and importantly to the body of legal statutes that enshrines the requirements and entailments of marriage itself. As Austin says, ‘… it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it.’ (Austin 1955, I 4) This action, of course, only works if the various people being addressed know that they are being addressed. The act is accomplished through the social changes it effects through agreed conventions. In the same way, in this talk I am clearly using language to address you. Whatever action I may intend by these words, it did not happen while I was talking to myself in my hotel room, practising - though even in relating that, I use the phrase ‘talking to myself’, since language always seems to imply that someone is being addressed, as Austin says ‘in .. the appropriate circumstances’, in order for an act to occur. What happened in my hotel room is maybe just different to what is happening now. The speaker, the addressee, and the situation are critically related.

Vladimir Jankélévitch, in his book Music and the Ineffable, actually begins by considering how music acts on people: in his very first sentence, he asserts ‘La musique agit sur l’homme …’ / ‘Music acts on a person’. This action, from the first, operates in a manner that is strikingly different to what I have just described for language. In the first place, in Jankélévitch’s account, it is the music, and not the person who makes it, who is performing the action. In the marriage example described above, while it is the words spoken that do the act, it is not the words that are regarded as having the agency: it is the person, not the words that get married. But when Jankélévitch says ‘Music acts …’ (my reversal of the emphasis) he is setting up a different social configuration, which he describes as follows:

One doesn’t ‘listen to’ a pianist playing before his public … in the same way that one ‘listens to’ a lecturer speaking to his audience, because for the lecturer the listener is the second person − ‘you’, the object of invocation or allocution – whereas the listener is the third person, the outsider, for the pianist sitting at the piano. (Jankélévitch 2003, 21)

This proposes the listener almost as voyeur, involved in the music but only indirectly. The music is not addressed to them, but appears as a component of
the social situation in addition to the performer and the listener. You could perhaps reflect that when someone is speaking to you, it is very disconcerting if they avoid your gaze while they are speaking. This is usually interpreted as casting some sort of doubt on the nature of the utterance. On the contrary, it would be equally disconcerting if a pianist fixed you in an interlocutory gaze while playing music. (I have seen this happen, on television, and it is a curious experience.) This proposes that music instantiates a totally different sort of social configuration than language does, and provides the strategic positioning from which Jankélévitch can maintain that music ‘suggests without signifying’. (Jankélévitch 2003, 73) Here, I feel that Jankélévitch gets himself caught up once again in the impasse of signification from which his initial strategy of thinking of music as *acting* promised to release him.

In Austin’s terms, the action that Jankélévitch proposes might seem not only too general to really count, but also indeterminate with respect to its achievement. The person saying ‘I do’ is really married, but what has the music achieved? Austin’s speech acts work by convention - they are socially mediated - and while there are clearly musical conventions, those might seem to operate in rather different ways. In addition, for Jankélévitch it is the music rather than the performer who is deemed to be doing the acting, and while social conventions clearly bind social actors, could music - whatever that is - be a ‘social actor’ in the same sense?

While I began by claiming that it is not perhaps so obvious that music and language are ‘in the same bracket’, historical discussions of both language and music have made much of the possible evolutionary relationship between the two. Thus Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, and Herbert Spencer, in his essay *The Origin and Function of Music* attempt to entangle music and language in terms of what and how they express rather than the actions they achieve. Like Jankélévitch, they are concerned with the articulation of signification. Charles Darwin, on the other hand, in *The Descent of Man*, is clear that music has the form of intended action. He writes:

> We shall see that primeval man, or rather some early progenitor of man, probably first used his voice in producing true musical cadences, that is in singing, as do some of the gibbon-apes at the present day; and we may conclude from a widely spread analogy, that this power would have been especially exerted during the courtship of the sexes – would have expressed
various emotions, such as love, jealousy, triumph – and would have served as a challenge to rivals. It is, therefore, probable that the imitation of musical cries by articulate sounds may have given rise to words expressive of various complex emotions. (Darwin 1871)

and consequently:

I conclude that musical notes and rhythm were first acquired by the male or female progenitors of mankind for the sake of charming the opposite sex. (Darwin 1897, 572)

This would surely count as a sort of music-act and, unlike Jankélévitch, Darwin puts the power of action not in the music but in the intentions of the self that makes or utters the music. At the same time, the type of act still seems to me to differ from that discussed by Austin. When Austin says ‘I bet you …’ the words achieve their intended action simply by being uttered, whereas the charming of the opposite sex is not so simply accomplished! Perhaps more critically, while Darwin’s formulation allows music variety of expression, as do the accounts of Rousseau, Spencer and Jankélévitch, it seems to deny music a variety of intentions. For Darwin, there is a music-act, but only one. What other music-acts could we imagine?

Arnold Pacey, in his book Meaning in Technology begins with a chapter on music, not in the context of its productive technologies but as a technology. Thus he remarks that:

Singing was just an ordinary hunting method. The Inuit used to make up lots of songs to make it easier to hunt animals …(Pacey 1999)

In a similar vein, Iain Morley, in his book The Prehistory of Music, starts with a concern for ‘… the roles that musical behaviours might fulfil …’ (11), and he begins with what he considers to be recent evidence of the life-style of the ancient hunter-gathers. As an example, he quotes Kehoe’s (1999) account of the culture of the Blackfoot nation in the grasslands of North America, where a young man would sing ‘a spiritually potent song in the manner of a bleating calf’ (Morley 2013, 16) in order to hunt buffalo. This, like Darwin’s account of music in the process of sexual selection, shows music in action. It also notes an additional property of music, shared by language, in its reference to mimesis: ‘in the manner of a bleating calf.’ This is clearly characterised as song - that is
as music, rather than mere animal imitation. But it is music that does something in the same way as one of Austin’s speech-acts. As Michael Taussig explains, in his book *Mimesis and Alterity*:

> ... to give an example, to instantiate, to be concrete, are all examples of the magic of mimesis wherein the replication, the copy, acquires the power of the represented ... (13)

The young man, through his imitation, sings something into being; something that slips between the human and the animal. Taussig is clear that:

> ... the spirits of plants and animals and so forth exist in human form! This slippage is essential, and I presume its specification for any particular plant, animal, object or person is its ‘secret’ ... (87)

Thus the song of the young man creates a being that slips between two worlds, in an act as definite as Austin’s laying of a bet, or contracting of a marriage. It makes something so, in a situation where the conventions in play include, but are more than human. This might also speak to contemporary concerns to counter a normative, anthropocentric position with a more inclusive sense of a world that arises from the mutual, situated affordances of things and selves both human and non-human.

What is the distribution of intention in this scenario? In Paul Grice’s account of speech acts, intentionality plays a key role, since it is critical that the perceiver of a speech act understands not only the force of the action but also the fact that it was intended by the person who uttered it. We can say that Austin’s saying of ‘I do’ affords marriage only if we believe that the person who utters the words really intends to do so. Peter Kivy asserts a similar requirement of the listener within the social configuration of music when he states that ‘... music is not a stimulus ...: it is an object of perception and cognition, which understanding opens up for appreciation.” (Kivy 1990, 41)

However, this also suggests a difference between music and language. Kivy’s statement reminds us that a music-act may result not only from the intention of the person who makes the utterance, as it is in language, but also from the intention of the person who hears it. Thus, in Jankélévitch’s account of the pianist performing, it is the listening that is the critical element:

> One doesn’t ‘listen to’ a pianist playing before his public ... in the same way
I want to suggest here, as I implied before when I said “music - whatever that is”, that music is not simply a perceptual flow or a structured set of sounding objects, ‘out there’ and available for human perception and interpretation. It is rather a sonorous network of disparate components, unfolding in time, that afford listening. One could even say that music is open to what sound has to give it. This would figure music as the consequence of listening, in the presence of bodies, animate and inanimate, brought into being by a music-act on the part of the listener, as well as on the part of the performer; that is: guided by two sets of intentions. In the formulation of the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, John Reid, it is a ‘social operation’ that is co-created, and co-intended by bodies in sympathy. This would mean that there could be what I would call ‘reduced’ or partial musics. When John Cage says, in a late interview, that “…finally I’d rather just listen to traffic …” he is proposing a music act where the only intentionality is that of the listener.

Finally, while I think it is potentially useful to think about music as acting, in the same way as Austin thinks about language as acting, it is not entirely clear to me what is the range of music acts. I have made a few basic suggestions, but these reveal some clear differences between music and language. A speech act requires social law or convention to produce its effect. To make a bet, to marry, to prohibit, are all substantive arrangements of social power. Music does not act within these, or within similar social conventions. There may be laws allowing or forbidding music, but these are not instantiated musically! Thus music must act within a different set of conventions. As Claude Levi-Strauss and Phillipe Descola point out that the notions of ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ co-evolve with one another, perhaps music might act within the conventions of this ‘nature’ alongside which ‘culture’ evolves.