

A definition of Music rooted in the Doctrine of Correspondences and brought to bear through principles of beauty-in-truth and scientific spirituality.

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July 5, 2024

It is not uncommon that theoretical instruction in Music aim for an enumeration of its constituent elements. In these attempts to lay out each aspect of Music and tie them all together, theorists present, in effect, definitions of Music. The theory of an art cannot come about without an intelligible conception of the art itself. Efforts of this sort within the framework of Tonality often include Melody, Harmony, Rhythm, Timbre, Accent, Form, and other components. Depending on several factors, not least of which being one's intention—conscious or unconscious—to explain Music Theory in a given stylistic context, a varying number of essential categories will offer a (hopefully) complete explanation of Music. For example, “Indian music,” as M. R. Gautam wrote, “rests on the tripod of *rāga* and *tāla* and *prabandha*. These represent respectively the sound, time, and structural aspects of musical experience.”¹ The present essay is built on a similar triune definition of Music. In contrast to a theory born of a given time period or geographical region, I offer here my best attempt to distill diverse texts into that which is universal and practical with regard to a definition of Music.

¹ M. R. Gautam, *Evolution of Rāga and Tāla in Indian Music* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988), front jacket.

Besides the Doctrine of Correspondences, the title of the present work is likely quite straightforward. To begin on the right foot, may the Doctrine of Correspondences be at least preliminarily explained. My use of the term invokes the Western European Renaissance. In fact, any inquiry into Renaissance thought would be incomplete without it. As an aspect of Renaissance cosmology, the Doctrine of Correspondences is defined very briefly, and yet quite effectively, in an adaptation from A Guide to the Study of Literature: A Companion Text for Core Studies 6, Landmarks of Literature (English Department, Brooklyn College) written by Lilia Melani.²

According to the aforementioned source, the essence of the Doctrine of Correspondences is that certain segments of the Great Chain of Being³ reflect other segments of the same. To echo two examples: a human being is a microcosm (little world) of the corresponding macrocosm (the world in its entirety); the four humors (black bile, phlegm, blood, and yellow bile) exhibit characteristics parallel to the four elements (earth, water, air, and fire).⁴

Music Theory in the Renaissance incorporated similar relationships. In their treatises incorporating Neoplatonic strains of musical thought from the late-fifteenth century, Gafori and Ramos de Pareja presented systems that fused pitches of the diatonic scale, the heavenly bodies, the Muses, and other numerically related sets applicable to Music and the Natural Sciences. If not always the most practicable layouts, or even the most accurate in terms of describing how contemporaneous musicians composed and performed, these webs of mutual symbolism point to

² Lilia Melani, "Renaissance," Brooklyn College, City University of New York, webpage, <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/ren.html>, accessed July 4, 2024, last updated March 29, 2009.

³ A hierarchy with God at the top, down through angels, humans, animals, plants, and various inanimate objects.

⁴ National Library of Medicine, "And there's the humor of it': Shakespeare and the four humors," webpage, <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/shakespeare-and-the-four-humors/index.html#:~:text=Courtesy%20National%20Library%20of%20Medicine&text=According%20to%20humoralism%2C%20four%20bodily,were%20in%20excess%20or%20deficit>, accessed July 5, 2024.

the continuation of a longstanding connection between the naturally magical and Music, in particular stringed instruments and the voice.

Scientific thought has changed dramatically since the late-fifteenth century. The symbols employed by Gafori and Ramos de Pareja may be useful vehicles in the exploration of archetypes through music or inspirational tools useful for systematizing musical affect, but they will likely not hold up to drier worldviews common today. Nevertheless, number symbolism and spirituality modeled on Humanist aesthetics need not be left entirely out of Music on account of scientific advances. Astrological implications of pitch or the gifts of a Muse proffered by a given Mode may not be currently in vogue either musically or scientifically, but one need not completely discard this type of thinking.

A three-part conception of the essential character of Music⁵ reminds a computational and perhaps disillusioned modern world that simple truths of the natural realm hold musical value in both contemplative and praxis-based contexts. Let some examples introduce the proposition at hand: events in time consist in a beginning, a middle (or unfolding, or development, etc.), and an end; life is a process of birth, growth, and death; conscious experience is a fixed past, a dynamic and emergent present, and an uncertain future; measurement as a concept is fundamentally a matter of nothing, something, or infinity; in astrology each element may be cardinal, fixed, or mutable; Hindu philosophy is built on Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva (equated commonly with Creation, Preservation, and Destruction). While it may not usually be presented explicitly as such, the Christian parallel model is apparent in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—a triune conception of the divine that deserves an honest rendering as part and parcel of humanity and the world of the living.

⁵ Here, I refer to the musical act as performed in real time.

In each and every case, these sets speak to the essence of something. They describe this something's indispensable and necessary elements. The first component always evokes the inevitable or an inescapable source, a constant and authoritative reality. In Music, the corresponding aspect must be Rhythm.

More broad in scope than the notion of a steady pulse, Rhythm as a constant is ever-present change through time. It is the domain of time itself, and how sound and silence arise and give way to any subsequent event. Even the freest, most wandering musical style has rhythm. Rhythm is not necessarily regular or recurring; it is the temporal plan that is to occur, or an *a posteriori* look at how the timing of the musical act has manifested.

The second component of each three-part set is an expression of agency, but is also heavily limited. The possibilities for how an event develops or unfolds are not countless. At every present moment, one is confronted with many options, but the nature of the second phase of the examples presented above is not entirely abstract; in fact it is concrete, if variable and subject to extreme contrast.

Sound is exactly the component of Music that must occupy the second phase of a naturally-arising three-part definition of this art. As a series of sounds plays out during the course of a performance, one decision suggests the next. Musicians not only potentially set out pitch limitations by choice of scale or mode (or raga, maqam, pitch set, tone row, etc.) before constructing a melody, but also probably decide on the direction of the discourse as the music grows, materialized, takes shape. Sound is a question of control and agency, of decision making. It is less foundational and imposing than Rhythm as defined above, but its absence would sabotage the musical construct.

The third component of the sets is supremely volatile. It is dissolution, or flexibility in innumerable directions. As an end to things, it brings an unknowable void; as death, the ineffable; future unforeseeable; infinity uncontainable; mutability without parameter; Shiva; the Holy Spirit; disintegration in all its perfect and naturally occurring beauty.

It may seem ironic that in Music this presumably shapeless element is Form. Form, the most self-explanatory of Music's three component parts is surprisingly elusive. Without conflating the notion of Form with that of template, one may posit a distilled definition of Form and by the same token capture its infiniteness: Form is any combination of Rhythm and Sound. Thus it is clear that musicians are at their most liberated when it comes to Form. In spite of the well-known templates to which we may be accustomed, Form could be as plain as the singing of a single note. A note possesses rhythm by virtue of occurring in time. It possesses sound as something audible.

The question of a succinct and universally practical definition of Music is not just a thought experiment. In prose form, the three-part definition of Music thus far: Music is sound organized across time. Where there is intention to present a given sound at a given moment, there is, at least in a theoretical sense, Music.

There are two important points to draw from this definition. First, one can do away altogether with the idea that Harmony, Melody, and Rhythm are the essentials of Music. Certain currents in Music Theory today examine just how unfair and incomplete it is to equate Music Theory as a discipline with Tonal Harmony in Western Europe from 1700 to 1850. I estimate this criticism to be well founded. Harmony as a study of Western Tonality, in spite of its pervasiveness, is not an indispensable pillar of Music. Neither is Melody in a popular sense, for the simple fact that if a drum solo is not melodic, is it not music? At the risk of

oversimplification, I propose Sound the best substitute for the terms Harmony and Melody, as Sound includes all that is audible and therefore all that may be audible as a feature of musical art.

Besides a reconsideration of how the mainstream envisions Music Theory, the most practical implication of this essay is that Rhythm be ground zero for Music Education. Students need to get through a piece of music in real time. An understanding of Rhythm and an ability to apply its principles means grasping the style and feel of a piece. The relationship between musician and time is a complex thing, and must be experienced—frequently and with long-term commitment—to be nurtured and improved. Without detracting from the strict necessity of Sound and Form (as second and third phase, respectively), one must insist upon Rhythm being the best point of departure.

Before you dismiss these ideas in critique of their esoteric tone or fairy-tale ties to an outdated rule of three, consider the fact that not all phenomena or art forms are well described by the three-part model. Music is an especially good fit. My position cannot be refuted simply by stating that everything has a beginning, middle, and end, and therefore why bother fitting Music into a three-part paradigm; or by claiming that Music is actually not a matter of sound at all, and consists more wholly in the intellectual realm or the cultural memory (see p. 3, note 5).

Literature, for example, removes the reader from the creative process more severely than musical performance does. Painting or Sculpture are even more fractured in this regard, and are less temporal in the sense that a start and finish are far less obvious. While Dance is closely related to Music, and may even be defined along lines similar to those I have laid out in this essay, there is an interesting distinction: being a sound-based—not necessarily visual—art form, Music offers the same basic experience for both listener and performer. Both hear effectively the same thing, while a dancer cannot observe themselves the same way an onlooker can.

Music is a special, maybe miraculous aspect of human existence; it is no novel statement. Perhaps no other art is so available in any given environment. In daily life, compositional inspiration is everywhere for all to observe and inescapable, except should one prefer to ignore the practice of giving form to sound across time! None of the examples with which I introduced the notion of a naturally arising three-part phenomenon is limited to human beings. They are all properties of the natural world, be it animal or otherwise, and should therefore involucrate Music among the purest of activities. If God is in any way synonymous to the natural order of the universe, then no wonder Music has remained an excellent communion with the divine.