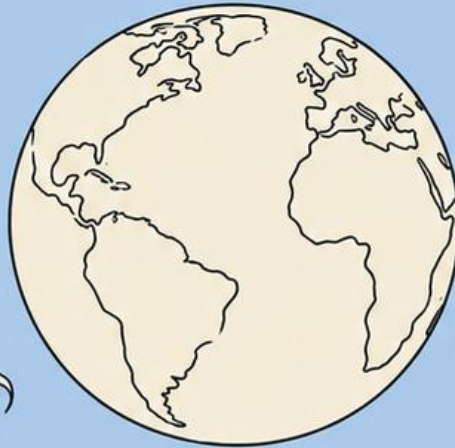
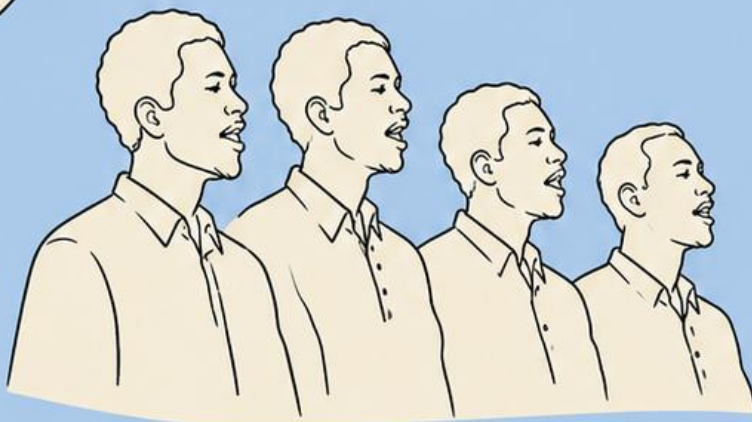




— BEYOND THE —
**UNIVERSAL
LANGUAGE:**

— ♦ —
MUSIC, MEANING,
AND HUMAN
COMMUNICATION



Beyond the Universal Language: Music, Meaning and Human Communication

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First Edition

Music and the Problem of Universality

Few ideas circulate through musical culture with greater ease than the claim that music is a universal language. The phrase appears in concert programs, educational philosophy, humanitarian campaigns, political speeches, and newspaper criticism with such regularity that it often escapes scrutiny altogether. Musicians invoke it to describe collaborations that cross national borders, educators employ it to defend arts instruction, and audiences repeat it after performances that seem to communicate beyond ordinary speech. The expression possesses unusual durability. It survives changing musical styles, political upheavals, and competing theories of art with remarkably little alteration.¹

The metaphor itself has a long history. Enlightenment philosophers speculated that melody possessed a direct avenue to human feeling unavailable to language, while nineteenth-century Romantic writers elevated instrumental music precisely because it appeared liberated from conceptual thought. E. T. A. Hoffmann described Beethoven's instrumental works as opening a realm beyond words, and similar language echoes through generations of concert criticism. Music appeared capable of speaking where language fell silent. These observations arose less from systematic philosophical argument than from listening itself—from the persistent impression that organized sound communicates despite resisting translation.²

Travel narratives and early ethnographic records preserve comparable experiences. European visitors attending ceremonies in West Africa, South Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas frequently described unfamiliar performances in language marked by simultaneous confidence and uncertainty. They believed they had recognized grief, celebration, reverence, or solemnity while admitting they understood almost nothing of the surrounding language, ritual, or history. One missionary attending an Indigenous ceremony in North America carefully recorded "descending songs of unusual solemnity," adding only that the performers appeared deeply invested in sounds whose significance remained beyond his comprehension. Similar admissions recur across colonial archives. Recognition arrived quickly. Explanation rarely followed.³

Those moments of uncertainty deserve closer attention than they have generally received. Earlier generations often regarded them as shortcomings of observation—as evidence that more complete transcription, more careful translation, or longer residence in the field would eventually reveal the music's true meaning. The archives themselves point toward a different conclusion. Their recurring admissions of bewilderment suggest that musical meaning may not exist as a stable object waiting to be recovered. What remained inaccessible was not merely information but a network of performance practices, historical memory, ritual expectation, and communal participation that could not accompany a melody once separated from the circumstances of its performance. The ambiguity preserved in these documents is therefore not an archival failure. It may instead reveal one of the defining characteristics of musical communication itself.

A funeral procession in New Orleans, an evening *raga* performed in Varanasi, medieval plainchant resonating beneath stone vaults, or a field recording of work songs from the Mississippi Delta may all produce immediate affective responses among listeners unfamiliar with their traditions.

Something is communicated across cultural distance. Yet sustained engagement almost always uncovers additional layers of meaning unavailable through listening alone. The newcomer may recognize mourning without understanding why a particular melody belongs to mourning, perceive celebration without recognizing the historical event being commemorated, or admire the sound of a ceremonial instrument without knowing why it appears only during specific rituals. Emotional recognition and cultural understanding are not identical experiences.

The distinction becomes increasingly important as one moves through the history of musicology. Philosophers, linguists, psychologists, anthropologists, neuroscientists, and ethnomusicologists have all attempted to explain why music appears capable of crossing linguistic boundaries. Some locate its apparent universality in shared biological capacities for rhythm, vocal expression, temporal prediction, and emotional perception. Others argue that musical meaning emerges through participation in historically situated communities of listening. The literature often presents these explanations as competing alternatives. The historical record suggests something more complicated. Human beings may indeed share capacities for entrainment, memory, anticipation, and vocal communication. The musical worlds through which those capacities become meaningful are learned rather than inherited. Biology equips listeners to organize sound. Culture teaches them what that organization signifies.⁴

This essay begins with a deceptively simple question: what does it mean to call music a universal language? The answer becomes less certain the longer one remains with the evidence. Every known society has cultivated musical practices through which communities mourn, celebrate, worship, protest, remember, and imagine themselves. That continuity is difficult to dispute. Whether those practices constitute language in any meaningful philosophical sense remains far less clear.

Historical encounters will therefore precede theoretical discussion whenever possible. Listening will take precedence over abstraction. The argument, if it emerges at all, develops gradually from archives, performances, field recordings, rehearsal practices, and the observations of musicians and listeners who repeatedly encountered sounds that appeared immediately intelligible while remaining strangely resistant to translation. Jean-Jacques Nattiez's observation that musical meaning is historically contingent and culturally situated serves less as a starting assumption than as a conclusion toward which the historical evidence repeatedly points.⁵

The pages that follow do not seek to determine whether music is or is not a universal language in any simple sense. They instead ask a different question: what, precisely, is universal about musical experience, and what remains inseparable from history, culture, and the communities that give music its meaning?

What Is Language? Defining the Terms of the Debate

The expression *universal language* has circulated through musical writing for so long that its metaphorical character has gradually disappeared from view. Nineteenth-century concert criticism routinely described symphonies as "speaking" to humanity, while opera reviews referred to melody as a discourse intelligible beyond national boundaries. Music was said to "address the heart," to

"transcend words," or to "express the inexpressible." Such formulations accumulated authority through repetition. They became articles of faith long before they became objects of philosophical inquiry.⁶

Outside the concert hall the language remained remarkably similar. Missionaries writing from the Pacific, military officers stationed in colonial India, and travelers moving through the Ottoman Empire frequently remarked upon the emotional immediacy of unfamiliar performances. Their journals describe surprise at recognizing grief, joy, reverence, or celebration despite understanding neither the language nor the ceremonial setting in which the music was performed. The confidence of these observations now appears striking. Recognition itself was often taken as sufficient evidence that music communicated independently of culture.

Yet many of those same documents contain quieter admissions that have received comparatively little attention. Melodies were transcribed with great care, instruments described in meticulous detail, and performances reconstructed as faithfully as possible, only to conclude with remarks such as "their purpose remains obscure," or "the meaning of the song could not be determined." These hesitations deserve to be read alongside the more confident declarations. They suggest that what listeners recognized immediately may not have been the same thing as what participants themselves understood. The archives preserve both responses simultaneously.

The question therefore becomes less straightforward than it first appears. *What exactly is meant by language?*

Modern linguistics generally reserves the term for symbolic systems capable of stable reference through shared convention. Words acquire meaning because communities collectively agree that particular sounds correspond to particular concepts, objects, or actions. The relationship between the spoken word and the thing it denotes is arbitrary, yet convention preserves that relationship with remarkable consistency across generations. A child does not invent meanings but inherits them through participation in an already existing community of speakers.⁷

The history of lexicography illustrates this stability particularly well. Dictionaries expand, pronunciations shift, and vocabulary changes over centuries, yet communication remains possible because speakers continue to recognize broadly shared semantic conventions. Ordinary conversation depends upon this reliability. If one asks for bread in a marketplace, misunderstanding remains possible, but it is generally limited. Language succeeds because reference remains sufficiently stable to support everyday social life.

Musical sound behaves differently. A melody that accompanies mourning in one society may accompany historical commemoration in another. A military bugle call may later appear in a symphony, stripped of its original practical function while retaining echoes of ceremony and authority. Folk songs migrate across borders, acquiring new texts, new political meanings, and new social purposes. Entire repertoires survive the disappearance of the communities that first produced them, their significance continually reshaped by new performers and audiences. Historical continuity rarely guarantees semantic continuity.

The surviving manuscripts of medieval plainchant provide a revealing example. Neumatic notation preserves melodic contour with varying degrees of precision, yet the performance traditions

surrounding those manuscripts remain only partially recoverable. Modern scholars can reconstruct intervals with considerable confidence while remaining uncertain about vocal production, ornamentation, tempo, acoustics, gesture, or ritual pacing. The notation survives more readily than the culture of listening that once animated it.

Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified clarified why linguistic systems maintain coherence despite the arbitrariness of individual words.⁸ The spoken word *tree* bears no intrinsic resemblance to the object it denotes, yet convention stabilizes the association. The sign functions because speakers collectively preserve the relationship across time.

Music appears to resist that kind of stability. Does a cadence refer to anything beyond itself? Does a descending melodic line inherently communicate sadness, or has that association emerged through centuries of stylistic practice? Are accelerating rhythms universally experienced as excitement, or do listeners gradually learn those expectations through participation in particular musical traditions? The historical record refuses simple answers. It repeatedly documents broad emotional recognition while simultaneously recording profound disagreement concerning interpretation.

Jean-Jacques Nattiez's theory of musical semiology offers a productive way of understanding these recurring ambiguities. Musical meaning, he argued, cannot be located exclusively within the score, the composer's intentions, or the listener's interpretation. It emerges through interactions among creation, performance, reception, and cultural history.⁹ Read from this perspective, the hesitant observations found throughout archival collections cease to appear as failures of documentation. They become evidence. The collector who admits that a song's purpose remained obscure may not have lacked sufficient information. He may instead have encountered the limits of musical translation itself.

Listening reinforces this conclusion. A cadence satisfies because listeners anticipate resolution. A suspension acquires expressive force because consonance has been momentarily delayed. Musical understanding unfolds through expectation, memory, and temporal experience before it becomes conceptual. One may recognize coherence without being able to paraphrase it.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy provides an unexpected parallel. Words possess meaning because they participate in shared forms of life—in practices learned through communal participation rather than abstract definition.¹⁰ Musical understanding appears similarly embedded within historically situated habits of listening. Communities learn when silence is appropriate, why one melody belongs to mourning while another accompanies celebration, or why a particular instrument appears only during specific ceremonies. These understandings are acquired socially rather than discovered analytically.

The distinction introduced in the opening pages of this essay therefore becomes more precise. Human beings may indeed share the biological capacities necessary for hearing, prediction, vocal recognition, and rhythmic coordination. Nothing in the historical record suggests that these capacities alone determine musical meaning. The patterns that invite anticipation, the gestures that signal closure, and the sounds that evoke collective memory emerge within particular histories of listening.

Musical communication is therefore neither wholly biological nor wholly cultural. It occupies the continually negotiated space between them.

That observation shifts the discussion in an important direction. If language alone cannot adequately explain why music appears meaningful across cultural boundaries, another question becomes unavoidable. Why do human beings continue to experience unfamiliar music as communicative even when they cannot explain what, precisely, has been communicated? The answer has increasingly been sought in biology, cognition, and the evolutionary history of listening itself.¹¹

Why Humans Believe Music Is Universal

The first commercial sound recordings circulated through the world with extraordinary speed. By the closing years of the nineteenth century, wax cylinders and shellac discs were carrying performances far beyond the communities that had created them. A listener in Berlin could hear court musicians from Java, devotional singing from northern India, or Chinese opera without leaving Europe. Colonial expositions, missionary collections, and the rapidly expanding recording industry fostered the impression that the world's musical traditions had suddenly become available for comparison. The experience was unprecedented. It also encouraged an assumption that continues to shape discussions of music today: if listeners could respond emotionally to unfamiliar performances, perhaps music possessed a form of universality unavailable to spoken language.¹²

The earliest reactions to these recordings are revealing. Reviews published in European newspapers rarely claimed to understand the music in any technical or cultural sense. Instead, writers repeatedly described being "moved," "astonished," or "deeply affected." Their language remained almost entirely emotional. Critics compared unfamiliar repertoires to landscapes, weather, or states of mind rather than attempting detailed musical analysis. One reviewer remarked that although he understood "nothing of the system," the performance nevertheless conveyed "an unmistakable dignity." Such statements appeared across remarkably different repertoires, suggesting that listeners experienced genuine communication despite possessing very little contextual knowledge.

The temptation is to treat these observations as evidence that music bypasses culture altogether. The historical record points elsewhere. Those same reviewers frequently misidentified ceremonial music as entertainment, heard lament where local musicians understood reverence, or interpreted ritual repetition as compositional monotony. Their emotional responses were sincere. Their cultural interpretations often proved inaccurate. Recognition and understanding had become intertwined, though they were not the same phenomenon.

Charles Darwin proposed one of the earliest biological explanations for this apparent paradox. In *The Descent of Man*, he speculated that musical vocalization may have preceded articulate speech, functioning in courtship and emotional expression before the emergence of symbolic language.¹³ Darwin's proposal remains speculative, yet it redirected attention toward a question that continues to occupy cognitive science: why should organized sound possess such immediate significance for human beings regardless of cultural background?

Research in developmental psychology has produced observations that Darwin himself could only have imagined. Infants display sensitivity to melodic contour, rhythmic regularity, vocal timbre,

and repetition long before they acquire spoken language. Across a wide range of societies, caregivers instinctively alter their voices while singing to children, extending vowels, exaggerating melodic contours, simplifying rhythmic patterns, and narrowing pitch range. Recordings collected from Finland, Peru, Nigeria, Japan, and rural China reveal extraordinary differences in musical language while preserving surprising similarities in vocal interaction between caregiver and child.¹⁴

Listening to these recordings, one notices details that resist statistical summary. Breath becomes part of the musical phrase. Pulse expands and contracts with the movement of the infant rather than adhering to an external meter. Small fluctuations of pitch carry more expressive weight than large melodic leaps. The songs often seem less concerned with transmitting information than with regulating attention, calming the body, and establishing interpersonal connection. Description quickly becomes physical. One hears rocking before one hears structure.

Comparable observations appear throughout ethnographic literature describing adult musical practices. Work songs coordinate physical labor among groups whose members may exchange very little spoken language while working. Dance traditions synchronize movement across large gatherings. Religious chant regulates breathing, posture, and collective attention. Military cadence organizes coordinated action through pulse and repetition. Although these practices differ dramatically in musical language and cultural meaning, they repeatedly demonstrate music's capacity to organize bodies in time.¹⁵

The biological mechanisms underlying these experiences remain incompletely understood, yet recent work in neuroscience has strengthened the connection between musical listening and embodied cognition. Neuroimaging studies indicate that listening recruits networks associated with movement, prediction, emotional regulation, and motor planning, often activating regions involved in physical action even when listeners remain perfectly still. Rhythm appears capable of encouraging synchronization not only between individuals but also within the listener's own perceptual and motor systems.¹⁶

None of this, however, establishes that musical meaning is universal.

Shared physiology does not necessarily produce shared interpretation. Human beings possess remarkably similar visual systems, yet artistic traditions differ dramatically across history and geography. The capacity to recognize faces does not determine how beauty is understood. Hearing operates similarly. Biological endowment equips listeners to perceive organized sound, but it does not prescribe the symbolic worlds into which that sound will later be incorporated.

Thomas Fritz's widely discussed experiments concerning emotional recognition in music illustrate both the promise and the limitations of biological explanation. Participants drawn from culturally distant communities successfully identified broad emotional categories such as happiness, sadness, or fear in unfamiliar musical excerpts at rates exceeding chance expectation.¹⁷ The findings have often been cited as evidence that music communicates universally. A closer reading suggests a more nuanced conclusion. Participants generally recognized broad affective qualities while remaining unable to identify the cultural meanings, ritual functions, historical associations, or social memories attached to the music they heard. The experiments demonstrated that listeners could recognize

emotional orientation. They did not demonstrate that they understood what the music meant within the communities that produced it.

That distinction becomes increasingly important. A listener encountering a funeral lament from another culture may recognize grief while remaining entirely unaware of the ceremonial obligations, religious beliefs, kinship structures, or historical events that give the performance its significance. Emotional recognition represents only the beginning of musical understanding. Deeper layers of meaning emerge through participation, memory, and prolonged immersion within particular traditions of listening.

Christopher Small's concept of *musicking* helps clarify why this difference matters. Music, Small argued, is not fundamentally an object but an activity—a network of relationships created whenever people perform, listen, rehearse, dance, remember, or gather around organized sound.¹⁸ Biological capacities make such activities possible. Culture determines what those activities become. A lullaby, a protest song, a wedding procession, and a requiem may all rely upon shared human capacities for rhythm, vocal expression, and anticipation while participating in entirely different social worlds.

The enduring appeal of the phrase *universal language* therefore begins to make historical sense. Human beings do appear broadly equipped to organize sound through memory, anticipation, vocal communication, and bodily coordination. Those capacities are widespread, perhaps universal. The patterns that invite those responses, the meanings listeners attribute to them, and the communities within which they acquire significance emerge through particular histories of listening. Biology provides the conditions of possibility. Culture gives those possibilities their form.¹⁹

Semiotics and Musical Meaning: How Does Music Come to Mean?

The notebooks left by early comparative musicologists possess an oddly unfinished quality. Their pages are filled with careful intervallic measurements, rhythmic transcriptions, sketches of instruments, and translations of song texts whenever translators could be found. Then, almost without warning, the technical observations give way to uncertainty. Erich Moritz von Hornbostel occasionally interrupted his analyses with brief remarks concerning atmosphere, gesture, or collective participation that he admitted could not be adequately represented in notation. Béla Bartók's field notebooks reveal a similar pattern. Melodies were documented with extraordinary precision, while descriptions of the performances themselves often remained fragmentary. The songs survived on paper. The events in which they had lived did not.²⁰

For much of the twentieth century these gaps were treated as limitations of the archive. Better recording technology, more accurate transcription, or longer periods of fieldwork were expected to recover what earlier collectors had missed. Yet the recurring nature of these admissions suggests another possibility. Their uncertainty was not merely technical. It reflected an encounter with forms of musical meaning that could not be separated from performance itself. The archive repeatedly reached a boundary beyond which notation alone could not travel.

This ambiguity is historically valuable precisely because it resists resolution. Jean-Jacques Nattiez argued that musical meaning is not contained exclusively within the musical work, the

intentions of its creator, or the perceptions of its audience. Rather, signification emerges through the interaction of creation, performance, reception, and the cultural histories that shape each of those activities.²¹ The bewilderment preserved in so many field notebooks therefore becomes evidence rather than deficiency. Collectors had not simply failed to discover the "correct" meaning of the music they encountered. They had discovered that musical meaning itself is historically contingent and culturally situated.

The question of musical meaning, however, long predates modern semiotics. Eduard Hanslick insisted that music consisted of "tonally moving forms," rejecting the claim that compositions necessarily represented emotions, narratives, or external ideas. Instrumental music, he argued, possessed its own internal logic independent of verbal description. Others reached almost the opposite conclusion, hearing in music a language of feeling whose expressive richness exceeded the capacities of ordinary speech. The disagreement has remained remarkably persistent because both positions capture part of musical experience while leaving something unexplained.

Semiotics introduced a new vocabulary for addressing the problem. Ferdinand de Saussure described language as a system of signs whose meanings arise through socially maintained relationships between signifiers and signifieds rather than through any natural correspondence between word and object.²² Linguistic communication succeeds because communities preserve these relationships with sufficient consistency to support everyday life. Meaning is conventional, yet convention produces remarkable stability.

Music enters that framework only uneasily. A bugle call summons soldiers to formation. Church bells announce worship. A familiar television theme identifies a news broadcast before a single spoken word has been heard. Through repeated use, sounds become associated with recognizable social functions. At first glance these examples appear comfortably semiotic. Convention has clearly attached meaning to sound.

History quickly complicates the picture. The same bugle call quoted in a symphony no longer instructs anyone to assemble. A hymn removed from liturgical practice may become a concert work. A folk melody collected from a rural village may later function as a symbol of national identity. Nothing within the pitches themselves guarantees these transformations. They emerge through changing historical circumstances. The sound remains largely unchanged while the social world surrounding it changes profoundly.

Charles Sanders Peirce's distinction among icons, indexes, and symbols proves particularly illuminating here because it allows different forms of musical signification to coexist.²³ Some musical gestures resemble physical experience. A rising melody may evoke ascent, while increasing tempo may suggest acceleration. Other sounds acquire meaning through repeated association. Funeral marches come to signify mourning because generations of listeners encounter them within rituals of bereavement. Still others function symbolically through collective agreement, as national anthems or ceremonial fanfares often do. Music moves among these categories with remarkable freedom, resisting reduction to any single theory of signs.

Listening confirms the complexity. A violin phrase ascending through gradual crescendo may evoke striving or aspiration without literally referring to either. A slow pulse performed by low drums may suggest gravity, distance, or ritual while remaining semantically indeterminate. Experienced listeners often agree about broad affective orientation while disagreeing entirely about narrative interpretation. Such ambiguity would be intolerable in legal discourse or scientific language. Within music it is often the source of expressive richness.

Susanne Langer approached this distinction by separating discursive symbolism from what she called presentational symbolism. Language communicates through concepts arranged into propositions. Music presents forms whose significance unfolds through temporal experience rather than conceptual reference.²⁴ One cannot adequately paraphrase a crescendo, a suspension, or a gradually unfolding cadence without losing something essential. Their meaning resides in process rather than translation.

Archival evidence repeatedly returns to this point. Ethnographers working with Indigenous communities occasionally reported that singers declined to perform ceremonial repertoires outside their proper contexts. One Navajo elder, according to a translated field note, explained simply that a particular chant "belongs to the place." The statement is deceptively modest. It implies that melody, landscape, ritual, memory, and communal obligation form a single network of meaning that cannot easily be extracted from one another. The recording device captured the pitches. It could not record belonging.

Christopher Small's later concept of *musicking* helps explain why such moments recur so persistently across ethnographic literature. Musical meaning does not reside solely within works but emerges through relationships among performers, listeners, spaces, institutions, and shared practices.²⁵ The archival collector who removed music from its ceremonial setting inevitably preserved only one portion of a much larger event. The recording remained valuable. It was never complete.

This realization alters the direction of the argument. If musical signs do not possess universally stable meanings comparable to linguistic signs, then the central question changes. The problem is no longer identifying what music refers to. It becomes understanding how listeners nevertheless experience coherence, continuity, and expressive force while listening.

Attention therefore shifts from signs to time itself.

Long before listeners assign symbolic significance to a musical event, they begin predicting it. Memory accumulates almost immediately. Patterns suggest continuation, repetition, interruption, or return. Meaning begins to emerge through anticipation before it emerges through interpretation. Leonard Meyer's work marks one of the most influential attempts to explain this temporal dimension of musical experience, directing the discussion away from fixed reference and toward expectation as music unfolds.²⁶

Expectation and Embodied Cognition

The opening of Claude Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* unsettled many of the listeners who first encountered it in Paris during the final decade of the nineteenth century. A solitary flute enters almost hesitantly, tracing an arabesque that seems unwilling to establish either a firm tonal center or a

predictable rhythmic direction. The melody rises, pauses, and turns back upon itself with a freedom that contemporary critics often described as wandering. Some admired its extraordinary delicacy. Others complained that the music lacked purpose or structural coherence. Reading those early reviews today, one notices how often writers resorted to metaphors of movement rather than formal analysis. The music drifted, floated, lingered, hesitated. Their vocabulary described bodily sensation before it described compositional technique.²⁷

The opening remains remarkable because it invites expectation without immediately satisfying it. Each phrase appears to promise continuation while quietly withholding confirmation. Silence acquires unusual importance. Breath becomes part of the melodic design. Timbre, register, and pacing contribute as much to the listener's orientation as harmony itself. One does not simply hear successive notes. One begins anticipating what has not yet occurred. Memory and prediction become inseparable almost from the first measures.

Such experiences occupy an important place in the history of music theory, although they have not always been described in psychological terms. Musicians have long recognized that listeners respond differently to confirmation than to delay, to repetition than to interruption, to stability than to ambiguity. The vocabulary varied across historical periods—cadence, suspension, preparation, resolution, expectation—but the underlying observation remained remarkably consistent. Music unfolds through time, and listeners continually negotiate what has already happened against what they believe will happen next.

Leonard B. Meyer transformed this longstanding musical intuition into one of the most influential theories of musical meaning in the twentieth century. Expressive force, he argued, does not arise primarily because musical sounds refer to external objects or emotions. It emerges because listeners develop expectations grounded in stylistic experience, and composers continually confirm, postpone, frustrate, or redirect those expectations as the music unfolds.²⁸ A delayed cadence, an unexpected modulation, or an interrupted phrase acquires significance because anticipation has already become part of the listening process. Meaning develops through temporal experience before it develops through symbolic interpretation.

The historical evidence supporting Meyer's insight extends well beyond concert music. Eighteenth-century correspondence between singers and teachers frequently discusses expressive suspensions in language that is strikingly physical. Performers were advised to linger, to wait, to lean into prepared dissonances before allowing consonance to return. They seldom described these moments through harmonic terminology alone. Instead they spoke of breath, weight, patience, and release. Their concern was not merely structural correctness but the lived experience of musical time.

Recorded performance offers similar examples. Billie Holiday rarely abandoned the pulse of a song, yet she often approached it obliquely, delaying melodic entrances by the smallest imaginable interval before settling momentarily into rhythmic alignment. The effect is almost impossible to capture through notation alone. Listeners experience a continual negotiation between expectation and fulfillment, hearing the voice hover around the accompaniment rather than simply occupying it. The expressive power lies less in the notes themselves than in the timing with which they arrive.

Jazz improvisation provides countless comparable moments. Lester Young's melodic lines frequently seem to anticipate harmonic arrival while simultaneously resisting it, allowing phrases to drift across bar lines before quietly resolving into the underlying progression. The listener experiences continuity not because every event is predictable but because unpredictability itself unfolds within recognizable stylistic boundaries. Surprise becomes meaningful only against a background of expectation already established through listening.

Recent developments in cognitive science have returned to these musical observations from a different direction. Rather than treating perception as the passive reception of sensory information, predictive models propose that the brain continually generates expectations concerning future events and revises those expectations as new information arrives. Musical listening provides an unusually clear example of this process because every sound immediately becomes part of an unfolding temporal sequence. Listeners are never simply hearing the present moment. They are simultaneously remembering what has already occurred while anticipating what is likely to follow.²⁹

Research into rhythmic entrainment reinforces this perspective. Neuroimaging studies indicate that listening recruits neural systems associated not only with hearing but also with movement, attention, and motor planning. Even listeners who remain physically motionless frequently display patterns of neural activity associated with imagined action. Pulse invites movement before movement becomes visible. Phrase structure subtly influences breathing. Cadential arrival often corresponds with measurable physiological changes. Musical perception extends beyond the auditory system into broader patterns of embodied anticipation.

Yet these biological capacities do not produce identical musical experiences across cultures. The ability to predict is widespread; the particular predictions listeners make are acquired historically. A deceptive cadence surprises audiences familiar with European tonal practice because generations of listening have established expectations concerning harmonic continuation. The same progression may carry little expressive significance for listeners whose musical education developed within entirely different tonal systems. Likewise, the gradual unfolding of a North Indian *raga* communicates extraordinary nuance to experienced performers and listeners precisely because years of participation have cultivated expectations concerning melodic development, ornamentation, and temporal pacing that outsiders have not yet acquired.

The distinction deserves emphasis because it connects the biological and cultural dimensions of musical experience that are too often treated separately. Human beings appear broadly equipped to organize sound through memory, anticipation, vocal recognition, and bodily coordination. Those capacities make musical communication possible. They do not determine what listeners hear. The patterns that invite expectation emerge within particular histories of listening, shaped by education, ritual participation, performance practice, and collective memory. Biology provides the capacity for prediction. Culture teaches listeners what to predict.

This interaction between embodied cognition and historical experience helps explain why unfamiliar music can appear simultaneously intelligible and elusive. A first-time listener may recognize tension, release, momentum, or repose without understanding the conventions through

which those experiences are organized. Emotional orientation becomes accessible long before symbolic or cultural significance. One senses coherence while remaining uncertain about meaning. The distinction echoes the archival encounters examined earlier in this essay, where collectors repeatedly recognized the expressive force of unfamiliar performances while acknowledging that their deeper significance remained beyond immediate comprehension.

Expectation therefore occupies an intermediate position between physiology and culture. It is neither an entirely innate response nor an exclusively learned convention. It emerges through the continual interaction of shared human capacities with historically specific musical environments. That interaction shifts the discussion once again. If listeners acquire expectations through participation in particular communities of performance, then musical meaning cannot be understood apart from the social worlds in which listening itself is learned. The next section turns directly toward those worlds, examining how culture, ritual, and enculturation shape the meanings that music comes to carry.³⁰

Culture, Context, and Enculturation

One afternoon in 1906, Béla Bartók paused while collecting songs in rural Hungary because the woman singing before him suddenly refused to continue. The melody itself presented no difficulty. She had already performed several verses while Bartók carefully notated each phrase. Yet when he requested another song associated with a family funeral, she quietly explained that it should not be sung outside the circumstances for which it belonged. Bartók recorded the exchange almost in passing before moving to another repertory. The moment occupies only a few lines in his notebooks. Its implications are much larger. The interruption reminds us that songs exist within systems of obligation as much as within systems of sound.³¹

Comparable episodes appear throughout the history of ethnographic fieldwork. Collectors repeatedly encountered performances that could not simply be separated from their social environments. Certain chants were reserved for particular seasons. Some ceremonial repertories required specific participants, ritual preparations, or sacred locations. Elsewhere, musicians willingly demonstrated melodies while insisting that the performance lacked its proper significance outside the communal setting in which it ordinarily occurred. The archive preserves many successful recordings. It also preserves repeated reminders that recording and understanding are not identical achievements.

These observations eventually transformed ethnomusicology itself. Earlier comparative approaches often treated musical works as objects that could be classified through scales, intervals, rhythmic organization, or formal structure. Those questions remained valuable, but they gradually proved insufficient. Two communities might employ remarkably similar melodic materials while assigning them entirely different social functions. Identical intervals could accompany worship in one setting, agricultural labor in another, and political ceremony somewhere else. Description of sound alone could not account for those differences.

Alan Merriam's *The Anthropology of Music* represented one of the decisive moments in this intellectual shift. Merriam argued that music should be understood simultaneously as sound, behavior, and concept.³² A melody could not be adequately explained apart from the practices that produced it, the beliefs that surrounded it, or the institutions through which it acquired significance. Musical

analysis therefore required attention not only to notes and rhythms but also to ritual, kinship, economics, religion, education, and everyday social life. Music became inseparable from culture because culture continually shaped what music was permitted to become.

Christopher Small extended this insight by proposing that the noun *music* often obscures the fundamentally social character of musical life. His preferred term, *musicking*, directs attention toward activity rather than artifact. People perform, rehearse, dance, accompany, remember, teach, and listen together. These actions create relationships that cannot be reduced to the sounding object itself.³³ A symphony, a lullaby, a protest march, and a village festival differ profoundly in style, yet each organizes participants into particular forms of social interaction. The event carries meanings that no score can fully preserve.

Listening habits emerge within these social worlds gradually, often without conscious reflection. Children raised in communities where additive rhythms are common learn to anticipate asymmetrical metric patterns that may initially puzzle outsiders. Listeners immersed in Arabic *maqām* traditions become sensitive to melodic inflections that escape ears trained exclusively within equal temperament. Devotees of Hindustani classical music recognize the unfolding grammar of a late-evening *raga*, hearing subtle transformations that remain almost invisible to inexperienced listeners. None of these abilities appear fully formed at birth. They develop through years of participation in communities where such distinctions matter.

Psychologists describe this process as enculturation. Infants begin life with broad perceptual capacities that gradually become shaped by repeated exposure to the sounds surrounding them. Musical intervals, rhythmic groupings, phrase structures, and timbral expectations that recur within everyday experience slowly become familiar, while patterns encountered less frequently may seem unusual or difficult to organize perceptually.³⁴ Enculturation does not eliminate biological capacities; it directs them. Shared mechanisms of attention and prediction become increasingly specialized through experience.

The process resembles language acquisition in certain respects while diverging from it in others. Children inherit the capacity to learn spoken language, yet the language they ultimately speak depends upon the community in which they are raised. Musical learning follows a comparable path. Human beings appear broadly equipped to perceive organized sound, synchronize movement, recognize vocal expression, and remember melodic contour. The specific musical expectations through which those capacities become meaningful emerge historically. A child raised among Balinese gamelan ensembles develops anticipatory habits unlike those cultivated within Appalachian fiddle traditions, despite sharing the same underlying perceptual abilities.

Historical recordings make this transformation audible. Early phonograph collections occasionally include performances recorded decades apart by musicians from the same communities. Melodic frameworks often remain recognizable across generations, yet ornamentation, pacing, vocal production, and ensemble interaction change in response to migration, technology, political upheaval, religious reform, and commercial exchange. Continuity and change coexist. Communities preserve

traditions not by freezing them in time but by continually reinterpreting them within changing historical circumstances.

The emergence of national anthems during the nineteenth century offers another revealing example. Many drew upon preexisting folk melodies or military repertoires, yet their meanings changed dramatically once incorporated into new political identities. A tune previously associated with regional custom could become a symbol of national sovereignty. The notes themselves remained largely unchanged. Collective memory surrounding those notes changed profoundly. Meaning accumulated through historical experience rather than through musical structure alone.

Fieldwork conducted during the twentieth century repeatedly confirmed this principle. Anthropologists who returned to communities documented by earlier researchers often discovered that local musicians themselves interpreted older recordings differently from their predecessors. Songs once associated with agricultural cycles had become markers of cultural heritage after economic modernization altered village life. Ceremonial music displaced by urban migration acquired new significance as a symbol of historical continuity. Musical meaning continued evolving because communities themselves continued changing.

The implications extend well beyond ethnomusicology. If musical understanding develops through participation in historically situated communities, then claims concerning universal musical meaning require careful qualification. Human beings may indeed share capacities for entrainment, memory, vocal communication, and emotional responsiveness. Nothing in the ethnographic record suggests that these capacities produce identical systems of interpretation. The symbolic worlds through which music acquires significance are learned through participation, sustained by memory, and continually reshaped by history.

This distinction helps explain why unfamiliar music often becomes increasingly meaningful with repeated exposure. The listener does not simply accumulate information about scales or rhythms. Expectations gradually become recalibrated. Gestures that once seemed unpredictable begin to acquire coherence. Cadences become recognizable. Ornamentation ceases to sound ornamental and begins to function structurally. Listening itself changes. The transformation reflects neither biological maturation nor intellectual deduction alone but the gradual formation of new habits of perception within an expanding musical world.

By this point, one feature of the argument has become increasingly clear. Biology supplies remarkably stable capacities for hearing, anticipation, synchronization, and memory. Culture organizes those capacities into historically specific traditions of listening. Yet another question remains unresolved. Even after acknowledging the importance of enculturation, music still displays forms of organization that invite comparison with language. Compositions possess syntax, recurring patterns, hierarchical structures, and internally coherent systems of expectation. Whether these qualities amount to a genuine language, however, depends upon a final distinction between musical structure and linguistic semantics. That distinction forms the subject of the next section.³⁵

Music Theory Without Semantics

The proposition that music possesses grammar but lacks semantics has occupied philosophers, linguists, and music theorists for more than a century. The comparison is appealing because both language and music unfold through ordered sequences governed by recognizable rules. Sentences depend upon syntax. So do fugues, chorales, jazz improvisations, and *rāga* performances. Notes rarely occur as isolated events. They derive significance from what precedes them, what follows them, and the larger structures within which they participate. Yet the resemblance begins to weaken once one asks the simplest possible question: *What does this passage refer to?*

A spoken sentence ordinarily permits a reasonably precise answer. The statement "The river flooded the valley" identifies an event involving recognizable objects and actions. Even when metaphor complicates interpretation, language remains oriented toward reference. Its symbols point beyond themselves toward shared concepts that speakers have learned through convention. Communication depends upon the relative stability of those references.

Musical organization follows another path. A cadence may conclude a phrase, establish tonal stability, or prepare a subsequent section, but it does not refer to an object in the world in the way that a noun or verb does. A diminished seventh chord may heighten tension. A sustained pedal tone may generate expectancy. These events possess undeniable expressive force, yet their significance emerges from their place within an unfolding musical process rather than from fixed semantic content. They function relationally rather than referentially.

The history of Western music theory repeatedly acknowledges this distinction, even when it employs linguistic metaphors. Jean-Philippe Rameau described harmonic succession as a coherent system governed by underlying principles rather than arbitrary convention. Heinrich Schenker later argued that the immense diversity of tonal compositions could be understood as elaborations of deeper structural relationships. Twentieth-century theorists, from Allen Forte to Dmitri Tymoczko, likewise demonstrated that musical coherence often depends upon patterns of organization extending across entire works rather than isolated events. These analytical traditions reveal extraordinary sophistication in explaining how music is constructed. They say comparatively little about what music denotes outside itself.³⁶

Leonard Bernstein famously explored this issue in the Norton Lectures, proposing that music shares certain generative characteristics with language while lacking the semantic precision that permits ordinary speech to refer consistently to external reality. His comparison drew inspiration from Noam Chomsky's theories of transformational grammar, which distinguished the deep organizational principles underlying language from the infinite variety of individual utterances. Bernstein argued that musical structure exhibits comparable generative richness. The analogy proved enormously influential, yet Bernstein himself repeatedly acknowledged its limits. Music organizes expectation with extraordinary complexity without establishing a lexicon comparable to spoken words.³⁷

Linguists have generally reached similar conclusions from the opposite direction. Noam Chomsky's work on universal grammar concerns the biological capacities that make language acquisition possible, not the cultural meanings attached to particular words. Human beings may indeed possess cognitive mechanisms that support hierarchical organization, recursion, and symbolic

learning. Those mechanisms almost certainly contribute to musical cognition as well. They do not imply that music functions semantically in the same manner as language. Shared cognitive architecture cannot erase the profound differences between syntactic organization and symbolic reference.

Ethnomusicological evidence reinforces this conclusion. A performer trained in Ottoman *makam*, Balinese gamelan, or West African drumming often acquires highly elaborate systems governing permissible melodic motion, rhythmic transformation, ornamentation, and formal development. These systems can be extraordinarily rigorous. Students spend years internalizing them through performance and apprenticeship. Yet mastery of those structural principles does not automatically produce stable semantic translation. One learns how the music moves, not what every gesture universally means.

Jazz offers another illuminating example. Improvisers rely upon shared harmonic frameworks, rhythmic conventions, stylistic vocabularies, and collective expectations developed through years of listening and performance. Experienced musicians can anticipate substitutions, recognize motivic development, and respond instantaneously to harmonic change. Their communication during performance is unmistakably sophisticated. Even so, a blues phrase played in New Orleans, Tokyo, Johannesburg, or Copenhagen may carry very different historical associations for performers and audiences despite employing nearly identical musical materials. Syntax travels more readily than cultural memory.

The distinction between syntax and semantics becomes especially apparent when compositions migrate across historical contexts. Johann Sebastian Bach's chorales originally functioned within Lutheran worship, where congregations encountered them as acts of devotion shaped by theological practice. Today the same works appear regularly in conservatories, concert halls, and music theory classrooms. Their harmonic syntax remains largely unchanged. Their meanings have multiplied. They now serve simultaneously as sacred music, historical artifacts, pedagogical models, concert repertory, and objects of scholarly analysis. None of these interpretations invalidates the others. They simply demonstrate that musical significance evolves more rapidly than musical structure.

Roger Scruton argued that this flexibility reflects one of music's defining philosophical characteristics. Musical understanding depends upon intentional listening directed toward patterns unfolding in time rather than toward objects represented outside the music itself.³⁸ Listeners hear movement, arrival, tension, expansion, contraction, balance, interruption, and return. These descriptions borrow vocabulary from ordinary experience, yet they do not imply literal reference. One hears a melody ascend without imagining that it physically climbs. Musical motion belongs to perception rather than geography.

This distinction explains why analytical description often relies upon metaphor. Theorists speak of dominant harmonies "seeking" resolution, melodies "leaning" toward cadences, rhythms "driving" forward, or phrases "breathing." Such expressions remain useful because they describe temporal experience more effectively than purely technical terminology. They should not be mistaken for semantic translation. The metaphors illuminate how music is perceived, not what it objectively signifies.

The absence of fixed semantics has sometimes been interpreted as a limitation, as though music communicates less effectively than language because it cannot specify propositions with comparable precision. The historical record suggests the opposite. Music's semantic openness allows it to participate in remarkably diverse social and historical settings without exhausting its expressive possibilities. The same melody may accompany worship, protest, remembrance, celebration, or mourning across different communities and historical periods. Language ordinarily narrows meaning through precision. Music often expands meaning through indeterminacy.

This observation returns us to the central question of the essay. Human beings appear capable of recognizing coherence, tension, release, momentum, repose, and emotional orientation across considerable cultural distance. Those experiences depend upon broadly shared capacities for prediction, memory, embodiment, and auditory organization. They do not establish the existence of universally stable musical semantics. Music demonstrates that syntax can flourish independently of fixed symbolic reference.

The distinction is not merely philosophical. It points toward a different understanding of musical communication altogether. If music neither functions as language nor remains reducible to abstract structure, then its communicative power must arise elsewhere. It emerges through participation, shared attention, collective memory, embodied action, and the social practices that transform organized sound into meaningful human experience. The final section draws these threads together, proposing a conception of musical communication that preserves both the universality of human musical capacity and the irreducible particularity of musical cultures.³⁹

Music Beyond Language: Toward a Theory of Musical Communication

If the historical record surveyed throughout this essay demonstrates anything with consistency, it is that music communicates without satisfying the ordinary requirements of language. Listeners separated by geography, history, and culture repeatedly recognize expressive movement in unfamiliar performances. They perceive tension, repose, excitement, solemnity, tenderness, or urgency even when they cannot identify the traditions from which those sounds emerge. At the same time, the same archives repeatedly document misunderstanding. Ceremonial functions are mistaken for entertainment, devotional music is heard as melancholy, historical remembrance becomes indistinguishable from celebration, and symbolic meanings known intimately within one community disappear almost entirely outside it. Both observations are true. Music communicates. It does not communicate linguistically.

The temptation has often been to resolve this apparent contradiction by choosing one side over the other. Some writers have celebrated music as a language more profound than words because it seems capable of crossing cultural boundaries with remarkable ease. Others have rejected the comparison altogether, arguing that music lacks the semantic precision necessary for genuine communication. Neither position adequately reflects the historical evidence. Music resembles language in certain respects while differing fundamentally in others. It organizes expectation, exhibits syntax, develops recognizable patterns, and sustains highly structured forms of interaction. Yet its meanings emerge through participation rather than stable reference.

The distinction becomes clearer when one considers what listeners actually do while listening. Musical understanding seldom begins with translation. A listener does not ordinarily convert melodic phrases into verbal propositions before responding emotionally or physically. Instead, attention follows temporal movement. Memory connects one phrase to the next. Anticipation develops almost immediately, allowing expectations to form, dissolve, and reform as the performance continues. Breathing subtly adjusts to phrasing. Bodies synchronize with pulse. Listeners become participants in an unfolding temporal experience long before conceptual interpretation begins.

Christopher Small's concept of *musicking* acquires its full significance at precisely this point. Music exists not simply as an object to be decoded but as an activity through which relationships are continually created and renegotiated. Performers respond to audiences. Audiences respond to performers. Conductors, dancers, technicians, instrument builders, composers, teachers, and listeners all participate in a network of actions that collectively produce musical meaning.⁴⁰ The score alone cannot account for this process because much of what listeners experience arises through interaction rather than notation.

Historical examples repeatedly support this view. Congregational hymn singing creates solidarity not because every participant interprets the theology identically but because collective participation itself becomes meaningful. Protest songs often unite individuals holding diverse political convictions while differing in the details of their personal interpretations. Lullabies calm infants who possess no semantic understanding of the words being sung. Military bands coordinate movement among hundreds of individuals through pulse and repetition before verbal commands are fully processed. Across these remarkably different settings, music organizes shared experience more consistently than it conveys shared propositions.

This perspective also helps explain why musical traditions survive periods of profound historical change. Communities preserve songs not because every generation hears precisely the same meanings but because performance continually renews their significance. A folk melody collected in the nineteenth century may later become an emblem of cultural identity for descendants living under entirely different social conditions. Spirituals first sung within enslaved communities acquired new meanings during the Civil Rights Movement without abandoning their earlier historical associations. Gregorian chant has served medieval monastic devotion, modern liturgical renewal, scholarly reconstruction, and concert performance, each context reshaping the music without exhausting its expressive possibilities. Continuity emerges through repeated acts of participation rather than immutable semantic content.

The argument developed throughout this essay therefore requires a distinction between universality of capacity and universality of meaning. Every known human society organizes sound through rhythm, melody, vocalization, and patterned time. Infants display remarkable sensitivity to musical contour before acquiring speech. Human beings appear broadly equipped for entrainment, auditory prediction, vocal imitation, and collective synchronization. These capacities may reasonably be described as universal features of our species. The meanings that emerge from them cannot.

Ethnomusicology has demonstrated this point with increasing clarity over the past century. Musical systems are learned through participation in communities where listening itself becomes a cultural practice. Ritual obligations, historical memory, religious belief, political identity, aesthetics, and everyday social interaction gradually shape what listeners hear. Enculturation does not replace biology; it gives biology historical direction. The same perceptual capacities become organized into different traditions of expectation, different symbolic worlds, and different habits of musical attention.

Seen from this perspective, the familiar phrase *music is a universal language* appears simultaneously insightful and misleading. It remains insightful because it recognizes something genuinely remarkable about human musical life. Organized sound possesses an extraordinary capacity to attract attention, coordinate bodies, evoke memory, regulate emotion, and sustain social bonds across extraordinary differences of language and culture. Few human activities accomplish these tasks with comparable consistency. The phrase becomes misleading, however, when the metaphor of language is taken literally. Languages depend upon relatively stable systems of symbolic reference. Music depends upon historically situated communities of practice whose meanings remain open, adaptive, and continually renewed through performance.

Perhaps the persistence of the metaphor tells us less about music than about human beings themselves. We instinctively search for language whenever we encounter communication. Faced with experiences that move us deeply, we reach for the vocabulary already available to us. Music feels like language because it produces many of the effects we associate with successful communication: shared attention, emotional connection, coordinated action, and enduring memory. Yet its operation follows different principles. It persuades without propositions, remembers without archives, and creates communities whose bonds often exceed what words alone can sustain.

The archival encounters with which this essay began now appear in a different light. The collectors who recognized expressive force while admitting that deeper meanings escaped them were not documenting incomplete knowledge awaiting eventual correction. They had encountered one of music's defining characteristics. Musical understanding unfolds in layers. Initial recognition may arise from capacities widely shared across humanity, while richer forms of significance emerge only through prolonged participation in particular histories of listening. Their uncertainty was therefore not a weakness of observation but evidence that musical communication exceeds simple translation.

The question posed in the introduction can now receive a more careful answer. Music is not a universal language if language implies stable semantic reference comparable to speech. It is, however, a universal human capacity for organizing time, attention, memory, and social experience through sound. Those capacities become meaningful only within the diverse historical worlds that communities create for themselves. The paradox dissolves once language ceases to serve as the primary metaphor. Music does not need to imitate language in order to communicate. Its greatest strength lies precisely in the distinctive forms of human understanding that language alone cannot produce.⁴¹

Beyond the Universal Language

The claim that music is a universal language has endured for centuries because it captures a genuine feature of human experience while describing it with an imprecise metaphor. Across cultures, listeners

routinely encounter unfamiliar music that nevertheless feels communicative. They recognize movement without instruction, emotional direction without translation, and patterns of tension and release without formal training in the musical system before them. Such experiences are neither imaginary nor insignificant. They reveal capacities that appear deeply rooted in human perception and social life. Yet they do not establish that music functions as language in the linguistic sense.

The historical evidence assembled throughout this essay points toward a more nuanced conclusion. From the travel journals of early European observers to the field notebooks of Bartók and Hornbostel, from Merriam's anthropology to Small's theory of *musicking*, scholars repeatedly encountered a common pattern. Listeners often understood that music mattered long before they understood why it mattered. They recognized expressive force while remaining uncertain of ceremonial purpose, historical association, or communal significance. Those moments of uncertainty were not temporary obstacles awaiting additional translation. They revealed the extent to which musical meaning depends upon participation in particular worlds of listening.

Research in psychology and neuroscience has strengthened rather than diminished this conclusion. Human beings share extraordinary capacities for rhythmic entrainment, vocal recognition, auditory prediction, and embodied synchronization. Infants respond to melodic contour before acquiring language. Groups coordinate movement through pulse with remarkable ease. Listeners form expectations almost immediately as musical events unfold through time. These findings provide compelling evidence for broadly shared biological foundations of musical behavior. They do not demonstrate that musical meanings themselves are biologically predetermined. Expectations are cultivated within history. Symbols emerge through culture. Communities teach listeners not simply how to hear but how to understand.

The distinction between syntax and semantics further clarifies the issue. Music exhibits sophisticated forms of organization that rival the structural complexity of language. It develops hierarchies, recurring patterns, formal relationships, and highly elaborate systems of expectation. Yet these structures do not stabilize meaning in the way linguistic symbols ordinarily do. A cadence cannot be translated into a proposition with the consistency of a sentence. A melodic gesture does not refer to an object through shared convention in the manner of a word. Music organizes experience without fixing reference. Its expressive richness derives in part from that openness.

This realization invites a shift in vocabulary. Instead of asking whether music qualifies as a language, it may be more productive to ask what forms of communication become possible precisely because music is not constrained by linguistic semantics. Music excels at coordinating attention, regulating emotion, sustaining collective memory, and organizing shared experience through time. These capacities emerge wherever human beings gather to sing, dance, mourn, worship, celebrate, protest, teach, or remember together. Communication occurs not because identical meanings are transmitted from one mind to another but because participation itself creates a framework within which meaning can develop collectively.

Such a perspective also explains why musical traditions remain both remarkably durable and continually changing. Communities inherit repertoires from previous generations while reinterpreting

them in response to migration, technological innovation, political transformation, religious change, and shifting social identities. Meanings accumulate rather than remain fixed. Old songs acquire new significance without abandoning their histories entirely. Musical continuity therefore depends less upon semantic stability than upon the repeated renewal of shared practices. Every performance stands within a tradition while simultaneously reshaping it.

The familiar expression *universal language* need not be discarded altogether, but it benefits from careful reinterpretation. What is universal is not a vocabulary of musical symbols understood identically across humanity. Universal, insofar as current evidence allows us to claim it, are the human capacities that make musical life possible: the ability to organize sound into meaningful patterns, to anticipate temporal events, to synchronize with others, to remember through melody, and to invest organized sound with social significance. Everything beyond those capacities—the symbolic worlds, ritual associations, historical memories, aesthetic values, and interpretive traditions through which music becomes meaningful—is learned.

The question posed at the beginning of this essay therefore receives a qualified answer. Music is not a universal language if language denotes a stable symbolic system whose meanings remain relatively constant across speakers. Music is, however, a universal human practice through which communities continually create meaning, negotiate identity, preserve memory, and experience the world together. Its communicative power lies not in overcoming history and culture but in giving history and culture audible form.

Perhaps that is the more remarkable achievement. Language often succeeds by reducing ambiguity, establishing increasingly precise distinctions between ideas and objects. Music frequently succeeds by preserving ambiguity, allowing individuals with different histories, beliefs, and experiences to inhabit the same sonic event without requiring identical interpretations. Listeners need not understand exactly the same thing in order to participate meaningfully together. A melody can unite people without erasing the differences that make each community distinct.

The enduring attraction of the phrase *music is a universal language* may therefore reveal less about music than about the human desire to find common ground across difference. The metaphor persists because it points toward an authentic intuition: organized sound possesses an unusual capacity to create moments of shared attention among people who may share little else. Yet the deepest significance of those moments does not arise from escaping culture. It arises because every act of listening is already embedded within culture, memory, and history. Music speaks everywhere human beings are found, but it always speaks with an accent shaped by the communities that bring it to life.

Notes

1. Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. Roger Lustig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 8–15.
2. E. T. A. Hoffmann, "Beethoven's Instrumental Music," in *E. T. A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, ed. David Charlton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 234–51.
3. Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 1–23.
4. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 10–36.
5. *Ibid.*, 16–28.
6. Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, 19–42.
7. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 65–78.
8. *Ibid.*, 98–101.
9. Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*, 29–67.
10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §§23–43.
11. Steven Mithen, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 117–42.
12. Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology*, 37–59.
13. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1871), 572–78.
14. Sandra E. Trehub, "The Developmental Origins of Musicality," *Nature Neuroscience* 6, no. 7 (2003): 669–73.
15. Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 209–27.
16. Aniruddh D. Patel, *Music, Language, and the Brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 367–99.
17. Thomas Fritz et al., "Universal Recognition of Three Basic Emotions in Music," *Current Biology* 19, no. 7 (2009): 573–76.
18. Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 8–18.
19. Patel, *Music, Language, and the Brain*, 410–34.
20. Béla Bartók, *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 289–312.
21. Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*, 11–36.
22. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 65–78.
23. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958), 2:228–29.

24. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 206–43.
25. Small, *Musicking*, 8–18.
26. Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 24–48.
27. François Lesure, *Claude Debussy: Biographie critique* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), 289–94.
28. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, 24–48.
29. Karl Friston, "The Free-Energy Principle: A Unified Brain Theory?" *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 11, no. 2 (2010): 127–38.
30. Patel, *Music, Language, and the Brain*, 367–99.
31. Bartók, *Béla Bartók Essays*, 289–312.
32. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*, 32–35.
33. Small, *Musicking*, 8–18.
34. Trehub, "The Developmental Origins of Musicality," 669–73.
35. Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, 59–92.
36. Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Treatise on Harmony*, trans. Philip Gossett (New York: Dover Publications, 1971); Heinrich Schenker, *Free Composition*, trans. Ernst Oster (New York: Longman, 1979); Dmitri Tymoczko, *A Geometry of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
37. Leonard Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question: Six Talks at Harvard* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976); Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965).
38. Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 78–114.
39. Nicholas Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 73–101.
40. Christopher Small, *Musicking*, 183–211.
41. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*, 135–62.

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