ISSA Proceedings 2002 – Are Musical Arguments Possible ?

1. Introduction

Recent work on argumentation suggests that images, gestures and other non-verbal elements may play a crucial role in argument (see Birdsell & Groarke, 1996; Blair, 1996; Gilbert, 1997; Groarke, 1998; and Lunsford, Ruszkiewicz, & Walters, 2001). In the wake of such research, I want to ask how argumentation theory should understand the role that music and other non-verbal sounds (sounds other than words and sentences) play in argumentative exchange **[i]**.

I shall understand questions about music and arguments as questions about arguments as they are understood in the theory of argument. One could talk of musical arguments in a more figurative sense, to describe formal relationships between or within particular pieces of music. A composition might, for example, be said to contain two musical themes that 'argue' with one another, if they compete for attention in a way that culminates in some resolution of their differences. There is much that might be made of musical arguments in this sense, but I must leave them for elsewhere.

In the present paper, I understand musical arguments as arguments in the traditional sense associated with logic B as attempts to convince someone of a conclusion by providing them with reasons for accepting it. My aim is a tentative account of the role that music and other non-verbal sounds play in arguments of this sort. In keeping with the emphasis that contemporary argumentation theory places on real argument, I will discuss musical arguments in the context of examples of actual argument, not by pursuing a philosophical discussion of the meaning and analysis of music (a discussion which would require an elaborate account of formalist and expressionist theories of music and aesthetics).

In sketching an account of musical argument, I am not claiming that *all* or *most* music argues. We can imagine a situation in which the playing of a Rachmaninoff piano concerto is properly understood as argument – when a concerto is played as background to an advertisement or a political commentary, or as proof of the composer's ability to create a certain kind of music. This said, musical

performances of this sort are normally intended for entertainment or aesthetic appreciation, and cannot be classified as attempts to establish some conclusion. In view of this, the argumentative use of music is properly described as one of its secondary or derivative functions.

It would be a mistake to conclude that a comprehensive theory of argument does not need an account of music. The more commonly recognized building blocks of argument – sentences and images – are also elements that have many non-argumentative uses, but this does not diminish their argumentative significance. In discussing the world of actual argument, it is a mistake to generalize about the significance of words, images or music, for their importance varies depending on the arguments in question. If we define a 'musical argument' as any argument that has a meaning that depends on the music, then it is not difficult to find cases of musical argument. In some of these cases, words are more important than music, but in others music plays a more significant role in conveying the meaning of the argument (sometimes because there are no words present). In most cases, musical arguments are concatenations of images, music and words that draw meaning from all these elements, as well as the ways in which they work together.

2. Music That Accompanies Argument

A plausible account of music and argument requires a distinction between music that merely accompanies an argument and music that is a more integral part of an argument's content. Sometimes music accompanies argument almost by accident, as when one expounds an argument while a radio, an orchestra or a CD plays in the background. In other cases, the music that accompanies an argument functions as a musical "flag" that introduces, announces or comments on the argument in question. Imagine a film that shows a newly elected prime minister driving down the road to deliver a speech to an assembled audience (a speech which will present an argument). If music from the final movement of Mahler's *Symphony No. 1* plays in background, it declares that "This is a great moment" and heralds the significance of what follows.

The film maker may comment more negatively on the argument in question by playing Chopin's *Funeral March*, in this way communicating to the viewer that what follow is troubling in some way (in documentary film, footage of Hitler's rise to power is often accompanied by such strains). A Charlie Chaplin piano piece may, in contrast, convey sweetness and harmlessness, while a slapstick composition from *The Keystone Cops* communicates the message that the prime

minister is comical, and not to be taken seriously.

Musical flags exploit the way a piece of music can establish a tone, announce an occasion or comment on a situation. Music's ability to do so can be used to great effect, and may, by attracting our attention, determine which arguments we do and do not entertain. It takes advantage of our inclination to something that follows or accompanies a piece of music that captivates us. This makes musical flags important devices in argumentative exchange, but they are not themselves arguments, and contribute to argumentative discourse in, at best, an indirect way, directing us to an argument that follows. To show that music can play a more integral role in argument we need examples that demonstrate that music can be a much more direct means of offering reasons for some conclusion.

3. Music, Condoms and Advertising

One could take examples of musical argument from the world of music theory, where debates about musical expression or composition may incorporate music itself. One might also look to films, where soundtracks play a crucial role in conveying the meaning of a scene or narrative. In the present context I will, however, focus on examples from the world of radio and television advertising, for this is the contemporary context in which music meets argumentation in the most pervasive way.

I take my first example from a series of radio advertisements for Durex Sheik Condoms. The basis of the ad campaign is an attempt to compare non-verbal sounds in a way that illustrates the difference sex with ordinary condoms and sex with durex sheet condoms. The comparisons re of interest in the present context because the ads do not make the comparisons verbally, but by juxtaposing music – and sometimes other sounds – in a way that communicates the difference. According to one ad:

Having sex with ordinary condoms is like this: [one then hears a polka band playing a rather pedestrian polka].

But having sex with Durex Sheik condoms is like this: [one then hears rock music with a rock beat].

It is easy to understand this advertisement as an argument. For it purports to give us a reason to buy Durex Sheik condoms (rather than ordinary condoms) – because sex with Durex Sheik condoms is more enlivening than sex with ordinary condoms, as rock music is more enlivening than a pedestrian polka. We can

capture the formal features of the music by saying that the ad contains a subargument for the premise of this argument, for these formal features suggest that sex with ordinary condoms is boringly predictable, hum drum and ordinary, while sex with Durex Sheik condoms is wild and passionate.

In the present context, it matters only that the advertisement can be recognized as an argument, and thus demonstrates one way in which music can convey a meaning that is an integral part of an argument. In this case the argument is presented in verbal and musical terms. In other variants of the ad, non-verbal sounds function in the same way. One of the ads thus claims that:

Having sex with ordinary condoms is like this: [one then hears the sound of an automobile engine which won't turn over].
Having sex with Durex Sheik condoms is like this: [one then hears the sound of an automobile engine that roars into life and the squeals of a car that races down the road].

Here the suggestion is that one should use Durex Sheik condoms because they promote better sex. In this case, the formal qualities of the music suggest that sex will be wilder and more exciting, and that performance will improve, as the performance of the second car is an obvious improvement over the performance of the first.

Once one recognizes these examples as arguments, they can be assessed and analysed in the same way as most verbal arguments B by asking whether the conclusion follows from the reasons (premises) presented, whether these reasons are plausible, and so on. A detailed assessment is not important here, and it suffices to say that the arguments fail to provide any convincing evidence for their unsupported premises, and that they fail to consider a variety of considerations that should probably inform a decision about the condoms one should buy (price, reliability, and so on).

4. Music, Freedom and Equivocation
Some of the dynamics of musical arguments on television are well illustrated in a Cotton Incorporated advertisement for cotton clothing. No words appear in the ad until the final frames, when the word COTTON grows at the bottom left hand side of the screen, followed by the phrase WORK IT. Visually, this inconspicuous display of the cotton logo is prefaced by a series of scenes which feature office

workers in their work environment.
Those workers clad in what must be cotton suits dance to techno music. The scene is odd and eye catching, primarily because their dance movements are contorted and incongruous and odd. These movements are formally in keeping with the music, which is full of odd sounds that include the bell of an elevator and the whirring of office machines in the background. The message conveyed by the music and the dancing might be summarized as the claim that one should wear cotton to work (and in this sense *work it* because it allows one the freedom to move – a freedom that is necessary if one is to move in these contorted ways (something that requires that one *work* one's cotton garments in this way).
There is, however, a deeper message that is buried in the visuals and the music. For the scenes of office workers dancing in wild and bizarre ways inside of offices and an office environment implies a much broader kind of freedom than the freedom to comfortably move inside one's clothes. Thus it implies the freedom to behave as one likes at work, regardless of the expectations that characterize other workers, and the social conventions that govern a conservative environment. The claim that cotton garments give one freedom in this way is confirmed in a number of scenes where office workers act in ways that are obviously unacceptable in an office – by dancing on desks, by gyrating wildly to strange music, and so on. In one particularly prominent case, an office girl pirouettes around a photocopy room as she pulls handfuls of shredded paper from a trash basket and casts them about the room.
In summarizing the argument in this advertisement, one may wish to capture the variety of cotton outfits it displays, for this is one prominent feature of the visuals. In view of this, one might summarize the argument as: "You should wear cotton garments because cotton (which is available in a great variety of outfits) makes you free."

One aspect of the appeal to freedom here is the claim that cotton clothes make you free to move – in the sense that one can move comfortably, even when one assumes an awkward pose, if one is wearing cotton. But this suggestion is coupled with the deeper suggestion that cotton will make you free in the sense that you will be able to behave in a free spirited way at work. So understood, the ad is a musical argument which is guilty of the fallacy of equivocation, for it equivocates on two different meanings of "freedom" – i.e. "freedom to move comfortably" and "freedom to behave as you want at work." In assessing and criticizing the argument, we need to treat the ad the way we treat any case of equivocation – by

disentangling these two senses of freedom and evaluating the argument accordingly (which means, of course, that we must reject the suggestion that cotton clothes will make you free in the broad sense the advertisement has suggested).

Once we recognize the argumentative content of musical arguments of this sort, they can be assessed in terms that are already well established within argumentation theory. In short, a musical argument may be fallacious, may have implausible premises, may have a conclusion that does not clearly follow from its premises, may rely on analogy or an appeal to authority, and so on. In view of this, recognizing musical arguments allows us to extend the critical eye of argumentation theory to a new realm that it has traditionally ignored. It is particularly significant that this can be done in a way that employs the standard theoretical understanding of good argument that characterizes contemporary argumentation theory.

5. Zoom, Zoom B Pragma Dialectics

This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the argumentative significance of music and other non-verbal sounds, but I would like to note that argumentation theory provides a ready explanation of this significance within pragma dialectics. For two notable features of its account of argument are the emphasis it places on the principles of communication that govern argumentative speech acts, and its explicit recognition of the role that implicit or "indirect" speech acts within argumentation. According to pragma-dialectics, an argument is an attempt to defend a standpoint (Eemeren &Grootendorst, 1992, 14), and this attempt need not be explicit. Indeed, "in practice, the explicit performance of a speech act is the exception rather than the rule" (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, 44). Sometimes indirect speech acts are implicit premises or conclusions but Groarke, 2002 has shown how the pragma-dialectical account of such acts can be used to understand the content of visual arguments that are conveyed through images instead of words. I believe that they can similarly be used in understanding and assessing musical arguments.

Two features of the pragma-dialectical account of indirect speech acts merit mention here. One is the suggestion that the attempt to understand argument images that argue as implicit and indirect speech acts is best furthered by a "maximally argumentative interpretation" which ensures that their argumentative function is fully recognized. There is, pragma dialectics points out, no way to

know the exact intentions of any individual who expresses a standpoint or argues. In view of this, we should be wary of making this our goal when we interpret speech acts. Instead, we can apply pragma-dialectical "principles of communication" which will help us distill the meaning of indirect speech acts. These principles of communication can be summarized as the stipulations that speech acts must not be:
1. incomprehensible,
2. insincere,
3. superfluous,
4. futile, or
5. inappropriately connected to other speech acts (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, 49-55).

In his account of visual communication, Groarke, 2002 reduces these principles to three principles which suggest the following general principles of musical communication:
1.The performance of music in argument is a communicative act that is in principle understandable.
2. Music in argument should be interpreted in a way that makes sense of the major (musical) elements it contains (i.e. its interpretation must make "internal" sense).
3. Music in argument should be interpreted in a way that makes sense from an "external" point of view (i.e. that fits the social, critical, political and aesthetic discourse in which the image is located).

The principles can also be applied, not only to music, but also to the interpretation of other non-verbal sounds that play a role in argument.

While I cannot discuss the application of these principles in great detail, their use can be illustrated in the context of particular examples. The cotton ads I have already discussed illustrate one way in which the internal structure of music may fit with an external context, for they illustrate the point that music is frequently associated with movement (in that case in order to promote the message that cotton promotes the freedom of movement). Music's ties to movement are a natural reflection of the temporality that is one of music's characteristic features – musical composition being a form of art that has a distinct beginning, proceeds through a series of notes and chords, and comes to an end. To this extent, it might be said that music itself moves.

The motion that is an essential part of music may help explain why music moves us emotionally. In a less elevated context, it may explain why music plays such a crucial role in automobile advertisements, for they typically emphasize the motion and the mobility of the vehicle in question (the “mobile” in “automobile”).

One series of advertisements that illustrates this connection is the “zoom, zoom” series which Mazda has created, first to promote the Miata sports car, and then to promote a range of other vehicles in a way that capitalizes on the success of this campaign. The ads are not verbal arguments made up of easily recognizable and decipherable propositions, but they are a clear attempt to make a case for the standpoint that we should purchase a Mazda motor car. The proposed principles of musical communication tell us that we must assume that the phrase “zoom zoom” and the music in the advertisement are not incomprehensible, but contribute in some way to the meaning of the argument. In determining the specific meaning, we need to find an interpretation of these sounds that makes sense from an internal and an external point of view – i.e. that makes sense of the formal qualities of the sound, and the context in which they appear.

This is not difficult to do. Mazda itself has explained its “zoom zoom” theme well, describing it as an attempt to capture the joy and exhilaration of motion. “Zoom zoom “is a phrase children use when they imitate the sound of a car engine. It expresses a fascination with motion experienced by a child playing with a toy car or riding a bike. The Mazda brand conveys this feeling and emotion in its products and Zoom-Zoom captures this feeling perfectly. Mazda’s new products deliver exciting and exhilarating driving experiences for customers who still have that childlike fascination with motion.” (Mazda, 2002)

The formal qualities of the music underscore this message, for the rhythm and the notes convey speed, agility and fun. Combined with visuals that convey a similar message, the advertisements can be seen as a non-verbal way to propound the argument that “You should purchase a Mazda because it will allow you to experience the joy of motion.” Different Mazda ads develop this theme in particular ways. The advertisement for the Mazda Tribute SUV forwards this basic theme in the guise of visuals designed to demonstrate that the tribute combines the agility and speed and handling of a sports car (the Mazda Miata) and the off road performance of an SUV. In all the advertisements, music and the phrase “zoom zoom” play a key role in the making of the argument.

6. Text and Subtext

I have used this paper to argue that music and other non-verbal sounds can play a significant role in argument, and to sketch an account of argumentative communication that recognizes this role. In doing so, I have tried to broaden the horizons of argumentation theory, allowing it to deal with a broader range of arguments than those encompassed by the traditional verbal paradigm.

Willard (1989, 155) has written that "If we restrict argument to propositions, then most mass messages are not arguments. Television commercials join hands with the whole array of aesthetic images – music, electronic effects, drama, comedy, layout design, and even dance – to create persuasive effects." The proposed account takes a different approach than Willard, for though it grants his point that the mass media tends to combine a "whole array of aesthetic images" it also suggests that these concatenations of music, visuals and texts can often be understood as argument in a straightforward way that uses the principles of communication to distil the implicitly propositional content they contain.

Looked at from this point of view, we might distinguish the literal text that appears in arguments and a deeper subtext that incorporates all the elements of the argument. The latter may include indirect speech acts like implicit premises and conclusions, as well as visual images, music and other kinds of sounds. Taken one step further, the subtext includes claims and narratives with metaphorical meanings, morals or symbolic significance.

An account of argument which hopes to capture the richness of ordinary argument must account for the richness of this subtext and all the meaning and significance it contains (in a particular context, even intonation and tone of voice may play a crucial role in conveying the argumentative message). There are good reasons for thinking that an account of argumentative communication along pragma-dialectical lines may allow argumentation theory to fully recognize this subtext. The present account of musical argument is intended as one step in this direction.

NOTES

[i] My curiosity about music's role in argument is rooted in a course on argumentation in which I had the good fortune to discuss the relationship between music and argument with a music student at Laurier – Sharon Dewey. I am indebted to her for our discussions.

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