Language Games and Musical Understanding*

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0. *Introduction*

As has often been observed, numerous language games introduced by Wittgenstein make reference to music and, more specifically, to musical understanding. The analogy between music and language takes shape against this backdrop. In this case, as in other cases – and for reasons that can be attributed to his way of conceiving the philosophical practice – the examples are presented as a springboard for reflection: they confront us with errors and conceptual traps, and they incite us to find a way out. But in what way did Wittgenstein make use of language games in order to interrogate certain simple musical morphologies? To what measure is this a fruitful exercise when we wish to clarify our ways of understanding music? How is the nexus between musical understanding and language games ultimately defined? In this study, we will attempt to draw an answer to these questions by closely examining his text as well as by using certain examples.

1. *Functions of Language Games*

The aspects of the notion of «language games» emphasized by Wittgenstein vary in relation to the evolution of his reflections. We can consider it as concept intended to suggest primitive forms of language that are useful for clarifying the more complex stratifications of daily speech, but also, according to the *Brown book*, as an instrument that is more generally intended to explore the processes of signification. Let us recall some

principal objectives, using the clear interpretation of Joachim Schulte (1992) as our basis. The following are the key concepts:

- to demonstrate the necessity, in order to understand the meaning of an utterance, of considering the context in which it is formulated;

- to point out the importance of following certain rules, with the same objective;

- to shed light on the fact that the former two points are learned through a process of learning;

- to demonstrate that, ultimately, understanding language is inseparable from understanding the activities that surround it.

All of these points are relevant, but the last two in particular substantiate the originality of the point of view maintained in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Language games lead us to recognize the illusoriness of the attempt to understand the meaning of an expression without entering into the actual practice in which it is introduced. Language functions as other human activities that are founded on rules, and the example of the game is effective because it demonstrates that in order to obtain a result it is not enough to simply start from theoretical knowledge: a guided and progressively perfected practice is needed. We learn to play by imitating, repeating, consolidating, correcting and adapting our behavior to new situations. This is what happens when we play a musical instrument: as useful as the study of theory can be, we cannot prescind from a specific *training* founded on the assimilation of muscular, nervous and perceptive competencies. Surely it is no coincidence that in many languages (such as in English, German and French) the Italian "suonare" and "giocare" are two meanings of the same word: the playing of an instrument is a good example of an activity that is based on rules.

The fact that this holds true for playing an instrument might seem obvious; yet it is not as apparent when we try to understand the meaning of a sentence, and it is perhaps this lesser patency that characterizes the originality of Wittgenstein's point of view. The term «language game» must imply that «the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life» (Wittgenstein [1953]: §23 (Wittgenstein [2009]: 15)). This intention also highlights the main objective of a good portion of language games that deal with music: clarifying the notions of meaning and of understanding of a *linguistic utterance* (even if, as Schulte observed, we are able to distinguish an underlying instrument that is related more generally to the task Wittgenstein attributed to philosophy). We can say that the direction of these observations moves from music to language. Is it possible to invert the direction of this vector and to affirm that they also clarify musical understanding? In our judgment, and in confirmation of what has been pointed out by other schol-

ars (see, for example, the keen observations of Ridley [2004]: 22-41, and Scruton [2009]: 33-42), it is. Nevertheless, it is a matter of understanding how to carry out this inversion without running risks, that is, without finding ourselves trapped in new conceptual cages.

2. *The Grammar of Musical Discourse*

Analyzing language games allows us, first and foremost, to clarify the ways we *speak of music* – that is, the way we *conceive* of it, as I believe can be said without having to necessarily postulate an identity between thought and language. Many of Wittgenstein's observations invite us to subject musical terminology to a careful examination. The meanings of terms such as "melody", "expression", "tempo" and "perception" vary according to the context: being aware of the game they are part of is useful in order for us not to commit errors of judgment. Accordingly, attempting to describe a melody by Schubert (Wittgenstein [1998]: 54) can lead us to reflect on the fact that this term does not have the exact same function when applied to another composer. Meaning varies additionally, we might add by following the suggestions in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, when it is used to describe or to assess (as with certain adjectives that indicate dynamic and expressive aspects: "graceful", for instance). In the first game we could say that a melody has eight bars and in the second that a composer lacks melody – we might think of Nietzsche's famous criticism of Wagner's *Leitmotif*. And still: the game of technical description does not (always) coincide with the game of aesthetic or expressive description (that which in the latter is a melody, could simply be a motive, a phrase, a period or a theme in the former).

Another example: when we say that we perceive the "solemnity" of a melody, we must be aware that what we perceive cannot be communicated by simply reproducing what we heard (Wittgenstein [1953]: §233 (Wittgenstein [2009]: 221)). Little is needed to show that, when dealing with musical content, the terms relative to perception must be understood as being in reference to a perception that is not purely sensory (when expounding the analyses of the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations*, scholars today usually define it as «aspectual perception»). Already in a passage from the *Big Typescript* (Wittgenstein [2005]: 321) we are invited to compare two phrases such as «I hear the music clearly» and «I hear the ringing in my ears clearly», leading us to reflect on the use of physical terms applied to sense data.

Yet another example: when explaining what it means to perform a song "with expression" we can surmise that this falls under things that are done («first you perform the song, then you add expression to it»). But if this way of thinking were accurate, according to Wittgenstein, then we should be able to reproduce alone not only the melody, but also its expression (Wittgenstein [1953]: §332 (Wittgenstein [2009]: 114)). If this appears odd, it is because musical expression would not be understood as an element that is added to others, but rather as the result of a certain arrangement of the elements under observation. This also illustrates the difficulties of the theory that expression in music coincides with the sensations that it transmits to us. An intransitive use of the term arises, instead, in reference to the manner of performing: «I can talk about the expression with which someone plays a passage without thinking that a different passage might have the same expression. Here this concept serves only as a means for comparing different performances of this passage» (Wittgenstein [1982]: §382, 52).

3. *Musical Understanding and Verbal Understanding*

The objective of the strategy that we have illustrated consists of clarifying the ways in which we speak of music or our experience of it. Let us now move forward and try to determine if the language games introduced by Wittgenstein can help us elucidate our ways of perceiving it and of understanding it. As we have already mentioned, a significant number of annotations concentrate on the confrontation between verbal understanding and musical understanding. How should we take this comparison? First off, we must remember that Wittgenstein took heed primarily to the parallel between the understanding of a *musical theme* (in view of his preferences and his examples, we might think of the melodic profile of a thematic group from a composition of *Wienerklassik*) and the understanding of a *sentence*. Already in the *Tractatus* it is acknowledged that, just as a musical theme, a proposition is «articulate» (Wittgenstein [1922]: §3.141 (Wittgenstein [2001]: 14)). But a musical object can coincide with different units or aspects. For example, a passage from the *Philosophical Investigations* (inspired by a reflection in the *Big Typescript* (Wittgenstein [2005]: 322)), invites us to ask ourselves «What happens when we learn to *feel* the ending of a church mode as an ending?» (Wittgenstein [1953]: §535 (Wittgenstein [2009]: 152)). In the *Brown Book*, Wittgenstein invites us to reflect on a simple piece of advice given to a performer: «Tell yourself that it's a waltz, and you will play it correctly» (Wittgenstein [1958]: 167). In his *Remarks on Philosophi-*

cal Psychology (Wittgenstein [1980] (Wittgenstein [1980]: §247)), he proposes to suggest the meaning of an «answer» of a musical passage by a gesture.

These invitations bring to light various aspects of a single problem: explaining the experience of signification. The most important is probably that which assumes the form of «hearing as» – parallel and complementary to the «playing as»: a game that actually has multiple functions and that is found, more or less explicitly, in the majority of instances in which Wittgenstein spoke of music and, in particular, of the way in which we are able to comprehend the design, the syntax or the expression of musical entities of various natures: from a phrase (or a theme), to an introduction, to a conclusion, to a waltz. In sum, its functions can be summarized as follows:

- it highlights the opportunity to conceive the perception / understanding of music in terms of aspectual perception;

- it solicits and makes easier the perception of aspects, inducing in this way a musical understanding;

- it allows us to check the musical understanding of which a listener (another person) is capable;

- it helps us to test musical ambiguities.

We will not dwell on these points, which have already been illustrated elsewhere (Arbo [2012]). In order to better grasp the meaning of these questions, we will instead turn to a broader section of the above-quoted passage from the *Brown Book*. Based on an ordinary situation of apparition of an aspect (particularly the case in which we retain to have captured the expression of a face), Wittgenstein invites us to try to understand what the «saying» of a melody consists of:

The same strange illusion which we are under when we seem to seek the something which a face expresses whereas, in reality, we are giving ourselves up to the features before us – that same illusion possesses us even more strongly if repeating a tune to ourselves and letting it make its full impression on us, we say "This tune says *something*", and it is as though I had to find *what* it says. And yet I know that it doesn't say anything such that I might express in words or pictures what it says. And if, recognizing this, I resign myself to saying "It just expresses a musical thought", this would mean no more than saying "It expresses itself". – "But surely when you play it you don't play it *anyhow*, you play it in this particular way, making a crescendo here, a diminuendo there, a caesura in this place, etc." – Precisely, and that's all I can say about it, or may be all that I can say about it. For in certain cases I can justify, explain the particular exp.ression with which I play it by a comparison, as when I say "At this point of the theme, there is, as it were, a colon", or "This is, as it were, the answer to what came before", etc. (This, by the way, shows what a 'justification' and an 'explanation' in aesthetics is like.) It is true I may hear a tune played and say "This is not how it ought to be

played, it goes like this"; and I whistle it in a different tempo. Here one is inclined to ask "What is it like to know the tempo in which a piece of music should be played?" And the idea suggests itself that there *must* be a paradigm somewhere in our mind, and that we have adjusted the tempo to conform to that paradigm. But in most cases if someone asked me "How do you think this melody should be played?", I will, as an answer, just whistle it in a particular way, and nothing will have been present to my mind but the tune *actually whistled* (not an image of *that*). (Wittgenstein [1958]: §17, 166).

Various commentators have focused on this passage in an attempt to understand if Wittgenstein's position can be considered to be formalist or expressionist. Let us observe the direction of the argument, which seems to lead our attention towards the fact that in order to understand music it is necessary to begin with an *activity*, or, more precisely, by *improving a performative act*. Grasping the meaning of a melody ultimately amounts to being able to convey it in a certain way (a crescendo here, a diminuendo there, etc.). The way we play it, and even the way we whistle it (we should note Wittgenstein's talent in this respect) suggests that we have been able to comprehend a certain morphology — but also a certain rhythm («Tell yourself that it's a waltz»). In other texts, the object coincides with an aspect («You have to hear these bars as an introduction» (Wittgenstein [1982]: §632, 81)) or, as in the *Tractatus*, an articulation; that is to say, a syntactic connection. The crux of the question seems to reside in this point: understanding, in music, amounts to grasping certain aspects.

Let us now focus on the fact that this is all demonstrated with reference to a unit of small or medium proportions: it is in these proportions that we are able to comprehend affinity through language. More precisely, what are the similarities that can be identified at this level? If we review the examples proposed by Wittgenstein, we can summarize them as follows:

- if applied to a theme (be it verbal or musical) the concept of understanding oscillates between the ability to paraphrase and the ability to seize the unicity or the non-paraphrasable essence of the object (in conformity with the more general idea of aesthetic understanding);

- a theme/sentence can be heard and comprehended, or heard without being comprehended;

- the understanding of a theme/sentence cannot be sufficiently realized without a clear awareness of the context in which it is placed;

- though different levels of understanding exist, it is manifested not as a process (a progressive or cumulative formation), but rather in the form of a "click" (the sudden apparition of an aspect).

Let us attempt to understand what consequences we can draw from these analogies. We might begin by noting that if, as Wittgenstein observes in the conclusion of the cited passage, it is true that both in the case of a musical theme and in that of a sentence it can be said that «the content of the sentence is *in* the sentence» (Wittgenstein [1958]: 167), rather than in the identification of elements or references denoted by it, in reality the idea of meaning corresponds, in both cases, to different uses. Understanding a proposition, in some language games, simply amounts to extracting information: which does not make sense, or at least is not what we usually do, in the case of a melody. In pointing out this thought, we might observe, in accordance with an observation revisited in the *Philosophical Investigations*, that at times we speak of understanding a sentence precisely «in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.)» (Wittgenstein [1953]: §531 (Wittgenstein [2009]: 152)). Nevertheless, in these cases too, which are particularly highlighted by poetic expression, it does not seem possible to prescind from the extraction of information, as elementary as it may be: in order to understand a poem in English, surely I must be able to comprehend how each word is irreplaceable; but I must also be able to understand English, in the sense that I must be able to know how to replace it with other words (Wittgenstein [1967]: §17, 6). At this point we might insist on competencies, as Wittgenstein does in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*; but we should also emphasize that the concept of aesthetic understanding cannot annul all forms of paraphrasing.

As demonstrated in a persuasive manner by Aaron Ridley ([2004]: 35-39), and as emphasized in many semiotic analyses (particularly those founded on the identification of specific *topoi* in the classical-romantic or contemporary style), this certainly holds true for music as well: not all of the content of a *Sonata* by Mozart or of a *Concert* by Vivaldi or Bach is unique and irreplaceable, but it can be considered, at least in part, as generic and replaceable (we might think of a harmonic sequence of transition, a progression, a final cadence or other more or less "exportable" or "interchangeable" elements). It would still be worth our while to point out that in our most common ways of "testing" musical understanding, we do not turn to the way in which a musician or a listener proves that they know how to "paraphrase" (musically) what they heard; rather, we try to scrutinize their way of conveying what they heard, by following the most elementary strategies suggested by Wittgenstein: we listen to determine if the phrasing is adequate (in the case of the musician), or if the theme is efficiently "mimed" by a gesture, or correctly whistled, or even conveyed by a facial expression, or suggested by the meaning of

a phrase that could count, in certain cases, as a sort of "verbal counterpoint". Ultimately, it is essential that the ability to produce an analogous mode of expression is proven.

4. *Language Games and Music Games*

It is in this sense that musical understanding works as other genres of aesthetic understanding: it does not involve a «know that» but rather a «know how». It is not founded on the transmission of content but rather it mobilizes our abilities to grasp expressions and aspects. This is why, in testing the musical comprehension of a listener, we do not tend to make reference to contents of meaning that are somehow separable from what he heard ("did you understand what the hero did by listening to this symphony?"). We are, instead, interested in knowing if he understood the specific mode of presentation and articulation of what he heard ("what would you compare the evolution of this minuet to?"). After reading Wittgenstein we can be easily convinced of the fact that even the comprehension of language cannot be reduced to the first hypothesis; but the fact remains that it also involves this possibility.
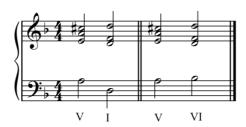
The second difference consists in the fact that, as can be inferred from many other reflections made by Wittgenstein, musical understanding depends on a perception that is enriched with cognitive elements, but nevertheless never entirely separable from *sensory components*. Here, too, the comparison with language can only be used up to a certain point. While the example of the poem appears relevant (Wittgenstein [1953]: §531 (Wittgenstein [2009]: 152)), there are still differences: reading a poem without hearing or imagining the sounds to which the printed letters correspond would surely be of little gratification and reductive, yet it is still possible; reading a musical score without imagining the sounds to which the notes correspond simply amounts to not reading it (admittedly, the theories regarding this point are conflicting; but we could be led, along with Dahlhaus [1986], to think that even the silent reading of a musical score corresponds to a sort of execution – at least if it has the ambition to present itself as a comprehension of the work: if, for example, we are not able to imagine how a certain harmonic progression might sound while we read, what can we claim to have comprehended on the musical plane?).

Despite the fact that musical understanding exhibits numerous similarities to the understanding of language, it would be wrong to claim a resemblance founded on an essential "linguisticity" of music. An aspect that is worth insisting upon when considering

the nexus between language games and musical understanding is the meaning that can be identified in the notion of a game. Let us see how.

We have already observed – and the annotations in the *Brown Book* and in the *Big Typescript* clearly point out – that in order to understand a musical object – or in order to try to make someone understand it – a certain *training* is necessary: we must be able to experience a conclusion *as a conclusion*, a phrase *as articulated* with two points, a song *as a waltz*, etc. Now, it is clear that in order to successfully perform this task we must master the linguistic procedures that we are referring to. But it is also true that *this* practice, in and of itself, is not enough: I can very well know what a conclusion or an introduction is, but still not be able to hear it (to hear the *musical conclusion*). This is why, in an attempt to convey the thought of Wittgenstein with terms that he did not use – we must emphasize this in order to avoid any misunderstanding – we can be lead to assert that understanding music amounts to entering the orbit of *music games* that exhibit a relative operational autonomy.

But why speak of games? The answer most likely has to do with the anthropological bases in which every musical activity plants its roots (as highlighted by Molino [2009]; moreover, this holds true for every activity in which we develop an aesthetic attitude, as has been argued by various philosophical perspectives in reworking a Schillerian intuition; see for example Gadamer [1960] (Gadamer [2004]) and Desideri [2011]). But there is still another way to answer the question: because one of the main aspects of the meaning of this notion (brought to light by Wittgenstein) still occupies a preeminent position. In order to understand music, both in playing it and in listening to it, it is necessary not only to *know* the rules, but also to be able to apply them or follow them. Surely a music game is learned by playing it. Let us consider a very simple example: what does it mean to comprehend a deceiving cadence? Its presence must be felt by ear, not (only) on paper. Clearly it is also necessary to understand its function, the role that it can play in a certain song or musical style (such as in the coded writing of basso continuo). Its surprising nature can be illustrated in an elementary manner, beginning with the comparison to another situation that can be considered its alternative, that of authentic cadence:

But surely the surprise can be more or less evident, depending on the harmonic and stylistic contexts. In a *Sonata* by Corelli, for example, it can seem weakened by the impression that it simply wishes to prolong the discourse (a function upon which various levels of expressive and symbolic meaning can expand). The harmonic rules that preside over a composition by Schubert are not very different: and yet the same solution often sees an increase in the surprise effect. We are close, I believe, to what Wittgenstein called a «move» within a language game. But, clearly, it is an elementary move, and other situations can demonstrate more subtle differences (the aforementioned difference between the melody of Schubert and that of Mozart is one example of this).

It could be said that not all musical situations can be traced back to defined rules such as those that preside over the composition of musical themes referred to by Wittgenstein (who especially loved Mozart and Beethoven). We might reply, however, that, as poorly defined as they can be, some rules are always present when there is a musical experience, as revolutionary or transgressive as it may seem. When Cage invited us to listen to the silence in 4'33" was he not proposing that we respect a rule? And weren't many others implied? (continuing to listen, applauding or whistling especially at the end, etc.). Does the improvisation of a *jam session* not impose the rule to scrutinize the musicians' ability to avoid solutions that are considered to be conventional, repetitive or banal? Moreover, no one has ever asserted that the rules of a game define *all* that we can do with it or in it: like all games (we are reminded by Wittgenstein [1953]: §68 (Wittgenstein [2009]: 37)), music games are only *partially* founded on rules.

We could be tempted into concluding that there is not much of a difference between this type of game and language games: they are both games and surely they exhibit certain family resemblances. But we must emphasize that this resemblance is not an identity. It should be noted that the mastery of a music game (by a musician or by a listener) is only rarely accompanied by a similar mastery of the language games that accompany it. And the opposite can be true: the ability to describe or judge a musical piece can easily be accompanied by a mediocre performative ability.

5. *Musical Understandings*

Another observation must be made so as to avoid any misunderstandings. We have remained faithful in a certain sense to Wittgenstein's way of expressing himself as our discussion has unfolded in speaking of musical understanding as a relatively homogeneous concept (though divided, so to speak, between the opposite extremes of paraphrasability and non-paraphrasability, as pointed out by Ridley [2004] and Soulez [2012]: 76-78). In reality, not only are there different uses of "understanding" but there are also different objects and different forms of understanding, so to speak. It is one thing to understand a musical phrase, but it is another to understand a musical work or one of its parts. It is reasonable to think that the knowledge and the games that we are referring to can have common aspects; but, once again, this similarity does not suggest that we can make generalizations without misconstructions. The comprehension of a musical work – *insofar as a musical work* – demands knowledge and abilities that are not required in the case of the comprehension of phrases: it is useful and even necessary to know the title, the author, the context in which it was created, the genre, etc. (for more on this sense of «hearing as», see Arbo [2012]: 122-127). Over the past ten years, scholars have expounded extensively upon this topic, concentrating their studies on the analysis of the criteria of the object's identity.

Let us now turn to what we have referred to as the different forms of understanding. Insofar as an aspectual perception, musical perception oscillates between one extreme, where sensory elements are preeminent with respect to conceptual elements, and the other extreme, where the situation is reversed (as illustrated by Darsel [2009]: 203). In order to recognize an expression of melancholy in a musical passage, we do not need to know many things, nor do we need to know many rules (which does not mean that we do not need to practice, but simply that this is not related to the mastery of certain rules, as Wittgenstein had noted). But in order to recognize a Neapolitan sixth, it is clear that we must *also* know what it is, where it is used, what its function is, etc. This should lead us to pay heed to the context in which the idea of comprehension is introduced: to the fact that it could refer to the ability to understand *by acquaintance* the relationship between one moment and another (as in the *basic musical understanding* theorized by Levinson [1997]), or to the comparison of broader sections; and even to the fact that the aspects in question can only be understood literally (as in the case of a Neapolitan sixth) or metaphorically (as in the affective meaning of a melody).

Finally, we must not forget that, insofar as aesthetic understanding, musical understanding implies an ability to appreciate (an ability to select that which is compliant with or not compliant with the rules, but also that which is expressively effective). This does not authorize us to say that the former is necessarily accompanied by the formulation of a judgment. We have already observed that many musicians are not able to express an assessment of that which makes (their) music communicative or expressive. And, yet, while we can say that, strictly speaking, an adequate (and sometimes even profound) musical understanding does not involve an aesthetic judgment, it is also true that, in a broader sense, said judgment constitutes not only one of the possible responses, but a response that we generally consider to be among the most pertinent within the realm of a musical culture. This strengthens the connection between comprehension and language games. In other words, if in the concept of comprehension we include the aesthetic judgments that accompany their reception, at this level it would seem not only opportune but necessary to acknowledge the constitutive value of language games. As has been stressed (see in particular the clear analysis of Michaud [1999]), for an appreciation to become a judgment, it is necessary to enter into the sphere of the specific ways of expression that we can imagine to be shared by a group or community of music lovers. To formulate an aesthetic judgment about a rap or pop song by using language games belonging to the presentation of the music of Max Reger not only seems out of place, but would most likely be considered an indication of misunderstanding.

It would be opportune to reflect, on this level, on the plurality and the variability that is implicit in the concept at hand. Not only are there numerous language games, but their efficacy varies with time: as pointed out by Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein [1953]: §23 (Wittgenstein [2009]: 14 s.)), while some get old and lose their function, others arise from new practices and forms of life (we might think of the entire universe of music created by technology or made in order to be diffused on the web). It is especially thanks to them that it is possible to confirm our understanding of different genres, styles, languages or forms of expression that we might encounter in the current world of music.

6. *Conclusion*

Let us attempt to summarize the meaning that language games assume in relation to musical understanding. We have stated that they serve as an instrument for testing the discourse we use to describe music and the way we experience it. Moreover, they represent one of the possible responses to the musical object, allowing a (third) person to

exhibit the comprehension of it. While it is still a stretch to say that they *constitute* musical understanding, it is legitimate to confirm that they support it and guide it. In order to explain what this consists of it would be opportune to make reference to its ability to correspond to *music games*. We must keep in mind that the concept of understanding involves different uses, gradations and objects: while strictly speaking it coincides with an aspectual perception related to a music game, in a broader sense, including the specific type of response that are aesthetic judgments, comprehension can be considered to be structured based on specific language games that are related to the diversity of objects.

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