

# Musicae Scientiae

<http://msx.sagepub.com/>

---

## Meaning and the Body

Peter Nelson

*Musicae Scientiae* 2001 5: 101

DOI: 10.1177/10298649010050S214

The online version of this article can be found at:

[http://msx.sagepub.com/content/5/2\\_suppl/101](http://msx.sagepub.com/content/5/2_suppl/101)

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

**E**uropean  
**S**ociety for the  
**C**ognitive Sciences  
**O**f  
**M**usic

[European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music](http://www.sagepub.com)

**Additional services and information for *Musicae Scientiae* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://msx.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://msx.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** [http://msx.sagepub.com/content/5/2\\_suppl/101.refs.html](http://msx.sagepub.com/content/5/2_suppl/101.refs.html)

>> [Version of Record](#) - Sep 1, 2001

[What is This?](#)

---

## Meaning and the body

PETER NELSON

University of Edinburgh, UK

---

How strange that music should need an introduction! Of all the attributes that make us human, the sense of music is surely one of the most fundamental and, indeed, one that characterises crucial aspects of the life we also share with other animals. It is the attribute closest to our hearts, in the most literal sense. Even before we can open our eyes, in our mothers' wombs, it is clear, we already open our ears to the sounds around us; to the sounds of the human body, even to those sounds which enter our internal world from the outside. Thus the cultural centrality which, as humans, we give to music cannot really come as a surprise. As John Blacking points out (Blacking, 1995), "every known human society has [...] 'music'". Music comes to us all already introduced, even if it manifests itself in radically different ways to different people. What is more surprising is the nature of some of the roles fashioned for music by musicologists, the "cultural work", in Cook's terms, which gets wrought on this thing we feel we already know and work ourselves.

In the first place, though, perhaps we might briefly consider the nature of the musicologist, a thread in the human fabric that is by no means common to "every known human society". As Cook points out, humorously, in his introduction, at some point in the book "[...] a gang of musicologists turn up and take over", and indeed there is a strong sense in which this whole book is about "musicology" rather than about "music". In a fascinating chapter, *Music and the Academy*, Cook undertakes an examination of the recent history of musicology, in order no doubt to contextualise its preoccupations. Leaving aside for now the fact that Cook manages to make this undertaking both engaging and informative, there is a very telling *caveat* at the start of the chapter which resonates through the book, the "issues of academic geography". Here Cook lays out those parts of the world where musicology dwells: Britain and North America, of course, Australia and Europe. Yet the point of this *caveat* is not to show that musicology is itself a geographically and culturally limited phenomenon, but to warn that even within these limitations there are clear differences of culture and approach. Suddenly the singularity of the title seems under threat. Whose "music" are we talking about? Are all these different musicologies even addressing the same subject?

Given that Cook teases out a disconcerting thread of confusion within musicology itself, these are questions that don't quite get resolved. There are clear fractures in the community, with the Americans, for example and rather unsurprisingly, a lot less certain about how the European part of the musical tradition relates to them and their culture, but these are the normal squabbles of cultural politics. What does seem to tie everyone together is a common paranoia about the worth of music; music, it seems, has to *mean* something in order to be taken seriously, and it is this *meaning* with which musicology ought to concern itself. Furthermore, this meaning within the domain of musicology is clearly tied to words and verbal concepts. And here, it appears, there is a crisis. Cook, indeed, speaks at the end of the book of his, "cautious optimism about music: not just about music itself, but about our ability to understand it [...]". *Understand*, in this context, is clearly a token of our ability to transfer our musical insights into the sorts of verbal, cultural and philosophical concepts Cook has been discussing. This cautious optimism, then, is backed, quite understandably, by an exhortation to musicologists to "acquire critical orientation", since "music has unique powers as an agent of ideology".

Now if music is as central a human attribute as I and many others seem to feel, then the fact that its future can be viewed with only cautious optimism is, to say the least, somewhat disconcerting. Even if, as seems possible, Cook means not "music" *per se* but only a small subset of music related to the European art tradition, that is still a matter for concern, for many reasons. Cook himself shifts out of an even more pessimistic mode by proposing that, "both music and musicology are ways of creating meaning rather than just representing it", but there are still some problems here. It is not clear in the context what is meant by purely *musical* meaning, and musicological meaning is left firmly in a conflicted arena of cultural and political wrangling.

I have to say that, by quite a different path, I share Cook's caution about music's future. Part of the reason for that, in those cultures descended through the Western European traditions at any rate, is that music is not taken seriously enough, even by musicologists of Prof. Cook's persuasion. When political educationalists pigeonhole music as "aesthetic", and musicologists become embroiled in justificatory searches for "meaning", however critically conscious, one is hard pressed to counter the notion, propounded most succinctly by Stephen Pinker in a recent book (Pinker, 1997) that music is no more than a type of "auditory cheesecake", or in Cook's own words, from the start of his book, "sounds that are good to listen to". Here one wonders why the so-called "new musicology" is reversing over the ground so hard won by, for instance, Gurney and Hanslick in the nineteenth century, to reinstitute a sort of hermeneutic struggle that seems doomed, at best, to remain tangentially within the world of cultural politics (however important that may be!) rather than relating squarely to the business of music itself.

In case it seems from this last phrase that I have just have not got the point at all, I should say at once that there seems to me to be a lot more "square" to music than critical editions or Schenkerian or Fortean analysis. Furthermore those things

remain to do with why music is so important to us, without getting us into any justificatory metaphysics of meaning. They also locate music firmly in the world, and not in some solipsistic “artistic” domain. To say, as Cook does in his introduction, that, “To talk about music in general is to talk about what music means”, seems to me to risk falling back into the morass which nineteenth century aesthetics did indeed get us into. It leads directly to the sort of cultural warfare which Cook so deftly handles in his book, which is natural to human cultures, but which tells us little or nothing about the nature of music itself. However crucial the discussions on music and gender, and they are crucial to the continuing practices of music, I think we are in trouble if this *outcome* of music is the only way we can see music as having real importance. Because these discussions and arguments depend on words, and words have exactly the same power that Cook imputes to music: they “appear to be a product of nature”. How else can we *mean* if not through words? Music is mute with respect to meaning; it needs words *to make its meaning clear*, does it not?

And yet, instantly in his retelling of Elvis Costello’s remark where Costello says that “writing about music is like dancing about architecture”, (a very nice idea!), Cook reveals two crucial things about human beings: they have more than one way of *meaning*, and several of those are to do with the particularly physical presence of the human body. In fact “the world of thought and feelings” may not even be so detached from “the world of people and things” as we have commonly supposed. Yet where words and verbal concepts are concerned, the *physical* reality of music remains out of consideration.

Maybe part of the problem lies in our particular notion of the nature of *meaning* itself. This of course is one of the principal tropes of post-modern thinking, but even there much of the attention has focussed on the “unavoidable” presence/absence of the word. However closely music and words may be related, however much their dodging of one another in their respective discourses may reveal their common ground, we do have a deep intuition that these discourses *are* different, and that the difference is worth defending. Why could this be, particularly if music’s translated *meaning* is the source of its importance to us? What does music itself reveal to us of meaning? How could it create meaning?

In a recent book on the nature and meaning of technology, Arnold Pacey (1999) takes the unusual step of starting with a chapter on music. For him, music has a very particular role in the world, and it is one that is perhaps worth exploring at some length here since his is a view that has cropped up in a number of other places, and which provides an interesting link into some contemporary ideas on how meaning anyway comes to be constituted in the human mind. Pacey justifies starting his book with a consideration of music by pointing out that, “we use machines and other technologies in the same way as we use music and musical instruments, to interpret the world and to give it meaning”. Now at the very start, with the inclusion of musical instruments, Pacey pulls the discussion away from the mental imagery of thoughts and ideas towards the domain of the body. He also shows us that music is

not just “humanly generated sounds that are good to listen to” but the result of an act of generation which is itself crucial. Crucial also to our possible extensions of what characterises music. Thus Pacey describes the sound of a well tuned motor bike as a sort of music, appreciated and “understood” by those who play it and hear it: indeed bikes are routinely “played” as musical instruments, much to the irritation of the non-biking community. But the sense of meaning and understanding here is one radically different to the one proposed by Cook. It is not to do with words but to do with the body.

As Cook points out in his opening scenario, music holds us captive, and it holds us captive in a *physical* sense. In his scenario, both the young man and the two listening ladies are physically arrested, and not by an idea! Whatever the putative message of the advertiser, it is clear that the music has a special hold over the bodies in the picture. Any *meaning* inherent in this situation seems to me to be *kitsch*; in Milan Kundera’s formulation, something that “throws a veil of commonplaces over the present moment, in order that the face of the real will disappear”. But perhaps we can get a better picture of the nature of that physical captivation by taking an unfamiliar, even unbelievable example from another culture. In the Southern African tale, *The Story of Hlakanyanna* (Abrahams (ed.), 1983), the following little scenario occurs:

“When the cannibals had eaten the white ox, they ran after Hlakanyanna. They caught up to him near a big stone. He jumped on the stone, and sang this song:

I went to hear the news

About rain from the girls.

The cannibals couldn’t resist dancing when they heard the song, so he was able to run away while the stone continued to sing the song for him.”

This story raises two crucial images:

- 1) that the *meaning* of music inheres in the *physical* power it has over us.
- 2) that music *connects* the animate and inanimate worlds.

The stone here is a “musical instrument”, albeit an animistic one that sings on its own: but then, in a sense, all musical instruments “sing on their own”! Our hearing of this is a way of integrating ourselves with an inanimate world, in the same way that rider and motorbike, or keyboard player and keyboard integrate themselves through sound (*cf.* Nelson, 1999).

This, integrationist sense of meaning is given a further turn by Pacey when he discusses the leg injury suffered by the neuropsychologist, Oliver Sacks. Sacks himself gives an account of how, after a serious leg injury, it seemed as if walking was going to remain a permanent problem. It was only by accident that he discovered that music could aid his rehabilitation programme, since, “What seemed to appear with the music was organisation and a center, co-ordinating the different functions of his leg [...]” (Sacks, 1986).

If this seems too far removed from our normal notions of *meaning*, it might be worth considering some of the ramifications of those normal notions. *Meaning* is a

qualitative emotion. I want to demonstrate what this might say by looking at the two extreme ends of a particular emotional continuum. At one end is the common idiom, "It doesn't mean anything to me." (Or in its more highly charged form, "*He* doesn't mean anything to me.") This is an expression of a feeling of connectedness. The situation of the idiom might be explored through the process of explanation: Typically the person doing the explaining presents a discourse that:

- a) is syntactically well-formed and semantically rich;
- b) *means* what it says, to the speaker.

The process of explanation commonly consists in the explainer finding a *succession* of different manifestations of this "meaning" until one is found that *means something to the auditor too*. At that point they feel connected, even if the act of understanding on the part of the auditor results in a shift of *meaning* with respect to what the explainer intended. There is no clear way of getting out of the intersubjectivity of this situation into the clean air of "objective meaning". "It doesn't mean anything to me", represents a loss of connection. At the other extreme of this continuum is the manic phase of manic depression. This is characterised by a *pathological* increase in perceived *meaning*. Everything appears to be connected. When Virginia Woolf thought that the birds spoke Greek to her, this was perhaps not strictly speaking an hallucination, so much as an unbearable increase in perceived meaningfulness and connectedness. The problem here is an extreme mismatch between this *feeling* of meaning and the normative logic of possible connections.

This vein of meaning is also characterised by the question, which in Pacey's account includes those questions we ask of the world. Asking questions arises not only from "problems" but also from the innate desire of human beings to integrate themselves into the social and material worlds. Thus a question is a *desire*, and the desire is not for an answer but for a communication. Of course questions do relate to problems, and answers are, by definition, pragmatically useful, but there are other scenarios. Children, for example, often go on asking questions beyond the exhaustion of the subject matter, and without any seeming interest in the answers provided. It seems to me that the ultimate, childish question, "Yes, but why?", seeks not an answer but an ultimate enfolding of the questioner into the social world of the other. From this point of view a question might be asked by the body as well as by the mind. Touching is a form of questioning. It seeks a parallel integration of the questioner into the physical world. *Meaning* thus becomes the *medium* within which the human being exists, and it is mediated by questions and answers in unending flow. Perhaps this is grounded in the real physical connection constituted for us by the touch and sound, first of our mothers, and later of the object-world around us?

In this respect the work of Colwyn Trevarthen (*cf.* Trevarthen *et al.*, 1999) has been crucial in demonstrating how music is constituted as an integrative human process right from the start of our lives in the world. We may question music with words later, in puzzlement, but we are aware of its non-verbal processes all along, and not through any transparent and illusory ideology of origin. There is no origin

in this modality, only an evolutionary and integrative sense of the ways in which our *bodies* can relate to the world. Trevarthen's development of this notion into an account of human narratives and how they develop in time is fascinating, and shows an extraordinary and parallel insight into the nature of music. I make no apologies for quoting in full here:

"Time of the mind is expressed in movements of the body. The rhythms which all movements show give evidence of what may be called the different levels of the *Intrinsic Motive Pulse* or IMP. Narratives come from a multilayered, polyrhythmic IMP deep in our living psychology. They tell about how we prepare for future experiences in our acting. They present for other people coherent accounts of the way we divide up the times of our consciousness and how we plan and carry out purposes. The most intimate details of how we think and feel can be conveyed by the forms of expression that colour what we show and tell. Collectively we create narratives that can influence and guide our lives. Patterns of expression become unforgettable and moving events, especially if we synchronise our appreciation of how they change, and sympathise with the emotions involved, for no expression of purpose or experience is devoid of emotional value, even if this emoting is just a matter of curiosity and investigative interest. Of course, there is no limit to the profundity, richness and energy of emotions that a narrative can convey" (1999).

This provides a pragmatic gloss on some other, more theoretical notions about music's ways of meaning. When Felix Guattari tells us that, "subjectivity is in fact plural and polyphonic — to use Mikhail Bakhtin's expression" (Guattari, 1995) we see a strong clue that it is not the "content" of music that has meaning for us but its very substance. It is itself constitutive of us. This "machinic" aspect of music, to use a Guattarian notion whose musical connotations are more fully explored elsewhere (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988), is important because it brings us to the way in which the human body and the physical world are mediated not just through music but through the *instrument*.

Trevarthen's characterisation of the vocal play between mothers and newborn babies as *musical* discourse is interesting because this vocal play also has an *instrumental* aspect. Human touch is a crucial part of the play. Furthermore, one might say that, in this playing, voices 'touch' just as much as bodies touch, and thus space, time, touch and sound are drawn into a moment of creative thought-formation which is fundamental to many more human activities than mere music! This is not the place to discuss the so-called "Mozart Effect" in any detail, but even without the literality of that version of things, the whole of the previous discussion suggests clearly that music is not just "important" or "cultural" or "aesthetically meaningful" in whatever way. It is absolutely crucial to us as human beings, and to our capacities for living as human beings. Without the skills it brings we are impaired more than musically, and its effect of meaningfulness has only tangentially to do with the *meanings* of words and cultures. The educationalists who place music only in the categories of culture and the aesthetic are thus

fundamentally and damagingly wrong, however important culture, and the cultures of music may be.

Ian Cross has already dealt compellingly with the background to these ideas in the domain of cognitive science (Cross, 1999). It is the work of Lakoff and Johnson, and particularly their most recent account of that work (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999), which begins to show *how* the notion of an embodied meaning which is efficacious, yet specifically not tied to disembodied concepts, might actually operate. Of course Lakoff starts out from linguistics, and Johnson is a philosopher, so their project is rather skewed towards language-based philosophy. However the line of thought clearly relates also to music, and fits neatly with the ideas of Trevarthen and such writers as David Sudnow (Sudnow, 1978) to show a path which has already been signposted and along which musicology clearly needs to go. Even the more philosophical aspects of Lakoff and Johnson's work have implications for the aesthetic and cultural debates followed by Cook. They give good clues, at least, for how one might try to go about reintegrating music and writing-about-music, since I suppose we have to assume that the latter is not easily going to go away.

Some of the tantalising proposals of Lakoff and Johnson concern the way in which they integrate the sensory-motor mechanisms of the body and such things as concept formation and metaphorical discourse. They put the body right at the centre of thought, in a way that is both fundamentally challenging, and yet also ringingly true to anyone who has any experience of music. When they tell us that:

“Our sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially upon our bodies, especially our sensorimotor apparatus, which enables us to perceive, move and manipulate, and the detailed structures of our brains, which have been shaped by both evolution and experience” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999)

we begin to see how the sense of reality we get when we listen to music is shaped, whether we are making it ourselves or not. At one end there is a sense of absolutely physical involvement, whether that physicality manifests itself in rapt attention or bodily movement, and we know when it is going well or badly, whether it coheres, and many more complex things to do with pitch, rhythm, polyphony and so on. At the other end is a sort of metaphorical association of ideas that play in our consciousness. We know, socially speaking, that it is much easier to get the bodily involvement synchronised with others than it is to agree on the conscious associations, indeed the whole edifice of musical performance depends on this. Yet there are some common, or at least culturally common metaphors which govern our musical thinking. One of Lakoff and Johnson's main themes is the way in which metaphors, and metaphorical thinking, are fundamental rather than fanciful, and in a real sense “hard-wired” into the body during our early learning. One example they give of this, which is at least close to a musical concept is the More Is Up metaphor:

“In More Is Up, a subjective judgement of quantity is conceptualised in terms of the sensorimotor experience of verticality.



This correspondance between quantity and verticality arises from a correlation in our normal everyday experiences, like pouring more water into a jug and seeing the level go up. Early in development, Johnson hypothesises, such correlations are 'conflations' in which quantity and verticality are not seen as separate, and associations between them are formed. After the conflation period, according to Grady, the association between More and Up and between Less and Down constitute a cross-domain mapping between the sensorimotor concept of verticality (the source domain) and the subjective judgement of quantity" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999).

These sorts of observations are coupled with assertions concerning the possibility that the correlations are actually hard-wired in the neurones of the brain, and that the same "brain part" might be used for *both* sensory-motor activity *and* "mental" activity. Thus the "body thought" involved in music, and particularly in playing a musical instrument, comes clearly into view. This echoes the much earlier attempt by David Sudnow to find ways of relating musical improvisation to the substance of bodily action. When Sudnow tells us that, "[...] a chord is a grabbed place" (Sudnow, 1978), it is clear that a space and a physical action are standing, justly, in a situation where a mental, conceptual definition would normally go. From such a description of the physical encounter with space and place, Sudnow moves to an exploration of a mode of thinking which has physical presence in the world, rather than a play of signs and meanings, as its way of going.

"[...] in a major scale way it can be approached from all sides, coming down or up, from the middle ourwardly, with many fingering possibilities, taken either sequentially or in various step-skipping ways, played by moving from its end towards the middle with a rocking-in, and many more. Through all such variations, the hand has *that* course thematic to it, in having deeply essentialised grasp of its presence as a course of definite theres (*sic*) at hand" (Sudnow, 1978).

It is important that this passage of physical understanding remains characterised as *thought*, with the hand as its locus, rather than as some sort of "tacit" knowledge, in Polanyi's terms, centred in the mind. (Polanyi, 1967) Not that the idea of "tacit" knowledge is not useful, but the formulation of knowledge is too constructed, in this instance, to account for the *play of thought* in which the hand engages. However the biological apparatus may be "wired", it is clear that "conscious thought" is not the only kind of thought we have. While the notion of "tacit" knowledge may do for balancing on a bicycle, it is hard to see how simple knowledge will manage to get a hand around a piano or a saxophone. This account also makes clear how it may be that *even as listeners* we get such a thrill from hearing music done. Music is *about* bodies rather than, or at least on the way to, ideas.

Now we can see some of the things that there might be for a "square on" musicology to do, for instance: what are music's "basic level concepts" and how do they operate; are there musical "frames of reference", based on our embodied

conceptions, and how could we describe them; how do we build and use our musical metaphors? How can we account for those *present* manifestations of our musical inheritance which are still alive with meaning for us? In short, how can we, in our culture, get a better grasp of the embodied and productive nature of our own music, both past and present? While some of this does seem the domain of neuroscience and cognitive science, it is past the moment when we can be scared of what these disciplines have to tell us. Of course, the phrase "our own music" has implications which are open to serious discussion, and these are probably also the business of musicology, but perhaps it is the moment for a change in the frame of reference of the discussion.

I have taken a very particular, and maybe quite extreme path through this brief comment on what is, finally, a most engaging and thought provoking book. In principle I am in full agreement with Nicholas Cook that the current nature of our musical discourse does not do justice to the situation in which music is. I also feel that music, all music, is crucial to us in shifting the deadened, multi-national, corporate subjectivity which dominates our age, and that we cannot afford to lose any of its multifarious richness. Indeed there is a musical richness that still needs to be produced. It is clear that academic musicology has not always lived up to the challenges, but I am not sure that Beethoven or his hagiographers are necessarily to blame, or quite what we gain from demonising them. Furthermore I wonder if a "new musicology" based on nineteenth century notions of musical meaning, albeit in twentieth century guise, really has the potential to take us places we have not been already<sup>1</sup>.

(1) Address for correspondence:  
Peter Nelson  
Faculty of Music  
University of Edinburgh  
Alison House  
12 Nicholson Square  
EDINBURGH EH8 9DF  
e-mail: P.Nelson@music.ed.ac.uk

## • REFERENCES

- Abrahams, R. D. (ed.) (1983). *African Folktales*. New York: Pantheon.
- Blacking, J. (1995). *Music, Culture and Experience*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Cross, I. (1999). Is music the most important thing we ever did? Music, development and evolution. In S. Won Yi (ed.), *Music, mind and science* (pp.10-39). Seoul: Seoul National University Press.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1988). *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (trans. B. Massumi). London: Athlone Press.
- Guattari, F. (1995). On the production of subjectivity. In F. Guattari, *Chaosmosis* (trans. P. Bains and J. Pefanis). Sydney: Power Publications.
- Kundera, M. (1995). *Testaments Betrayed*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the Flesh. The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Nelson, P. (1999). The Musical Cyborg. In E. Miranda (ed.), *Musica y Nuevas Tecnologías: Perspectivas para Siglo XXI*. Barcelona: ACC L'Angelot.
- Pacey, A. (1999). *Meaning in Technology*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Pinker, S. (1997). *How the mind works*. London: Allen Lane.
- Polanyi, M. (1967). *The Tacit Dimension*. London: Routledge and Keegan Paul.
- Sacks, O. (1986). *A Leg to Stand On*. London: Picador.
- Sudnow, D. (1978). *Ways of the Hand: The Organisation of Improvised Conduct*. London: Routledge and Keegan Paul.
- Trevarthen, C. (1999) Musicality and the Intrinsic Motive Pulse: Evidence from human psychobiology and infant communication. *Musica Scientia, special issue*, 157-213.
- Trevarthen, C., Kokkinaki, T., & Fiamenghi, G. A. Jr. (1999). What infants' imitations communicate: With mothers, with fathers and with peers. In J. Nadel and G. Butterworth (eds), *Imitation in infancy* (pp. 127-185). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.