

On the Possibility of Narrative Content in Instrumental Music

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This paper explores the question of whether instrumental music can transport narrative content in a meaningful sense.

While extensive scholarship exists on the relationship between music and emotions, the narrative capabilities of instrumental music remain surprisingly underexplored in philosophical discourse. Drawing parallels with recent work on non-linguistic narratives in other media, particularly single pictures, I propose a framework for understanding how instrumental music might convey narrative elements independently of linguistic or visual accompaniment.

The narrative capacity of linguistic media such as novels is well-established, as is that of visual media like films and comic strips, which typically incorporate some textual elements. More recently, research has expanded to consider purely visual narratives in wordless picture books and silent films, and even single pictures (Fasnacht 2023; Nanay 2009; Speidel 2013). Instrumental music presents a similar puzzle, perhaps even more challenging than single pictures, yet has not received comparable attention regarding its narrative capabilities.

The philosophical literature on music and emotions distinguishes between emotions that can be attributed to a piece of music and emotions aroused in listeners (Kania 2023). This distinction proves instructive for our investigation into musical narratives. I argue that we must similarly differentiate between narrative elements justifiably attributable to a piece of instrumental music and narrative elements evoked in a listener. My focus centers on the former—whether we can speak of narratives in instrumental music in a semantic rather than purely pragmatic sense.

Standard definitions of narrative typically include temporal extension, events, and meaningful connections between those events. Instrumental music easily satisfies the temporal requirement but faces challenges regarding the identification of musical "events." Unlike in linguistic or visual narratives, where events often involve characters with intentions, musical events defy straightforward definition. I suggest several possibilities for conceptualizing musical events:

- (1) Repetition with variation might constitute a sequence of events, where each playing represents an event and the repetition creates narrative continuity.
- (2) Song-specific elements that establish patterns might function as event markers.
- (3) References to recognizable musical sequences could serve as "cited" events within a broader musical narrative.

The "meaningful connection" criterion presents less difficulty in music, as relationships between musical elements are often structured through repetition, variation, and progression. Consider a pattern of repeating motifs (ABABABABA) that descends tonally between repetitions, creating a sense of narrative development through purely musical means. This approach reveals tensions in applying traditional narrative theory to instrumental music.

While music struggles to portray specific characters with intentions—a cornerstone of paradigmatic linguistic and visual narratives—it can nonetheless satisfy amended versions of basic narrative characteristics. The question becomes whether these characteristics require modification to accommodate musical expression or whether this limitation indicates a fundamental boundary to music's narrative capacity.

I propose that instrumental music occupies a unique position on the spectrum of narrative-capable media. Rather than attempting to fit music into existing narrative frameworks, we might better understand its capabilities by developing medium-specific criteria for musical narratives. The repetition structures, tonal progressions, and tension-resolution patterns characteristic of musical composition create what might be termed "proto-narratives"—sequences that possess narrative qualities without conforming to the character-driven expectations of traditional narratives.

Whether we can justifiably attribute narrative elements to instrumental music connects to broader questions in the philosophy of art regarding cross-modal aesthetics and meaning-making. If instrumental music can indeed transport narrative content, even in a modified sense, this suggests that narrative comprehension may be more fundamental to human cognition than previously recognized – extending beyond linguistic and visual processing to include abstract auditory patterns. It might also suggest that we should refine our definitions of what “narrative” is. But if it turns out that these proto-narrative elements are not sufficient to really count as narratives, it might prove worthwhile to examine in-depth why not, and thereby learn more about narrativity in general, too.

Drawing from interdisciplinary research in philosophical aesthetics, narratology, and picture theory, I conclude that instrumental music can transport narrative elements, though these differ significantly from linguistic narratives. The challenge lies not in determining whether music can be narrative but in developing adequate theoretical tools to describe its particular form of narrativity. This requires moving beyond linguistic paradigms of narrative to consider how instrumental music might communicate through entirely different means, that transcend both emotional expression and formal structure.

Bibliography

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