

chapter 2: the language analogy

Many writers have explored the common ground between music and spoken language. Though they have a great deal in common, in important ways the two are fundamentally different. Words are symbols that represent real objects, actions, and ideas. Musical sounds, when not coupled with lyrics, are not involved with the symbolic representation of anything.

Yet when musical sounds are put together they take on intricate and multidimensional relationships with each other that resemble the patterning of speech; and when we speak, we “perform” the sounds of language in real time. The similarities between music and spoken language are indeed many.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Since spoken language is such a rich and omnipresent aspect of our daily lives, examining its resemblance to music can yield potent insights. In this chapter, I will introduce some of these ideas as food for thought, notions to chew on as you progress through the book. Then, in Chapter 23, after exploring the depths of ornamentation, variation, blowing, phrasing, articulation, the use of the breath, and the playing of slow airs, we will revisit the analogy.

VERY SIMILAR, BUT DIFFERENT

Lest we go off the deep end with this fascinating parallel, let’s first look at some of the fundamental differences between music and spoken language.

As mentioned above, words refer directly to things in the external world. Instrumental music refers to nothing outside itself. We often associate things of the outside world with instrumental music, for example by connecting a tune with its title. We may become inspired by the outside world to create music. But these external connections are not directly communicated by the music itself.

Almost all Irish music has a regular pulse and the durations of its notes are regular subdivisions of that pulse, lilt notwithstanding. The pitches of Irish music are discrete, contained in simple modes, and easily identifiable. Sometimes we slide into or out of a pitch or alter it in other ways, but these inflections refer to known pitches.

In speech there is a feeling of rhythm but not a recurrent pulse, unless we are reciting verse or chanting. The durations of syllables are usually not proportional to each other, and the pitched inflections we use are not stable, discrete, and identifiable as part of any consistent pattern or musical scale.

Now let’s look at some parallels.

KEEPING THE BIG PICTURE IN VIEW

One of the prime challenges for the novice musician is to elevate her focus from the small details of individual notes and the technical challenges of playing to a broader view in which she can hear and understand musical phrasing, structure, and meaning.

Compare individual notes to syllables. The articulation of a note is like the beginning consonant or vowel of a syllable: discrete, well-defined, and hard; or soft and smoothly connected to the previous syllable. Syllables link together to form longer words, just as three-note groupings in a jig might form a melodic “word.” Several words join together to form a phrase, a complete thought. Note groupings connect to form a musical phrase, a structure that creates direction and motion.