CLASSICAL VIEW;
How Music Spins a Web Of Meaning

BYLINE: By Paul Griffiths

IN HIS LATEST BOOK, "LOOK, LISTEN, READ," Claude Levi-Strauss pursues his decadeslong study of language once again into the realms of music and painting. Where music is concerned, he finds an 18th-century hero in an earlier Parisian intellectual, Michel Paul Guy de Chabanon, who evidently came up with surprisingly modern ideas about music's being an autonomous art, not dependent on an ability to imitate natural phenomena, emotions or anything else but, instead, appealing in its own right.

This is not to say that music has no meaning beyond itself. The music's composer can make it refer to something else by setting words to it or giving it a title. To take one example from Mr. Levi-Strauss's book (published by Basic Books, with numerous musical solecisms in the English translation), once we know the program of "La Mer," by Debussy, we can hear its sounds and sways of sounds as images of the sea.

And one might go farther. Certain alliances of sound and image become, over time, conventions. There are conventions for rage that developed in 18th-century opera, for example, or for love music that came about in the second half of the 19th century. So music began to lose its pristine independence, its immediate appeal, which is perhaps one reason composers had to change the game drastically around the time of World War I.

Mr. Levi-Strauss, though, makes other suggestions about that revolution. He notes that in Chabanon's time, which was also Rameau's time, listeners were expected to have some grounding in musical theory. Because we do not share that expertise, such a piece as the air "Tristes apprets" in Rameau's "Castor et Pollux" can, he maintains, have little effect on us. This point is highly disputable. In a sense, the music we have heard since Rameau has taught us how to hear his music's expressive power. We understand in this wonderful air the kind of slow anguish we have learned to associate with chromatic alteration at an andante tempo from Gluck, from Beethoven and even from Wagner.

But the fact remains that music was a topic of intellectual curiosity in the 18th century and not afterward. It would seem that for Chabanon, anything one learned about or alongside a piece of music, whether from a title, a text or a treatise, entered into a dialogue with that music in one's mind. "In this manner the spider, sitting at the center of her web, corresponds with all its threads," he wrote, "living, as it were, in each of them."

CHABANON LIKED SPIDERS. HE PLAYED tunes to them on his violin and concluded from their appreciation that music did indeed have an effect of itself alone. But human beings could, of course, enjoy greater effects by learning how music worked.

In the 19th century, the usefulness of theory to the listener dwindled, probably not because music became simpler but because all the theory you needed to know was now contained in the music itself. Like a computer program that comes with the mechanism for its own installation, a 19th-century symphony not only gives us something to hear but also tells us how to hear it.

This could be why the tonality of the Classical and Romantic periods still seems, 90 years after Schoenberg broke the barrier into atonality, music's natural language -- even though we know that there is nothing natural about it, even though we know that it did not exist before its emergence during the Renaissance. It seems natural because it can be understood without benefit of instruction. Program notes for a Brahms symphony can hardly do more than duplicate, in words, events and processes whose logic is perfectly well explained by the music itself as we hear it, whereas we may well gain something from enlightenment about African drumming, a medieval Mass or, perhaps, a Rameau air.
We may also gain from learning about the theoretical underpinning of a 20th-century work. The idea that knowledge will besmirch the experience is an inheritance from the Romantic era, which may not be so helpful in our own time, especially if that idea should lead us to admire only new music that makes a pretense of naturalness by maintaining the seemingly natural language of an earlier period.

A lot of 20th-century music will almost certainly be incomprehensible -- or comprehensible only as sound effect -- without some understanding of compositional techniques, esthetic aims and historical circumstances. This is not music that, to use Mr. Levi-Strauss's term, "spoon-feeds" us, and if it asks us to do some work, it also allows us a greater freedom of interpretation. We are unlikely to be carried through a modern work in the way we are carried through a Brahms symphony; instead, we are given the challenges and the pleasures of finding our own ways.

Of course, the break is not complete. Just as later music informs us about Rameau, so earlier music informs us about a contemporary work. The compelling force of the great tonal tradition cannot just be forgotten. Its rules, though, are not the only ones: 20th-century composers and 20th-century history have come up with a lot of alternatives.

Chabanon might be amazed if he could hear the multiplicity of musical languages to which this century has given rise. But he would surely find support in that multiplicity for his belief that the sense of music does not depend on its expressive effects. Though expressive effects will have a place in the web that makes up our musical response, information, too, as he knew, will play a part.

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**GRAPHIC:** Photo: CROSSING BORDERS Claude Levi-Strauss pursues his longtime study of language into the realm of music. (Micha Bar-Am, 1987)