

# Musical narrative deconstruction: Ritual and transgression

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Envisaging musical narrative as a sequence of ritual structures, this research lies on the concepts of ritual, transgression, and narrative as applied in a case study of a musical theatre piece, *Sound Bridges*. In traditional musical narrative, the focus is on construction, and one could speak of fields around which hierarchies, systems, and rules of musical language are built. In this piece, we find unpredictable transgressive musical gestures, acted out by performers, combined with conventional narrative procedures, as successive musical suspensions in the piece generate pauses in the musical discourse. This research aimed to demonstrate that the concepts of musical narrative and ritual dimension cannot be seen as isolated objects but as entities of transformation by composers, and how the trilogy composer/performer/listener (audience) is associated with narrative and ritual. Ritual and transgression can thus be linked to traditional concepts of musical narrative connecting composing, performing, and listening activities. The concept of ritual can be successfully manipulated by the composer and the performer, particularly in the context of contemporary music. Transgression of ritual, as planned by the composer, can act as a deconstructive factor; as mediators, performers take a crucial role in the process.

*Keywords:* performance; narrative; transgression; ritual; deconstruction

The term narrative has been addressed differently in research fields such as literary studies, linguistics, aesthetics, and anthropology. In musical research, different approaches to narrative have been discussed (Almén 2008, Klein 2004, Maus 1988, Tarasti 1979), resulting in several reorientations of the concept: "...new consensus is developing about musical narrative that is aware both of the limitations of musical expression and of the rich potential of music as a narrative medium" (Almén 2008, p. 3).

All these studies shed light on an issue that can be observed through different angles, but “common to virtually all approaches to musical narrative is the recognition of a degree of similarity between musical and literary discourse” (Almén 2008, p. 11), a similarity that can be extended to theatrical discourse, since “narrative mechanisms native to one medium...frequently cross-pollinate with other media, resulting in complex semantic hybrids” (p. 38).

In music, the use of theatrical devices can enhance performance. They are also linked to ritual practices, a powerful idea that has been, and still is, applied to compositional works. In the context of theatrical and performance studies, this idea has been developed by authors such as Richard Schechner, and it remains a key concept in ethnomusicology studies: “Rituals are collective memories encoded into actions.... Play gives people a chance to temporarily experience the taboo, the excessive, and risky.... Thus, ritual and play transform people” (Schechner 2007, p. 52). If musical narrative is envisaged as a sequence of ritual structures, which involve an emotional attachment from the audience to the musical work, it then becomes one of the effects that a composer intends to produce in the listener, and the performer, as mediator, plays an essential role in this process.

This paper aims to demonstrate that the concepts of musical narrative and ritual dimension cannot be seen as isolated objects but as entities of transformation by composers, and how the trilogy composer/performer/listener (audience) is associated with musical narrative and ritual.

### MAIN CONTRIBUTION

This research lies on the concepts of ritual, transgression, and musical narrative, as applied in a case study of a musical theatre piece, *Sound Bridges*. The study focuses on how musical gesture takes different meanings in the trilogy composer/performer/listener and discusses different concepts connecting the role of embodied ritual in performance, and its effects in the listener.

In traditional musical narrative, the focus is on construction, and one could speak of fields around which hierarchies, systems, and rules of musical language are built. In this piece, we find transgressive musical gestures, acted out by performers, combined with conventional narrative procedures, as the successive suspensions in the piece generate pauses in the discourse and challenge conventional hierarchical values. An effective non-verbal communication by the performers can mediate a narrative deconstruction of the listener's expectations, through the connection between musical gestures on the one hand, and musical narrative and ritual on the other.

## Deconstructing musical narratives

In the words of Livingston (2008, p. 363):

The content of the narrative includes not only a series of represented events, but actions whereby these events are presented to an implicit audience, as well as the agent(s) responsible for those actions. Narrative entails narrating which entails a narrator.

Therefore, we could extrapolate that in a piece of music we may speak about musical narrative, and the composer, the performer, and the listener are the participating agents: the composer as narrator, the listener as the audience, and the performer as the mediator. A composer sets up a narrative in an analogous way to a literary/theatrical work by establishing a close relationship between verbal and musical modes of perception.

Verbal and non-verbal events are often configured into various relationships, establishing a network of values that leads to understanding in the listener. If this network is broken, the awareness of the narrative processes can have an impact on the listener, as “narrative acts as a potential link to important aspects of human experience” (Almén 2008, p. 41).

Familiarity builds on our common understanding of things. When listening to music, our imagination constructs narrative contexts and/or discursive trajectories. Nevertheless, the incomprehension of a musical experience also creates barriers and splinters the construction of a continuous thought. The deconstruction of the individual narrative can be achieved through abrupt interruptions in the musical flow. In this paper, the concept of flow, taken from Csikszentmihalyi’s (1988) concept of flow or optimal experience, is applied to the listener’s perspective as an action that can be enjoyable and rewarding, creating understanding and individual sense of control.

The main objective of the musical theatre piece *Sound Bridges* is the narrative deconstruction of the listener’s thoughts. Thus, we find unpredictable musical gestures that challenge conventional concert-performance rules, and cyclically return to traditional settings. The central idea is to create suspense, disruption, discontinuity, and rupture in the way the musical narrative fragments are perceived, breaking the traditional formal outline of the piece.

Non-verbal gestures and non-verbal communication clearly play an important role in music performance. Among the functions ascribed to non-verbal behavior, Highlen and Hill (1984, p. 368) point out that “behavior is a primary means of expressing or communicating emotions.... In relation to verbal behavior, non-verbal behaviors can repeat, contradict, complement,

accent, or regulate meaning.” Verbal and non-verbal communication helps to configure musical events into different categories that may organize musical narrative perception.

### *Verbal tools*

The piece’s title and the program notes are verbal communicative tools, which function as a direct way of transmitting an intention from the composer to the performer and to the listener, and engage them into a narrative strategy. Tempo indications, agogic and dynamics, as well as music theatre also function as means of verbal communication between composer and performer, and can act indirectly in the listener’s perception of narrative.

### *Non-verbal tools*

In non-verbal communication, we find both musical and physical gestures; in the case of this piece, it is through the music theatre genre that the composer develops a non-verbal form of communication. The use of several gestures (as described below) generates abrupt cuts in the musical flow. Composer, performer, and listener play several roles in this (de)constructed world. The composer challenges both performer and listener to accept an unconventional sequence of events. The efficacy of the piece requires the performer’s engagement and willingness to adopt alternative behaviors.

Resorting to cuts as a dominant style, suppressing and subverting the traditional rules of musical writing are ways of intervening in the musical material, creating multiple sensations and experiences. The musical narration becomes discontinuous, compromising the linearity of the listener’s musical thinking. The deconstructed musical narrative prevents the indifferent acceptance of the listener in an attempt to provoke reflection.

## **Ritual and transgression**

Music theatre performances create ritual-like ways of expression. The trilogy composer, performer, and listener becomes deeply embedded with narrative and ritual. *Sound Bridges* was planned as a pre-ordered set of ritualized moments: six blocs of music, cyclically interrupted by compositional devices that break musical flow, disrupting the expected musical syntax. These compositional devices include: mobile ring tone, score pages out of order, players’ cough, motionless and repetition, and leaving the stage. In explanation:

- Mobile ring tone: In concerts, turning off phones is a common ritual. Nevertheless the audience is willing to “forgive” the transgression.
- Score pages out of order: An uncommon, but possible, mishap. One friend, a member of the audience, comments: “Such bad luck! Maybe they should restart....”
- Players’ cough: At this point some members of the audience realize that the interruptions may be intentional.
- Motionless and repetition: The performers stop, motionless, for 15 to 25 s; then they repeat the same phrase, over and over again. Most of the audience understands that the first three interruptions were planned and that the piece includes an intended transgression.
- Leaving the stage: One of the performers continues to play while the other two leave the stage.

Three different perspectives can be distinguished in rituals involving Western art music: performance, composition, and listening. It is possible to apply Schechner’s (2007, p. 56) four perspectives of rituals and ritualizing—namely structure, function, process, and experience—to characterize the intervening “actors” (composer, performer, and listener).

Performers have to think about the manner in which they are going to present the ritual, how to use the given space, and most importantly how to enact that same ritual. In *Sound Bridges*, while acting and playing a role, performers momentarily become someone else, actors of the intentions inscribed in the score. Effectiveness is the prime concern, and entertainment is relegated to a secondary plane.

The ritual process used in composition involves the organization of performance concepts and imagined dynamics, namely meaning, modes of performance, choice of physical space, and performers. Composers also deal with the aspect of function and experience, projecting how the composition will impact performer and listener.

Listeners are also participants in the ritual action. van Gennep proposed a three-phased structure of ritual action: “the preliminal, liminal, and postliminal” (cited in Schechner 2007, p. 58). The liminal phase corresponds to “a period of time when a person is ‘betwixt and between’ social categories or personal identities” (p. 66). As pointed out by Schechner (2007, p. 66), during the “liminal” phase, participants in the ritual “become ‘nothing’, put into a state of extreme vulnerability where they are open to change.” Turner (1969) used the term “liminoid” to distinguish voluntary activities (including the arts and popular entertainment) from “liminal,” which refers to rites of passage. Applying this concept to *Sound Bridges*, we can assume that listeners lose

their individual voice in order to accept a new musical narrative deconstruction.

## IMPLICATIONS

Music theatre can thus function as a relevant field for research of non-verbal techniques. Pieces written for the theatre can then be seen as a theatrical action that is generated and determined by the music; in *Sound Bridges* these theatrical actions, previously called blocs of music and interruptions, are generated by the music itself and allow for the deconstruction of musical narrative through ritualized forms of transgression. Ritual and transgression can be linked to traditional concepts of musical narrative connecting composing, performing, and listening activities. The concept of ritual can be successfully manipulated by the composer and the performer, particularly in the context of contemporary music. Transgression of ritual, as planned by the composer, can act as a deconstructive factor; as mediators, performers take a crucial role in the process, allowing the creation of multiple sensations and experiences in the listener.

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