

Approaching Sounds as Symbols in Archetypal Studies

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Scream. Crash. Tick. Stomp. Crescendo. Whistle. Voice. I wanted to know why none of these symbols, nor any like them, were listed anywhere in the large stack of books that I had piled in front of me. After all, I was at the mecca for symbol studies: the C.G. Jung Foundation Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism (ARAS) in New York City. If it wasn't here, I surmised, it wasn't anywhere. Flipping through the indexes of numerous symbol dictionaries spanning several decades, I couldn't help but notice that all of the symbols listed were images. I wondered, must something be *visible* in order to be a "symbol"? Surely sounds can be symbols too.

My inquiry came about as the result of a recurring dream I'd been having for about a year, in which I always found myself in some state of emotional distress, but whenever I tried to scream, no sound would come out. I would often try harder and harder to use my voice, only to wake myself up screaming. It was these "silent screams" from my dream life that led me to seek out the symbolic meanings associated with the voice and sound, but even in the exhaustive review of the human body found in *The Book of Symbols*, there was no mention of the human voice.

The Book did, however, include one "sound," and that was silence: the sound that is said to encompass all sounds. ((ARAS), 2010) This was, however, the shortest entry in the book, and not particularly helpful. I decided to pose my question to the three women behind the desk, who turned out to be the compilers of *The Book of Symbols*. I asked if they had ever considered that sounds could be symbols. Their eyes seemed to light up at the suggestion, and all three exclaimed, "Well, of course! I mean, *of course* sounds can be symbols!" Yet they had trouble laying their hands on any materials relating to the topic. I got the impression that this was something that none of them had ever seriously considered.

One of the women then remembered that “music” was originally proposed for *The Book of Symbols*, but that it was cut due to space. “Let me go get the materials for you,” she offered, and brought out a dusty file folder labeled “music/musician.” The file contained information and images of instruments, musicians, and different kinds of musical notation from all over the world. It also included several variations of the Orpheus myth. All of this was very interesting, but again, not wholly satisfying, for it struck me that even here, they were engaging with the symbol of “music” as a *visual* object. I wanted to know about symbols *in* music – *sound*-symbols, so to speak – and how these might be understood in relation to archetypes.

“The power of the human voice,” writes Peter O’Loughlin, “is unmistakable.” From the moment we unleash our first cry at birth, our contact with the world is being carried out in the medium of the voice through speaking, singing, shouting, crying, laughing, and groaning. (O’Loughlin, 1995, p. 162) In his book *Music Quickens Time*, Daniel Barenboim points out that our relationship with sound develops even earlier than that, since the ear comes to life in the fetus of a pregnant woman on the forty-fifth day, giving it a seven-and-a-half-month advance over the eye. (Barenboim, 2008, p. 22) Why, then, do we find this bias towards the visual in the study of archetypes and symbols? Barenboim argues that we live in a “primarily visual society,” which tends toward identification with the sensory experience of seeing over hearing. (Barenboim, 2008, p. 22). Indeed, visual images are often the common reference point for human mimetic experience, even though studies suggest that auditory memory is, for most people, more acute.

In oral cultures, where a stronger emphasis on aural capacities is required, there is a more heightened awareness of the powers of sound. But even in modern Western society, this perspective has been retained, primarily religious cultures. Indeed, virtually all human communities use some form of communal music-making as an integral part of their religious rituals. Among religious communities, the experience of music-making is fairly ubiquitous, and is commonly understood to serve as a bridge between the ordinary consciousness of our everyday reality and an expanded, more

unitive consciousness relating to the infinite. (Bruscia, 1998) Indeed, music is frequently cited along with religion and language as one of the major human universals, and one of the distinguishing factors between humanity and the rest of the animal kingdom.

Given the power that the voice, along with various forms of auditory expression and sound-play defined as “music” have in human society, particularly in terms of eliciting “numinous” experiences, the lack of discussion in Jungian literature about how sound-symbols function is particularly striking. Perhaps Jung’s own ambivalence about music contributed to the oversight, since he never embarked on any major scholarly pursuits of his own regarding music or sound and did not leave behind any extensive literature on the subject for future scholars to develop. Moreover, Jung was frequently cited as being rather unsympathetic to music, musicians, and the role of sound in archetypal studies and analytic psychology for most of his career. (Tilly, 1982, p. 124)

However, a turning point occurred for Jung in 1956, when he called on musician Margaret Tilly to visit him at his home in order to discuss a paper she had given on the potential role of music in psychoanalysis. He confessed to her that he had dismissed all previous literature on music therapy, on the premise that it was too “sentimental.” When asked about his own relationship to music, he admitted that he never listened anymore, saying, “It exhausts and irritates me.” When Tilly inquired as to why, Jung apparently replied: “Because music is dealing with *such deep archetypal material*, and those who play don’t realize this.” (Tilly, 1982, p. 125, emphasis mine) Apparently, it was not the case that Jung did not think music or sound had any significant relationship to symbolic or archetypal material. On the contrary, after a long session with Ms. Tilly he exclaimed,

this opens up whole new avenues of research I’d never even dreamed of...I feel from now on music should be an essential part of every analysis. This reaches the deep archetypal material that we can only sometimes reach in our analytical work with patients. (Tilly, 1982)

It is furthermore reported that just before Jung’s death, he had plans to construct an “Aeolian harp” at Bollingen that would hang from a tree to be caressed by the wind, producing “a music of the spheres: archetypal and primordial.” (Knapp, 1988, p. 212) Thus, it would seem that Dr. Jung

experienced a significant change of mind about the relationship of sounds and music to archetypal studies at the end of his life. Unfortunately, he was not able to pursue further study on the topic in his lifetime. Thankfully, a growing number of musicians, musicologists, and music therapists have begun to put the pieces together, which I will compile here in an effort to begin shaping an understanding of how we might understand and work with sounds on a symbolic or archetypal level.

I suspect that part of the difficulty with approaching sounds as symbols rests in the complications inherent in addressing the subject of symbols and archetypes altogether, for we are forced to use a conflation of both signs and symbols in order to communicate in the first place about archetypes at all. In other words, we have no direct access to them. Taking into consideration the distinction that Jung makes between signs and symbols, the matter can get quite confusing: all language is composed of symbols, which are used to create words. Those words then become signs, signifiers of known referents. But they also can become signs for symbols, which are signifiers for the archetypes, defined as referents that are known to us *only* by their symbols. The word “water,” for example, can call to mind the referent of water, which is made up of a composite memory of all our material experiences of water. At the same time, Jung would argue, the symbol also serves as a signifier for a deeper, collective sense of water that is embedded in our unconscious, which enables and activates an innate human experience of water. Within this linguistic schema, sounds serve as symbols upon which all other signs and symbol-objects are built. As such, they can represent multivalent layers of signification that can bring us much closer to the archetypes themselves. In other words, sounds – and the meaningful arrangement of sounds into words or music – serve as something like symbols of symbols.

Richard Wagner claimed something along these same lines when he said that music “speaks out the very thing which word speech in itself cannot speak out...that which, looked at from the standpoint of our human intellect, is the *unspeakable*.” (Lipscomb, 2005, p. 389) This, of course, is the basis for his development of leitmotifs in opera, which has had a profound impact on film music:

sound-symbols that accompany the drama have the capacity to carry and convey multivalent layers of archetypal meaning. Suzanne Langer writes that “music has all the earmarks of a true symbolism except one: the existence of an *assigned connotation*,” making music what she calls an “unconsummated symbol.” (Lipscomb, 2005, p. 389) This unconsummated symbol is experienced as “archetypal” whenever its meaning is derived from – and reenacts or reflects – universal human experiences that reside in the collective unconscious. Here, at the deepest subliminal levels of the psyche – an area that is usually inaccessible to the conscious mind – “the great artist descends for inspiration [and] is exposed to a living system of reactions and aptitudes that determine the path his work will take.” (Knapp, 1988, p. 1)

Kenneth Bruscia has delineated the archetypal functions of music into two categories: *referential* and *non-referential*. He defines *referential* music as that which seeks to express or depict specific archetypal symbols like the hero, the villain, romance, the quest, etc., in an obvious or overt way, whereas *non-referential* music “reenacts the energy forms that precede and underlie the myth, as indigenously nonverbal experiences of the human condition (i.e. conflict, balance, harmony) that come into consciousness through reenactment.” (Bruscia, 1998) It is in the first, *referential* sense that Carolyn Kenny discusses the archetypal nature of music, suggesting that it is able to represent themes like birth and death through tension and resolution in the music, or through the relationship between various textures and timbres. (Kenny, 2002) Knapp, alternatively, describes music as archetypal in the *non-referential* sense, endowed with “repetitions, modulations, leitmotifs, associations, multiple variants, and combinations” that emanate from “the matrix of life.” (Knapp, 1988, p. 3) The German philosopher Schopenhauer seems to suggest that music can only be archetypal in a *non-referential* sense, writing:

[Music] never expresses the phenomenon, but only the inner nature, the in-itself, of every phenomenon, the will itself. Therefore music does not express this or that particular and definite pleasure, this or that affliction, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety...but joy, sorrow, horror, gaiety...peace of mind *themselves*, to a certain extent in the abstract; their essential nature...we understand them perfectly in this extracted quintessence. (Knapp, 1988, p. 12)

Quoting from Meyer, Ian Cross speaks of music's capacity to hint, allude, connote, and refer both *to* itself and *beyond* itself, simultaneously in such a way that can be both *referential* and *non-referential*. Musical meaning is therefore created through "connotative complexes":

Music does not present the concept or image of death itself. Rather it connotes that rich realm of experience in which death and darkness, night and cold, winter and sleep and silence are all combined and consolidated into a single connotative complex...What music presents is not any one of these metaphorical events but rather that which is common to all of them, that which enables them to become metaphors for one another. Music presents a generic event, a 'connotative complex', which then becomes particularized in the experience of the individual listener. (Cross, 2005, p. 34)

Regardless of *how* sounds are understood to convey symbolic and archetypal content, numerous thinkers from a variety of fields have expressed the sense that sound's ability to access deeper layers of human experience is somehow innate. Recalling experiences from her many years working as a music therapist, Carolyn Kenny noticed how her patients seemed to "just know" where to go on the piano and other instruments during improvisational healing exercises, writing that it was "as if their brains were programmed with forms. This could be pre-cognition." (Kenny, 2002) Astronomer Johannas Kepler was also known to have speculated from his work concerning music interval ratios and the space between planets that "the musical proportions must be inborn in the human soul," using language similar to that of Carl Jung. (Hamel, 1979, p. 121)

Of course, Kepler's idea that music is foundational to the universe was by no means a new hypothesis. Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle all spoke of the "music of the spheres" in ancient Greek texts that influenced more than two millennia of Western thought on the subject. This notion was further developed by Boethius in the sixth century, and was reflected in the educational systems of medieval Europe, where music was studied alongside geometry, arithmetic, and astrology as part of the *quadrivium* curriculum representing the four foundational subjects for all philosophical knowledge. "Musical laws" and techniques of "acoustic self-realization" were believed to be central to understanding the universe. (Hamel, 1979, p. 100) Hamel furthermore points out that:

among the ancients...music was seen as part of the terrestrial blueprint, as the foundation of the world, even as the world-soul itself....music was inaudible; only its symbol was

audible...The unheard substance of the cosmos, the Essential, was in both cases sound and tone. These demanded expression and representation by means of notes and instruments. (Hamel, 1979, p. 93)

Placed in relation to modern notions of the archetypes and archetypal expression, music and other sounds are frequently acknowledged as having a power that exceeds other forms of communication. Bettina Knapp goes so far as to suggest that the archetypal layer of existence *is* music. In other words, what we hear *as* “*music*” is archetypal in its most direct, symbolic form. Knapp’s argument that the musical archetypes underlie all other forms of literary or visual human expression is poetically expressed, and worth quoting at length:

As custodians and channelers of creative energy, musical archetypes dictate the creative individual’s verbal composition: the manner in which fantasy images are conveyed and laid out acoustically, the intensity of the feelings expressed, the sensations and behavioral trajectories of the characters, and the linguistical schemes of the prose or poetry used....The writer transforms the sound waves leaping up from within his collective unconscious into words endowed with their own auditory, rhythmical, and sensory motifs....If the reader is affected by the archetypal music picked up by his inner ear, whose rhythms are scanned by his senses, his heartbeat might accelerate, his muscles tense, his blood pressure increase, and his entire emotional system marvel at this collective power alive within him. As a suggestive power, archetypal music may summon up infinite musical resonances within the reader; sound waves of different lengths and traveling at a variety of speeds open up fresh causeways of feelings. Love, rage, hatred, violence, passivity, serenity, may be regarded as cathartic or reactive – may stir, build, beguile, or repel a whole panoply of affinities within the reader – as archetypal music had done within the author when he was the recipient of this spellbinding force.” (Knapp, 1988, p. 4)

One way to make sense of why music has been so widely understood as archetypal in its expression of religious or spiritual content is to consider what music even *is*. It is important to remember that what Western thinkers call “music” is *not* a universally monolithic concept, but one that varies greatly across cultures. That said, we can broadly define music as the meaningful arrangement of sounds. Thinking acoustically, we know that sounds are essentially vibrations, and different kinds of sounds carry different kinds of vibrations. Sound vibrations are a kinetic source of energy that exists within and through all objects in the entire universe. (Amir, 1995, p. 52) It is notable that within the deaf community, music is not experienced as an auditory phenomenon, but as a purely visceral, physical experience of vibrations. O’Loughlin has observed that on both a

metaphorical and metaphysical level, “movement is life, and lack of movement is death.”

(O'Loughlin, 1995, p. 164) So while for many people, music is felt to be a more “abstract” form of human expression – particularly when compared to artistic mediums that are more visually engaging – sound is unique in its ability to convey both essence (spirit) and being (matter) simultaneously. In this way, music can connect us to the transcendent while at the same time imbuing us physically with that sense of movement which is intrinsic to all life. Semantic scholar and music therapist Carolyn Kenny therefore describes music as “distinctly ecological.” (Kenny, 2002)

The ancient Greeks believed that the first manifestation of thought that created the world was song, and that “the sound of the primal vibration sacrificed itself so that it might become progressively transformed into an upward-spiraling rhythm of ever-higher, newly-formed vibrations.” (Hamel, 1979, p. 109) Even modern physicists agree that every organism – from the smallest grain of sand to the stars and the planets – exhibits its own “vibratory rate.” Because of this, the Greeks believed that a body could be disintegrated and/or cognized simply by knowing its rate of vibration and harnessing its note or basic resonance-frequency. By this same understanding, singing and rhythmical speech may be considered, in the deepest ritual sense, an “active conjuration, a creative act within the world’s acoustic foundations,” which has the power to transform human beings on both physical and spiritual levels of existence. (Hamel, 1979, p. 109)

Thus, we find instances in which various cultures throughout the world have found ways of connecting with and manifesting their understanding of the Divine through sound. In the ancient near East, for example, the *pneuma* – the breath – was understood as the living manifestation of the spirit of God. Because each vowel penetrates a different breath cavity, ancient papyri would speak of the ruler of the Gods, King Adonai, as Lord I-A-O-U-E-Ae, or the “Eye of the World” I-E-O-U-E-Y. Likewise, the Jewish name of God, *Jehovah*, was based on the vowels I-E-O-U-A. By utilizing every vowel, sounds filling every breath cavity with the name of God were used as the sonic signifier for God. (Hamel, 1979, p. 115) Similarly, the Upanishads of the ancient East speak of the OM as being

“in truth the whole universe.” The OM is understood as the sound from which all other words originate, the primal vibration or basic natural force inherent in all phenomena, from which everything emerges. It is upon this mantra that many yogis are encouraged to focus most (if not all) of their meditations. (Knapp, 1988, p. 5)

“Mystically speaking,” writes Knapp, “*voice* combines the collective creative breath of spirit (pneuma) with the individual breath of the performer,” and Hamel therefore cautions that the power of a *mantra*, whatever its materiality or purpose, is always intimately bound up with the state of consciousness of the performer. A *mantra* is not merely a sound-wave phenomenon of the physical sort; thus, it is understood to have no effect when performed by one who is ignorant. (Hamel, 1979, p. 110) This is what I call the *aesthetic necessity*: the relationship between our physiological experience of sonic phenomenon and the meaning we assign to it depends largely on aesthetic context. While it may be tempting to think of sound’s power as an innately supernatural or mystical force that carries inherent meanings that are embedded in the frequencies and rhythms of the vibration itself, as Lisa Summer puts it, “the real power of sound is always symbolic, and humanistic.” (Summer, 1995, p. 60)

One example of this is how the ancient Greeks (and as a result, the early Christians) applied moral classifications to various modes of music, based on their understanding of the laws of acoustical interval ratios. The octave, fifth, and fourth intervals were considered *pneumata* or “spiritual sounds,” while seconds and thirds, called *somata*, were thought of as “bodily sounds.” This perspective continues to have a profound influence on the way that many modern musicians and music theorists think about sound’s meaning and power. Music therapists, medical scientists, and New Age healers alike have quested after some systematic, universal, and objective theory of sound that would allow people to apply healing techniques through the manipulation of certain tones and vibrations. (Hamel, 1979, p. 121)

Lisa Summer recognizes that this approach to music therapy is “seductive,” but argues that “any serious therapeutic application of the power of sound must consider and include the human element of compassion,” by which she means to emphasize the need for the music practitioner to be fully present to the patient, capable of improvising *within the context*, and utilizing their own aesthetic sensibilities along with an acute somatic awareness and genuine human empathy. (Summer, 1995, p. 64) Christopher Tree furthermore observes that the tendency to approach music as a systematic study of intervals, mathematical frequencies, and rigidly-defined scales will always be a poor substitute for the psychoactive energy of spontaneous creativity: “If it is so that creativity is essentially spontaneous,” he writes, “then it follows that the more spontaneous the music, the more creatively essential it should be.” (Tree, 1995, p. 83)

Ironically, the emphasis on the aesthetic necessity and the need for creative spontaneity within the field of music therapy raises an important caution to those who might be interested in pursuing scholarly efforts to outline sound’s symbolic nature in relation to the archetypes. Linguistic considerations of sound and music must be tempered with a certain humility, and a deference to the primary experience of direct, individual encounters with the archetypes through sound. “Archetypal music,” writes Knapp, “implies the emergence of a primal force which conveys the fruit of an inner experience of soma and psyche.” It is only after such “fruits” have arisen that the rational, disciplined, and ideational factors can enter in, to distill the raw materials of the unconscious by applying the aesthetic sensibilities of one’s cultural context. (Knapp, 1988, p. 212) Much in the same way that Jung resisted Freud’s application of rational, fixed meanings to particular dream symbols, we must also resist any temptation to narrowly define sound-symbols within music in this same way.

Kenneth Bruscia argues that therapeutic healing in music is available through the aesthetic experience itself, and that this is because of the ontological coherence coded in music’s revelation of beauty. He writes,

Music imparts ontological meaning on two levels: from within – as a rich texture of sounds in various relationships within one another; and from without – as part of a larger pattern of human life and as a manifestation of the larger order of the entire universe. Beauty is implicated in that it is no more or less than a phenomenon of universal order that we experience as an affirmation of ontological meaning. (Bruscia, 1998)

It is because of this inherent ontological meaning that musical experiences provide listeners (including musical performers) with peak or unitive moments that suspend the ordinary boundaries between self and music – or self and other – forming a new expanded whole in which music is no longer a mirror of the self, but “the music *is* the self on the way to becoming Self...The three components (self, other, and music) become indistinguishably one as part of the greater Self.” (Bruscia, 1998)

This paradox of the silent scream that presented itself to me as a persistent dream symbol ultimately led me down a fruitful trajectory of research that opened up new pathways of theoretical understanding, in addition to my own dream interpretation. In “Meetings with the Unsounded Voice,” Peter O’Laughlin writes, “while the power of the vocal expression is readily apparent, the power of the unsounded voice holds its own profound influence on the individual and those around him or her. These are the sounds which are held back in silence, in secrecy, in respect, in silent rage, in love.” (O’Loughlin, 1995, p. 162) Indeed, silence is much more than the serene and spiritual place “where the sacred traditions meet,” as *The Book of Symbols* suggests. For many, silence is the non-acoustic sound of oppression and imprisonment, a sound that is used to contain “the well containing the primary feelings of pain, rage, and shame, as well as joy and love, [and] practices a kind of death in which life force arising is always swallowed back down into the bruised stillness.”

In his depiction of a particular kind of vocal opening therapy that seeks to overcome this kind of entrapment, Peter O’Laughlin describes the sound that often comes from the eventual unleashing of an unsounded voice:

[It is] a groan which grows with repetition into something more like thunder, a startling sound which is no longer human nor identifiable in human terms, but rather is the pitch of life itself swelling from a source larger than this one being’s body. In unison it is the bellow of a lion and the howl of the wind, a cry of death

and a call of the newly living. We know that later we will hear the stories of trauma and abuse which led to this outpouring of unlimited feeling. But right now the sound is the story, complete and wholly authentic in its resonance. Each of us in the room is encompassed by its force in a way which gathers all our stories and unexpressed longing into its reverberations. There is no one person making this sound. (O'Loughlin, 1995, p. 164)

In his Epistle to the Romans (8:26), the apostle Paul acknowledges that much of the time we do not know what to pray for. But in these moments, he says, the Spirit (*pneuma*) intercedes for us with “sighs too deep for words.” In the Greek, the word translated as “sighs” (στεναγμός) is more accurately translated as something more akin to my silent scream: the unutterable groan of acute distress. It has been said that whenever you hear a scream in the hospital, it helps to know whether you are in the maternity ward or the intensive care unit. On an archetypal level, however, I wonder how much of a difference it really makes. For there is a place within all of us where those shouts reside, and in the sound of cries unleashed, we are connected back to the deepest part of ourselves, and beyond.

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