

On Rhythm

If, as one finds it set out in the transcendental aesthetic of Kant's first *Critique*, space and time are the pre-conditions of experience, then melody and rhythm might be similarly set out as the preconditions of music. The analogy, I want to suggest, is not as loose as it might at first sight appear. Melody moves, and if it moves, then there must be, not only prior to that movement but rather in a way pre-suppositional to the very possibility of that movement, musical space. Melodies rise and fall, they leap wide intervals, they slide minor seconds, they move within space given limits by the highest and lowest notes of their instrument's register – limits which exist within the more expansive space of the lowest to highest audible pitches. But while melody moves in what we might call the sonic space that makes that melodic movement so much as possible, that sonic space is not clearly, or in an immediately evident sense, *contained* within real space. Miles Davis leaps from a low E-natural to a high C, like a trapeze artist in danger, just barely catches it after an unsure or fumbling attack, and falls back to a B-natural. He moves *like* a trapeze artist; he does not move *with* him. Rhythm is, I think in a telling way, different: the time within which rhythm moves (although as we will see shortly in an important way, very different from) seems contained within, or to coincide exactly with, real time.

I once saw Max Roach walk on stage with a single snare drum, sit down behind it, and hold an audience of four hundred people absolutely, motionlessly, spellbound for about four minutes. Every rhythmic figure, every gesture, set up and then followed through (in terms of its rhythmic logic), took place *within* the actual four minutes of real time. Davis moved in sonic, or figurative, or metaphorical, "space". Roach moved in real time. As

Davis leaped, dangerously, that wide upward interval, he did so in a non-literal space that makes that melodic movement not real – it was a musical *representation* of movement. Did roach's solo *represent* time? One wants to say: No, because it took place in real time – the clock ticked for about four minutes – it *presented* time. It in fact could not represent time, for the simple reason that the real thing – time – could not be gotten out of the way in order to represent it: whatever Roach did, the clock was still ticking, duration still increasing at a steady rate. I have suggested elsewhere that jazz improvisation can – in some ways – be helpfully seen as a representational art. Melodically, we can already, with a single example of what we call an interval *leap*, see how this might be developed – the space that is the musical analogue to the Kantian precondition is metaphorical. But *rhythm*? Since it invariably and without exception takes place within the real time of its performance or audition, trying to represent it would be like trying to send a representative of yourself to a meeting by going yourself. It can't work, because you are always already there. Or to put it another way: the widest interval leap possible on an instrument – say a low E to a high C over three and one-half octaves up on a guitar – takes no more *actual* space than does a minor second. By contrast the longest drum solo in musical history takes very much more time – actual time – than the shortest.

Given these reflections, one might rush to announce a grand contrast between the nature of space and time as they function in music. One could do this, but – as I expect the musicians in the room are already thinking – one would be wrong. Interestingly, and very, wrong. We need a finer-toothed comb to see the truth here. It is I think undeniable that the differences I have just sketched – differences concerning the metaphorical character of spatial movement in melody and the literal character of temporal duration in

rhythm – exist. But one does not want the foregrounding of these differences to blind us to the similarities.

Thanks to Arthur Danto, we now readily recognize what it means to say that, of a piece of found art (say driftwood or a men’s room plumbing fixture) that, in terms of what is retinally discernible, it is what it is prior to our viewing it as art. In this sense, John Cage’s 4:33 is a piece of found sonic art: it fixes a duration of time within which, sonically speaking, what happens, happens, and we hear what would not have been art within these durational limits as art. This might seem to show, in the most dramatic form, the preceding philosophical point in music itself, i.e. that musical duration is – again like the person who tries to represent himself – always already literally there and thus the kind of thing that cannot by its nature be, by analogy to spatial sonic representation, represented. On this line of thinking, what is sonically discernible for a given duration will already be there *for that exact* duration. But then how could rhythm, as a primary organizational element of music, ever be expressive? Well, *duration* – the sole structural content of Cage’s piece, isn’t. But Cage’s piece does not serve to reveal the hidden essence of all music with regard to the character of musical time. Indeed, it is as remote from other musical cases as driftwood is from Rembrandt. So here the closer investigation begins.

Cage’s piece specifies duration, but it does not specify meter, pulse, time signature, or indeed any *definition* of musical time. It is for this reason that what is of real interest about Cage’s subtractive invention is not what it reveals, but what it precludes. What sense could the concepts of *accelerando*, *ritardando*, or *rubato* have within that duration? Instructively, none. And here we begin to see why rhythm, as performed, has more in

common with Rauschenberg's bed than with Duchamp's fountain. Rauschenberg, as a commentary on Plato's famous chapter, applied paint to (borrowing Danto's helpful language again) a mere real thing. In doing so, he worked on a surface, over the top of a pre-existent structure. This last phrase describes what musicians do with rhythm. The bed, the duration, *is* there, and there is no debate about that. But the expressive gesture is one made over, or upon, that set foundation. The passage of time within musical duration is set – the clock keeps ticking. But if the metronome is clicking (and I mean here an actual or inwardly-imagined or – perhaps better – inwardly-sensed one), then the definition of the temporal divisions that structure musical time is – unlike Cage's mere real duration – provided. And suddenly, with that context provided, all the rhythmically-expressive terms mentioned above (*ritardando*, *rubato*, etc.) make sense. How so, precisely?

Once the rate of the beat – the tempo – is established, the mere real duration is subdivided. And those subdivisions, temporal building blocks, are then grouped into larger-block patterns that themselves display organizational differentiations: if ordered into a time-signature of 4/4, then four of those fill (what we call, appropriately) a measure. So far, this is obvious and simple. But syncopation makes this instantly less simple, and it begins to answer the preceding questions asking how rhythm could be so much as expressive. Melodic structures exhibit forms of tension and resolution – we have leading tones that, as we say, can demand resolution to the tonic. (Harmonic structures can of course do the same, e.g. tri-tone resolution to a 3rd or inverted-third 6th.) That tension calls for resolution in metaphorical melodic space – and now we can begin to see that rhythm, *when heard against the imaginative backdrop of measured duration*, can do

the same. The syncopations of three against four, or two against three, or of quarter-note triplets, resolve on a downbeat that falls at the end of a syncopated cycle – this is like a clockwork mechanism, where wheels-within-wheels, moving in their own cycles, all finally meet at once. That syncopation and its resolution, I want to suggest, is Rauschenberg’s paint, not Cage’s duration. And if that’s true, then the bed is the measured duration against which the syncopation takes on its – metaphorical, and thus now representational – tension. Measured duration is mere real time; a syncopated figure superimposed over that – if you will, painted over that – is not. To return to Kant for a moment: measured duration is the precondition for the possibility of rhythmic expressivity; patterns of tension and release are its condition. But not only syncopated tension and release: acceleration and deceleration function expressively (and render our rhythmic terms intelligible) in a performance against the unheard backdrop mentioned a moment ago – it is as if we, as listeners, gauge the rate of deceleration in a *ritardando* against the imaginary ideal of the mental metronome. That is, the rhythmic *placement* (as we tellingly say) is heard against that which we decidedly do not actually hear, and it is only against that duration-measuring backdrop that expressive rhythmic movement can be discerned. When Johnny Hartman sings the closing ascending line of *Lush Life* with John Coltrane, we hear the aching quality of that unaccompanied *ritardando* against what he, or the rhythm section if it were still playing, *would have done* had he not delayed; it is the *arrival* of each pitch that has a beauty all its own. The words “Those whose lives are lonely too” are sad. The melody is resigned. It is the rhythmic placement that is heartbroken.

But then matters of the imagined temporal backdrop, as every player knows, are not as

simple as all this. Pulse, as a rhythmic measure, is different from time signature: when Stan Getz's last quartet launches into what must be one of the great performances of all time of *On Green Dolphin Street*, the pulse – beneath the time signature of 4/4 – is 2/2, half what an analyst working from the score would expect. And although the 2/2 pulse is left behind, it is, throughout the piece, never forgotten. If one asks, well then where is it, one has an interestingly bad question, one not unlike Augustine's asking, if his youth left him, where did it go? One too easily thinks, according to a simplifying dualistic template, that the 2/2 pulse must be either occurrently in the minds of the players, or in the audible sound they are making. I want to suggest, for rhythmic phenomena such as a 2/2 pulse that is initially vividly apparent and then gradually submerged beneath an emergent 4/4, a very different model: one might say that it is in the aesthetic analogue to what moral philosophers have discussed as collective intention. It is a collectively emergent fact about the rhythmic under-structure of the performance: the 2/2 pulse is played over the top of, like a rhythmic palimpsest, but never fully effaced. And like collective intention, it would not be reducible to an determinate episode in the minds of the players, or the mind of any one player (and then handed off like a relay race from one to the other to keep it alive) at any one time. Nor can one precisely point to it in the sound, as one can point to the leap of a minor sixth. Augustine's youth gradually, imperceptibly, left him (as we say with a splash of minor poetry), yet he lived with the memory of it, and at one point in retrospect he realized it was no longer there – except as a memory that inflects the present. That is not so unlike the state of Getz and his players by the time they reach the final chorus of the performance. There is of course much more to say about this (and particularly about collective intention), but before closing I'd like to identify a few more

issues concerning rhythm.

A player can play on the beat, behind the beat, or in front of (or on top of) the beat. That itself is telling language: neo-behaviorist impulses might lead us to say that this before, on, and behind the beat talk must be nonsense (I assure you it is not), because after all the sounded percussive events just *are* the beat – you get what you hear. But that reductive impulse also fails to see the representational gap between the duration and the musical handling of time over the top of it. If one plays in front of the beat, one places the attack just at the earliest possible moment, but in a way that avoids the rhythmic sin of rushing (i.e. where the tempo is inadvertently accelerated). This playing sounds alert, fully present, attentive, eager to participate, being on top of things – representationally speaking, one might say it rhythmically portrays alacrity. (Art Blakey, for one, often sounds like this.) Playing behind the beat – the placing of the attack at the last possible moment before committing the sin of dragging (inadvertently decelerating) – by contrast portrays a casual, relaxed, perhaps languid sense of unhurried participation. And with these two expressively-significant rhythmic placements in focus, playing *on* the beat becomes particularly interesting in terms of the larger contrast between measured duration and rhythm that I am trying to bring out: playing on the beat is rather like one of Danto's indiscernible counterparts – it is sonically indistinguishable from the measured duration over which it is performed, but nonetheless is ontologically different from it. Of course I should add that the descriptions “in front of”, “on”, and “behind” the beat mark stations along a wide continuum – these are not fixed points one learns as one may learn to place the pitch of A –natural precisely at 440 beats per second. Count Basie's unmatched rhythm section with guitarist Freddie Green itself constitutes a definitive

study of this continuum.

Critics are right, I believe, to say synaesthetically that Diana Krall's voice sounds like smoky scotch. That nicely describes the texture of the voice. But no such textural description could answer one of the helpfully specific questions in musical aesthetics: what made Sinatra *Sinatra*? The texture, the quality, of the vocal instrument certainly did not hurt (although later in his career, after returning from retirement, that was not true). Sinatra understood the expressive quality of rhythmic placement as well as any singer I've heard, and he was in this respect a kind of double-layered Rauschenberg. He moved phrases, or even more effectively, fragments of them, across bar lines, making them elastic without breaking them, picking them up and shifting them to new positions. He moved swiftly, within a single phrase, from before, to behind, to on the beat – where that beat was the one sounded, the one played. And it is just here that we see his double-layered work: Sinatra placed his phrases over a rhythm as sounded that was itself, as described above, layered over the top of measured duration. Like Getz's unforgotten under-girding in 2/2 while playing an aggressive 4/4, he knew precisely where the unsounded metronome was, he knew precisely where his rhythm section was in relation to that, and like the trapeze artist who appears always to just barely make it, he knew precisely how to shift rhythmic placements over the top of that sounded foundation. When Rauschenberg erased de Kooning, he worked, subtractively, over the top of the line de Kooning had placed before that over the top of a drawing paper's open space. Sinatra was able to elide phrases in a subtractive way that compressed the force of the phrase as written, and he did so over the top of the rhythm section's own placement of pulse and exactly defined signature over open time. Sinatra, to be sure, moved in melodic space.

But it was his inimitable maneuvers in rhythmic time – time of a kind never reducible to temporal duration – that made him who he was. And within his work he showed that, in truth – against what initially appears as the irreconcilable difference between musical space and time – rhythm is as free from measured duration as melodic movement is from actual space.