

# Music as a Global Language

Zoe Wolf

“Music is a powerful means of communication by which people share emotions, intentions, and meanings,” writes UK-based piano teacher Frances Wilson. While some claim music has no meaning, it remains a global language.

Maria Zavogianni, a clinical linguist and classical musician, notes that some individuals claim that music only pertains to entertainment. However, people throughout history have used music to give orders, evoke emotion, and provide additional information (Zavogianni). According to Cameron Sauers, a student at the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College, a historical example of giving orders through music is the drummer boy from the Civil War times. Officers used their services to give orders and direct troops amidst the fog and chaos of combat (Sauers). Author of historic novels for young readers Carolyn Reeder writes that in the noise and confusion of battle it was often impossible to hear the officers’ orders. Therefore, each order was given a series of drumbeats to represent it. Both soldiers and drummers had to learn which drumroll meant “meet here,” and which meant “retreat,” and all the other commands of the battlefield and camp (Reeder). Wrongly communicated messages could lead to needless casualties in battle (Sauers).

Civil war officers were not the only ones to use music to relay information. Beethoven was famous because of his interest in the human soul. Unrestrained feelings filled his works: passion, love, and even hate and aggression (Cameron). Leon Botstein, the music director of the American Symphony Orchestra, writes that Beethoven wished his specific narratives to be hidden so that the music might be accessible and persuasive to musicians and listeners without reference to them. Beethoven’s music has come to be identified with transcendental notions of struggle, revolution, and the sublime. Ideals of freedom and emancipation from tyranny permeate works such as his only opera, *Fidelio* (British Library). But what explains the persistent and unique popularity of Beethoven's instrumental music? One of the plausible answers is the uncanny connection between Beethoven's manipulation of musical logic and formal procedures in sonata form. Also, his use of musical time within sonata form as a translation into a literary and visual narrative helps to shed light on why Beethoven has remained so popular. (Botstein).

Moreover, video production company 2Bridges Productions elucidates movie producers’ and directors’ high awareness of the abilities of the musical language. For *Star Wars* fans, when you close your eyes and imagine a galaxy far, far away, it takes the strongest of wills not to burst along to the catchy theme. It has created an identity for the franchise, inspiring an adventurous sense of defying-the-odds. One famous example of the most iconic scores in film history would be the haunting tubas from “Jaws”. Composer John Williams managed to create a chilling theme for the movie, establishing a motif of danger and dread that contributed massively to the franchise’s success. When the tubas started playing, viewers knew straight away what was coming, even if the threat was not visible. Music goes where words cannot, speaking when words fail. Music serves purposes that include enhancing storytelling and fostering emotional connections (2Bridges Productions).

On the other hand, people insist that the passages of music do not have any obvious meaning. They also contend that music does not communicate anything specific (Dorrell). Music is often crucial to the experience of enjoying a film. It helps shape emotional responses and comments on the action in movies. In certain pieces of film, music has transcended its cinematic roots. Take for example the haunting tubas of *Jaws* mentioned above. Those musical accents mean terror, whether or not they are associated with the images of sharks (Grybowski). An idea of the importance most studios attach to music is attested by the fact that the salary of a film's musical director can range from \$63,000 a year ("Music Directors and Composers") to \$122,000 a year ("Films LLC Salary for Music Director"). In an interview with Stephen Watts, influential film director Alfred Hitchcock said, "The first and most obvious use of music in film is atmospheric. To create excitement. To heighten tensivity. In a scene of action, for instance, when the aim is to build up to a physical climax, music adds excitement. In the days of silent films, when the villain was coming, you always had the orchestra playing quickening music. You felt the menace" (153).

Correspondingly, Neil Brand, a seasoned silent film accompanist, stipulates that music, when combined with storytelling, is primarily one thing: information. Music tells us about characters, about major turning-points in the story, and about the deep subtext beneath a scene. It can tell us when a character is lying, when we are being asked to concentrate on something else on the screen, when to be swept up in the action, and when to sit back and view it dispassionately. The impossible worlds of *Harry Potter*, *Marvel*, *James Bond*, and *Lord of the Rings* are made possible because music helps us to empathize with their unrealities. Without music, the escapism does not work (Brand).

Furthermore, music is a powerful means of communication, especially when the meanings of the spoken languages may be mutually incomprehensible, according to Senior Lecturer in Music Psychology at Keele University Alexandra Lamont. However, some believe that language is only used for communication and that we do not really know what music is (Dorrell). Despite that, Diana Cameron, who has worked in the early childhood industry for over thirty years, recognizes that music and speech have two major characteristics in common: timing and pitch. These two elements are essential to both speech and music (Cameron). Without timing, which is referred to as rhythm in music, neither speech nor music would make sense. Imagine the confusion you would feel when listening to a recording that has been sped up tenfold. In order to get anything out of it, the timing must be right. Have you ever noticed how at the end of an interrogative sentence, that the pitch of your voice sounds a little higher than is typical? In fact, if you end every sentence with a higher pitch, everything you say will sound like a question. Pitch is important to speech, just as it is to music. Pitch is simply what makes it possible to label a sound as "lower" or "higher" (Britannica).

Lastly, music possesses an emotional value. The use of music encompasses the essentials of an effective communication strategy. According to Elise Lemaire, alumna of the International Laboratory of Research on Brain, Music, and Sound, the thoughtful manipulation of structural and emotional musical parameters makes music a powerful and innovative communication tool that can effectively capture attention and communicate with the population (477-479). Katricia Stewart, who earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Music, observed that the experience and expression of

emotions influence behavior and are core aspects of human life. The expression and inducement of emotional states often occur through music. Music has innate, essential, and intricate ties to our human experience (14).

In conclusion, my argument that music is a global language is demonstrated by people of all generations using it to communicate. Music provides information where words fail. Additionally, timing and pitch are essential to both speech and music. Music communicates emotion in a language that listeners across the globe can understand.

#### Works Cited

- Botstein, Leon. "Why Beethoven?" *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 93, no. 3–4, 2011, pp. 361-365. <https://doi.org/10.1093/musqtl/gdq023>.
- Brand, Neil. "The Power of Music-When Film and Music Meet" *British Council*, 30 Jan. 2023, [music.britishcouncil.org/news-and-features/2023-01-30/the-power-of-music-when-film-and-music-meet](https://music.britishcouncil.org/news-and-features/2023-01-30/the-power-of-music-when-film-and-music-meet).
- Cameron, Diana. "What Do Music and Speech Have in Common?" *Building Brain Connections*, [buildingbrainconnections.com/what-do-music-and-speech-have-in-common/#](https://buildingbrainconnections.com/what-do-music-and-speech-have-in-common/#).
- Dorrell, Philip. "The Differences Between Music and Language" *What Is Music*, 21 June 2015, [whatismusic.info/blog/TheDifferencesBetweenMusicAndLanguage.html](https://whatismusic.info/blog/TheDifferencesBetweenMusicAndLanguage.html)
- "Films LLC Salary for Music Director." *Salary.com*, [www.salary.com/research/company/films-llc/music-director-salary?cjid=15351243](https://www.salary.com/research/company/films-llc/music-director-salary?cjid=15351243).
- Grybowski, Adam. "Symposium Examines the Role of Music in Film." *News@Rider*, 14 Oct. 2014, [www.rider.edu/about/news/2014/10/14/symposium-examines-role-music-film](https://www.rider.edu/about/news/2014/10/14/symposium-examines-role-music-film).
- Lamont, Alexandra. *Musical Communication*, edited by Dorothy Miell, Raymond MacDonald, and David J. Hargreaves, Oxford University Press, 2005. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198529361.001.0001>.
- Lemaire, Elise Cournoyer. "Extraordinary Times Call for Extraordinary Measures: The Use of Music to Communicate Public Health Recommendations Against the Spread of COVID-19." *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, vol. 111, no. 4, 2020, pp. 477-479. doi:10.17269/s41997-020-00379-2.
- "Ludwig Van Beethoven" *The British Library*, [www.bl.uk/people/ludwig-van-beethoven](https://www.bl.uk/people/ludwig-van-beethoven).
- "Music Directors and Composers." *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, 6 Sept. 2023, [www.bls.gov/ooh/entertainment-and-sports/music-directors-and-composers.htm](https://www.bls.gov/ooh/entertainment-and-sports/music-directors-and-composers.htm).
- "Pitch". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 30 Mar. 2023, [www.britannica.com/art/pitch-music](https://www.britannica.com/art/pitch-music).
- Reeder, Carolyn. "Drummer Boys Played Important Roles in the Civil War, and Some Became Soldiers." *The Washington Post*, 21 Feb. 2012, [www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/kidspost/drummer-boys-played-important-roles-in-the-civil-war-and-some-became-soldiers/2012/01/31/gIQA3cKzRR\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/kidspost/drummer-boys-played-important-roles-in-the-civil-war-and-some-became-soldiers/2012/01/31/gIQA3cKzRR_story.html).
- Sauers, Cameron. "The Little Civil War Drummer Boy" *The Gettysburg Compiler*, 14 May 2019, [gettysburgcompiler.org/2019/05/14/the-little-civil-war-drummer-boy/](https://gettysburgcompiler.org/2019/05/14/the-little-civil-war-drummer-boy/).

- Stewart, Katricia D. F. "The Essentialism of Music in Human Life and Its Roots in Nature." *Digital Commons @Linfield*, Linfield University, Dec. 2014, pp. 14, [digitalcommons.linfield.edu/muscstud\\_theses/6](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/muscstud_theses/6).
- Watts, Stephen. "Alfred Hitchcock on Music in Films." *Celluloid Symphonies: Texts and Contexts in Film Music History*, edited by Julie Hubbert, University of California, 2011, pp. 153. [doi.org/10.1525/9780520947436](https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520947436).
- "What Is the Role of Music in Film?" *2Bridges Productions*, [www.2bridges.nyc/nycblog/what-is-the-role-of-music-in-film/](http://www.2bridges.nyc/nycblog/what-is-the-role-of-music-in-film/).
- "What We Can Learn from Beethoven." *The Economist*, <https://worldin.economist.com/article/17530/edition2020what-we-can-learn-beethoven#>.
- Wilson, Frances. "How Do Musicians Express Their Emotions through Music?" *Interlude*, 4 Nov. 2018, [interlude.hk/communication](http://interlude.hk/communication).
- Zavogianni, Maria. "Language and Music: Different but Similar" *NEO-PRISM-C*, 29 Mar. 2022, [neoprismc.org/language-and-music-different-but-similar/](http://neoprismc.org/language-and-music-different-but-similar/).