

Caroline Carlson  
Music 414  
Professor Dill  
9/9/14

**Essay Prompt:** In not less than two pages, explain what Rosen means by the following quotation and explain whether or not you agree with it: “The history of an artistic ‘language’... cannot be understood in the same way as the history of a language used for everyday communication.”

In his book *The Classical Style*, Rosen says that the history of music cannot be understood in the same way that the history of a language can, even though both are communicative by nature and often compared. He identifies two main discrepancies within this comparison; the first being the idea that a musical style is not unlike a dialect of a language, and yet it is treated as an expression--not just a means of expression, and the second being the notion that in music, individual expression takes precedence over a collective norm. I agree with both of the points that he raises about the difference in the history of language vs. the history of music, and would like to elaborate on each of Rosen’s claims as I explain why.

Let us begin by asserting that music is composed in different styles, and, for the sake of this assignment and this course, let us take for example the Classical style. Now let us also assert that languages have different dialects or ‘styles’ in which they are spoken, such as English and British English. As one might imagine, the Classical period in music is characterized by the use of a Classical style. But the argument that Rosen raises is that the style in which the composers of the classical period wrote is not simply a variant on a means to an end, but rather the end in and of itself. In contrast, English and British English are ‘styles’ of the same language but a person’s reason for using them in communication is not to say something by using a particular dialect, but to say something *through* using a particular dialect, the specifics of which is likely arbitrarily decided by geographical location and habit. In this way, the history of lingual dialects and musical styles are really incomparable even though they seem to be quite similar. The space between conscious and unconscious employment of a musical style or dialect is what separates the two most, in my understanding of it, and their histories must be treated in accordance with this difference.

The second big point that Rosen raises regarding the difference between music history and the history of a language is that musical style is defined more by oddities and breaches of the preceding norm than by the norm itself. This is much different than a language, which is thought of not in terms of a couple of its individual speakers, but by its body of speakers as a whole regardless of their personal proclivities. The emphasis on the exceptional rather than the usual is especially troublesome when it comes to the history of music because to think of each piece in terms of its unique graces and characteristics negates the usefulness of grouping compositions or composers under any sort of unifying terms. Certainly individual tendencies can exist within a greater group (or periodic) tendency, but still the problem of how and by what to define the group tendency lingers. This is where style comes into play. But even where a discussion of style is introduced unity and cohesion, within the history of music, are hard won.

Charles Rosen is of the opinion that the Classical “style” itself is a fiction conjured by its most prolific composers (Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven) that comes out of three brilliant minds finding the same solutions to some of the shortcomings of the music of the pre-classical period.

As in visual and literary art “style” in music is more a convention for those who deal with studying it than for the artists themselves. Rosen points out, and I agree, that style in visual art helps bridge the gap between individual artists and the “anonymous” broad umbrella of, say, French Impressionistic painting. However, in music it isn’t as cut and dry. The Classical style, generally between about 1730 and 1820 is often defined by the genius of Haydn, Mozart and early Beethoven. But the “classical style” moniker has been appropriated, in mass culture, to refer to almost any symphonic music as well as solo instrumental, and vocal works in an exceptionally broad super-genre or “style.” And here the word style resurfaces. Every time it comes around I wind up farther from what I am trying to get at than before.

On the one hand style is personal. It’s the unique way that Mozart pushed and dealt with tonality, as opposed to the plodding and basic harmonic movement Scarlatti exhibits in his compositions. But then it is also the Classical style, set within a framework of time. And again, it becomes “classical style” music to many people who do not know much about the intricacies of the genre. This tri-fold division of the term style when applied to music serves as another brick in the wall that separates the history of a language from the history of music. Not only are dialects formed and utilized differently than musical styles, we should really have a whole separate set of terms to accompany the idea of musical style. “Style” as it applies to music in at least three (and likely more) very different senses is a different “style” than that of linguistics. The nuance is subtle, the discrepancy almost indescribable with the vocabulary available to us. Still, musical style and linguistic style share quite a lot, fundamentally. I think this might be why, as Rosen points out, the parallel between linguistics and music is so easily drawn and readily accepted. It works quite well up to a point. But further examination reveals that pushing the analogy distorts its meaning.

It even becomes difficult, when using the word style in three different senses, to discern which of the three Rosen is referencing at any given time. Some instances, of course, are quite clear: “personal style or manner of the artist” (Rosen, 20) is the first sense of a composer’s personal style. But the necessity for defining and redefining each of the different “styles” such as in the “manner of the artist” becomes cumbersome and tiring. “Each successive style is almost a solid object” (21) is a phrase that refers to the style of periods in time. But which sense of style does Rosen appeal to when he says “Yet at that point that grace begins to take on such importance, a style ceases to be strictly a system of expression or of communication” (21)? He could be talking about individual style, periodic style, or the large umbrella of style that might be better understood as a genre. All three are a systems of expression and communication, just as language is a system of expression and communication, but not only do styles in language and music function differently, our language actually leads to a faulty comparison between the two through a lack of more specific terms for the nuances of musical ‘style’.

Thus the analogy drawn between the history of music and the history of language pulls apart even as the two are forced together by shared vocabulary. The latter is a form of practical communication from which the side-effects of its use produce different sounds, constructions and meanings, the former a conscious deviation from the norm that defines this norm by its uniqueness, not its sameness. In language we think about dialect and accent, in music we think about style. But style is not enough. Haydn’s ‘style’ is different from Mozart’s is different from Beethoven’s and still they all compose with the same ‘style’ in the same ‘style’. If you take even a short listen to each of them you know that this can’t be true, and this is the point that Charles Rosen champions in *The Classical Style*.