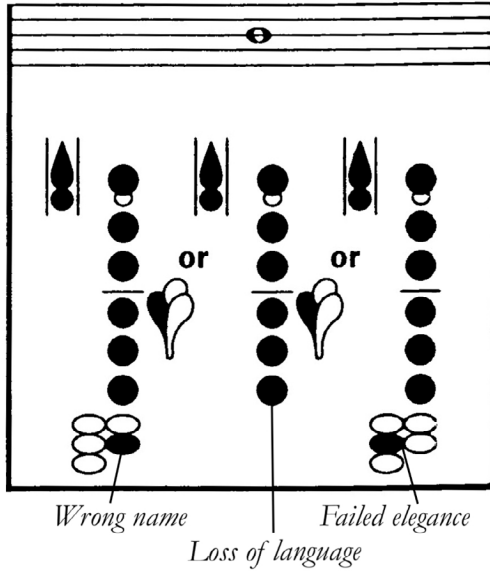
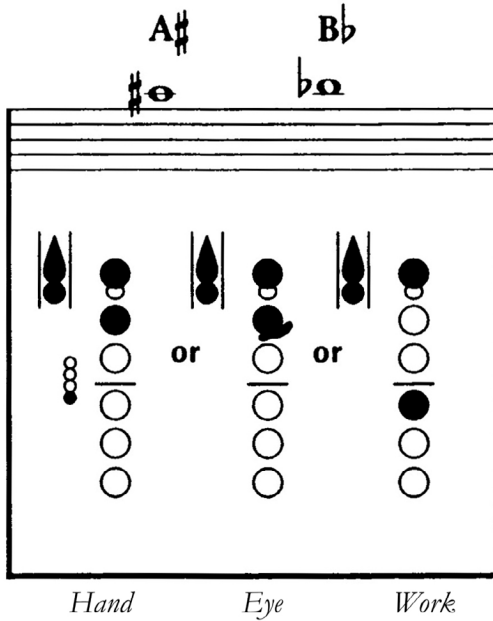


B



You unwittingly keep a catalogue of embarrassments on hand, lifetime-deep, ready to be flipped open to any page should the right moment present itself. The right moment is usually wrong, conventionally speaking: the bus driver doesn't want to hear it, no matter what stop you're at; strangers waiting for the crossing signal don't care; but whenever you happen to remember calling an old friend by the wrong name, or the time you lost all sense of language during an interview, or the failed attempts at elegance, the story comes bursting out. Energy arrives in a constantly unraveling package, ribbons flying everywhere. Sometimes the ribbons get inside the clarinet.



Words are flirtatious and uncertain: one moment they turn you on, the next they turn on you, attaching themselves to your memories and the landscape of everyday life in an endless exchange of betrayal and arousal. Sometimes it seems Babel never fell: all languages are unified in your mind; communication requires only a near-mastery of dialects and vernacular. At other times, seven-syllable words accumulate in your throat forming some inextricable melon-shaped blockage. Meanwhile, birds and children sing outside. Music is not a language because it cannot be translated into anything. It can only be described. A#, then, is the word “handiwork” mispronounced “hand-eye-work.”

Is Music a Language?

Some say music is a language. If it is, you should be able to order coffee or declare war with it. If not, then why does it seem to be soliciting me?— you might ask.

Music beseeches and bemoans, or says nothing at all. It is highly impractical. It cannot provide directions or explain itself before a jury.

No one has been subpoenaed or sentenced to death with music.

Russian can be translated into English, but neither can be translated into music. The clarinet uses neither the Cyrillic or Latin alphabets.

Written music is a schematic for the specific movement of body parts along an instrument. Your fingers are dancers in a discotheque called the clarinet.

Language is perfectly capable of describing music, but not the other way around. Instead, music envelops language in colorful robes that help get the point across.

A judge delivering a death sentence wraps his words in the most straightforward music possible in an effort to reduce the chance of misinterpretation.

Advertising stuffs music with sawdust, directing all its beseeching toward a product.

Advertising beseeches and bemoans. But unlike music, it is highly persuasive and straightforward.

Music is often used to set the mood, but moods are temporary, and some songs are longer than a lifetime.

If your family is coming to visit, music would not be enough to tell them it rains every day, that they should bring a coat.

A strawberry is called *ichigo* in Japanese, *truskawka* in Polish, *fresa* in Spanish, but in music?

You can't ask for someone's hand in marriage with music alone, unless a certain melody meant exactly, *will you marry me?*

Music can express joy, sorrow, longing, melancholia, and euphoria without the use of words. But music cannot express hunger, the weather, opinions, grocery lists, dollar amounts, glossaries, rules, or names without the use of language or some sort of subjective or poetic intervention.

You are free to analyze a Bach cantata any way you like, but any interpretation of a stop sign other than "stop" is life threatening.

There is no equivalent of harmony in language except metaphorically. Someone who hears two (or more) words spoken at the same time will probably say, What? Whereas two (or more) notes at the same time are so lovely they get their own names: F major, G# minor, C suspended—to name a few.

A singer who is harmonizing with another singer will often close an ear in order to more accurately produce the pitch. If instead the singers were speaking to each other, the same gesture would be taken as a sign of discomfort, of dissonance.

But why exactly does the singer close an ear? To better hear the inner voice. The same could be said of the writer—poet, speechwriter, dramaturge or propagandist—who might close one ear to the world in order to fine-tune their ideas.

Musical harmony is vertical, instantaneous. Harmony in language occurs over time.

Harmony in language produces miracles like ideas, equations, dissertations, or poetry, all of which are intimate with music, so intimate the borders between them seem to dissolve.

But when poetry gazes into music's eyes and says, "How do I love thee, let me count the ways," music replies with a lyrical crescendo in triple meter originally written for cello but transcribed for clarinet, transposed up an octave and marked *rubato*.

It's not that music is unreasonable; it simply does not use reason the way language does. Listening to the sound of a flute, one never says, "I agree."

There is no equivalent of rhyme in music except metaphorically. "Love" and "dove" rhyme, but what rhymes with the sound of a clarinet?

Perhaps the oboe and saxophone rhyme with a clarinet, but certainly not a garbage truck or an eagle, you say. But have you heard a clarinet screeching?

If all language were lost except music, what would you say on your deathbed? No last words, just last rhythms, last melodies, painfully beautiful but impossible to decipher—how would anyone know that you were trying to say you buried your will in a box in the backyard?

Language has more to say about music than music has to say about music.

Music is not concerned with the truth, but language constantly battles with it.

The clarinetist should take note of these responsibilities.