Haptic Communication and Musical Aesthesis: Feeling in Jazz

Jon P. Radwan
The OPEN SPACE magazine
issue 7 fall 2005

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Benjamin Boretz  Mary Lee Roberts  Tildy Bayar  Dorota Czerner  Editors


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J K R pass 3: A CD album for and of JKR
In 2006 OPEN SPACE is issuing a series of CDs containing performances of music composed for and by Jim Randall. Contributors include Elaine Barkin, Eve Beglarian, Benjamin Boretz, Doug Henderson, Mark Zuckerman—and others still to be heard from

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texts and scores

Walter Branchi    Many are the things that call to mind Jim Randall / Sono molte le cose che mi fanno pensare a J. K. Randall
Robert Morris    A collection of thoughts on Jim Randall, his piano piece GAP6 I, and some notions of "gap."
Lewis Lockwood, Martin Boykan
Andrew Mead
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Elaine Barkin

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Haptic Communication and Musical Aesthetics:

Feeling in Jazz

Jon Radwan

Ah touch! – there’s the rub! Touch. To have the touch. To be touched. A sure touch. A warm touch. A sensitive touch – shy, delicate, tender to the touch. All of it – let all of it in – the quavering violent touch. The wild, the passionate touch. That’s how you know it’s us – it’s human. Now we can live. Now we can know each other and live. (Richards, 1973, p. 24)

In the Middle Ages, Western musicians developed a notation system that facilitated both composition and group performance. This new writing system led to significant cultural developments, such as polyphony, the orchestra, and precise criticism, but it also served to reify music. Music, the art which had once been accessible only in unique and ephemeral performances, suddenly had the concrete properties of a thing, an object on a page.

Notation, as a written medium, created a graphic approach that still dominates “serious” analysis of music today. To provide an alternative to our graphic, reified tradition, this essay presents a Haptic, or feeling-based theory of musical communication. After a brief description of graphic thought in music criticism, Eric Berne’s “Stroke” is introduced as the fundamental act of interpersonal communication. Next, “Timbre” and “Feel” are approached as haptic variables that
generate meaning in Jazz Music. Ultimately, we see that graphic terms cannot account for what is most meaningful in Jazz performance, the concrete immediacy of interpersonal contact.

**Graphic Aesthetics and Music**

During the Middle Ages, Guido of Arezzo (c. 995-1050) revolutionized musical practice by developing a standardized system that could represent any musical composition graphically. In *Prologus in Antiphonarium*, Guido invented the staff, gave each of the notes a name, refined rhythmic signs, and outlined a course of instruction that spread throughout Europe. It is essentially the same system that we still use today. Other developments, such as the organ/keyboard and the tempered scale, also helped contribute to polyphony and complex (lengthy) compositions, but it was Guido’s notation system that shifted music from an art focused on memory, improvisation, and performance to a graphic art united with writing and reading (James, 1993, pp. 80-83).

Guidonian notation is a graphic symbol system similar to written language: both represent sounds visually with lines proceeding across a page. But whereas speech is graphed in a phonetic and linear symbol system, music is graphed in a pitched multi-linear symbol system. That is, in writing each letter denotes a single phoneme that must be voiced in sequence. In notation, each beat of a measure may denote multiple pitches, which are sounded simultaneously as the reader proceeds sequentially to the next beat.

Each medium creates and enables specific modes of thought and action, and Guidonian notation was a writing technology that opened completely new artistic possibilities. In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan established that media are much more than mere tools, they are “extensions” of our human senses and faculties that constitute who we are. “Each form of transport [medium] not only carries, but translates and transforms, the sender, the receiver, and the message” (1964, p. 90). Accordingly, the introduction of new media will alter thoughts about what can or should be done and how to do it — the medium itself facilitates and encourages ideas that are expressible within its structure. This means that both individual thought patterns and social forms of interaction are ultimately dependent upon the means of expression that are culturally available.

Cultures with sound as the dominant medium (oral/aural) differ significantly from those with a tradition of graphic communication (McLuhan, 1962, Ong, 1982, 1986). Where one depends upon the ear and lives in a world of dynamic aural development, the other depends upon the eye and lives in a world conceived in terms of a static visual field. When notation was introduced into the music world, a cultural shift occurred as visual values began to be applied to music.

Two important implications of the graphic reification of music are composers and *pieces* of music. The composer, as an available subject position, cannot exist without Guidonian notation. Complex, extended polyphony, the supreme contribution of western music, was made possible by allowing the composer to work out ideas in a static medium and then communicate them clearly and efficiently. In its most basic sense, notation is a set of written instructions that precisely graphs what to do and when to do it. This imperative mode enabled unprecedented control for the composer (or conductor), concentrating power over authorship and interpretation within a single artist. One need only compare improvised or traditional music with any symphony to hear the differences enabled by notation. The orchestra is literally impossible without writing; consider how you might communicate your musical ideas to so many other musicians if you were illiterate (non-numerate). Written scores also changed the focus of the critic from the “performance” to the “piece,” an independent, completed, graphically parsed work of art. Donoghue reports that “analysis of music is a recent [late 18th century] activity. The elucidation of a work of music used
to be merely offered as a model for composition, an inventory of correct practice.” (1991, p. 93) With the advent of writing, music could be conceived as an abstract and timeless art freed from its dependence on performance.

The abstract approach to music theory and criticism reaches its fullest expression in the Formalist school of thought. Through notation, Formalism developed to a point where theorists like Hanslick (1854/1986) and Schenker (1906/1968, 1969) could focus on compositions as complete technical wholes with no reference beyond the inter-relation of their own parts. These critics held “the conviction that music never conveys anything but itself, that it is solely sonorous form with no significant content, and that its value lies in its formal relations and not in its expressiveness” (Bruhn, 1996, p. 6).5

Despite the dominance of notation in contemporary critical discourse, most musical experience is distinctly non-graphic (Radocy & Boyle, 1988). The average listener never comes into contact with a score and does not understand music theory. Especially with traditional forms of music, such as Jazz, many performers do not read, or do read but choose not to write, notation. It is clear that, even without a writing system, jazz listeners and performers engage one another musically. This is because music does not denote. Music Listeners do not need to know any representation of musical symbols to translate a musical symbol into a non-musical meaning. Musical symbols live at the level of articulation and performance, not representation (Langer, 1957). This lack of abstraction, the non-representative and visceral appeal of music that graphic media are structurally incapable of addressing, can be explained with a Haptic approach to aesthetics.

Haptics and Aesthetics

A haptic critique stresses the tactile dimensions of art. Most communication theorists focus upon aural or visual meaning, because our epistemic paradigm is based upon spoken and written language.6 Media theorists also tend to stress aural and visual dimensions of communication technologies, as when McLuhan proposed electromechanical extensions of our organs -- radio extends the ear, print extends the eye, and electricity extends the central nervous system.7 Sight, hearing, and their respective media are certainly important, but they cannot communicate what a single touch can -- the concrete immediacy of inter-human contact.

To balance audio-visual bias and technologism, consider the phenomenological perspective, where all knowledge derives from a perceiving body. In Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues for descriptive research that begins with lived experience. Physical, bodily experience is the necessary starting point for knowledge, and all “objective” accounts of reality lose credence because they are abstract and removed from their subject.

We have relearned to feel our body; we have found underneath the objective and detached knowledge of the body that other knowledge which we have of it in virtue of its always being with us and of the fact that we are our body. In the same way we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourself, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception. (p. 206)

To develop a phenomenological account of haptics, communication must be described in terms of both physical and symbolic action. By stressing bodily actions (seeing, hearing, touching) instead of human organs (“the eye, the ear”), media become modes of doing rather than physical things (“extensions”). In terms of a research question, the communication theorist concerned with concrete physical interaction asks “What are we doing together?”, and in this case, “What are we doing together at Jazz events?” From a haptic perspective, the response is
that we are making both physical and symbolic contact; we touch one another at musical events. Two key verbs operationalize this active and haptic approach: stroking and aesthetics.

Eric Berne's Transactional theory of human communication explains the significance of touch (1961). Berne begins with "recognition-hunger," the human drive and need for social contact. Biologically, we are required to spend an extended period of contact with our mother when we are born. As we grow, we retain this basic need for inter-human contact, but it is satisfied with symbolic as well as actual touches. For instance, a friendly wave is a symbolically transformed touch. An acquaintance who ignores us and refuses to wave is psychically disturbing. In the extreme, solitary confinement is considered the worst possible punishment because it severs the inmate from all inter-human contact. This absolute need for touching leads Berne to introduce "The Stroke" as the basis of human exchange. 8

"Stroking" may be used as a general term for intimate physical contact; in practice it may take various forms. Some people literally stroke an infant; others hug or pat it, while some people pinch it playfully or flip it with a fingertip. These all have their analogues in conversation, so that it seems one might predict how an individual would handle a baby by listening to him talk. By extension of meaning, "stroking" may be employed colloquially to imply any act implying recognition of another's presence. Hence a stroke may be used as the fundamental unit of social action. An exchange of strokes constitutes a transaction, which is the unit of social intercourse. (1961, p. 15)

The second key verb, aesthetics, denotes the process of feeling. The more familiar term, aesthetics, frequently takes the symbol as its point of departure. Questions of beauty, creativity, and expression are routinely treated in terms of representation and abstraction. Grammatically, the noun form of "aesthetics" encourages the critic to think in terms of things that represent - symbols and sets of symbols. In "Relational Sense: Towards a Haptic Aesthetics," Fisher describes how aesthetics must move past abstract meaning to account for lived experience.

The challenge in a project of recuperating the term "aesthetic" is to move beyond modernism's preoccupation with the singularity of the visual, to pose a more immanent and relational aesthetics: an aesthetics which refers to experience as well as objects... The corporeality of aesthetic processes - which speak to the connections between artists, art and beholders - have for the most part been left to the side of contemporary art criticism.

Of particular importance to the affective links of art's politics of feeling is a dimension of sensory experience - the haptic sense. (1997, p.5)

"Aesthetics" is intended to shift the discussion on how art communicates toward the active, visceral, bodily process of feeling and symbolizing. 9 As an entry into haptic aesthetics, begin with the contrast between a visual perspective on an object, and an instance of physical contact with the same object. In On The Soul, Aristotle describes a simple experiment to demonstrate the necessity of distance and a medium for vision.

The following experiment makes the necessity of a medium clear. If what has colour is placed in immediate contact with the eye, it cannot be seen... Hence it is indispensable that there be something in between -- if there were nothing, so far from seeing with greater distinctness, we should see nothing at all. (350 B.C.E./1941, p. 569)

Vision, the dominant sense in a graphic culture, requires physical (and psychological) separation between subject and object. McLuhan (1964) uses this basic principle to explain Western detachment from and control over nature. Touch, on the other hand, requires physical contact with the object. Aristotle is correct about vision, you cannot see an object placed on your
eye. However, you can certainly feel this object sitting on/in your eye, and it is difficult to maintain psychological distance from something that is directly causing pain.

Because touch does not enable distancing or "objective" evaluation, it has a completely different mode of meaning than sight. Reading "don't feed the bears" on a sign requires interpretation – one must understand English to decode the sign. Seeing an actual bear also requires interpretation – one must understand that bears are potential threats. Feeling the bear feed on one's arm requires no interpretation – the subject knows, without any abstraction/decoding/representation, that this new pain is intense and to be avoided whenever possible. Haptic aesthetic is not "about" pleasure or pain, it is pleasure or pain.

With Berne's approach, we are social animals whose archetypal touch, the Stroke, is contact with a fellow human being, not an object. Touch is the most direct and personal of our senses, and it is the least symbolic. It is the mode of communication and influence that operates on our most basic, animal, level of understanding, because unlike a visual image or a spoken word, a touch does not represent intimacy or aggression, it is intimacy or aggression. There are certainly cultural and symbolic overtones to touches, as with ritualized handshakes or crowded elevator etiquette, but haptic contact differs from all other modes of communication due to its direct physical impact.

A phenomenology of touch must include the reciprocal immediacy of both feeling and being felt. Our other senses are distal. Sight can operate with only one half of the process – I may see you, but you may not see me, and vice versa. Sound, as with a spoken conversation, is a bit more reciprocal in that if I hear you, chances are you can hear me. Mediated sound however, as with a public address system or radio, can be quite unilateral. Touch, in contrast, is necessarily reciprocal all of the time. This immediacy and fundamental co-presence of touch is understood by all animals; we humans are unique in that we build symbol systems to enable virtual and symbolic strokes to feed our recognition hunger. The thesis of a haptic approach is that virtual and symbolic interactions are all based (to a greater or lesser degree) on actual touching (Berne, 1961). While each alternate mode of communication has its own special properties and limitations, adopting the stroke as fundamental act in human exchange requires an understanding of the physical process of contacting others.

Touch is not only intimate and immediate, it is also constant. While we are awake, there is a continuous flow of sensation via our body and skin – a breeze on your cheek, your shirt against your back, the temperature of the room, your seat against your bottom – all of these sensations are simultaneous and continuous. We may not focus on all of them, but they are perpetually present. In Sense and Significance, Ihde describes touch as a constant sensitivity to both core features and a general fringe "Field State."

Within the totality of experience and within touch there is usually a focus which stands in inverse relation to those aspects of the touch experience which stand on the fringe. In this case, that which stands out is clearly present to my experience, while that which is on the fringe is barely noticed. (1973, p. 97)

We may select a key feature of the field to focus upon, such as your fingers upon the door in the dark, while the rest of the field remains as a fringe context. The overall field state, in a hot sauna, in a cold lake, on a windy beach, serves as a constant and we may vary our focus to specific features within the field. There are even states where we feel that we begin to merge with the field, as with floating in a warm bath or resting on a soft bed.

The sense of touch is generally addressed in terms of two interdependent systems. The first system, Kinesthetic Force, encompasses movement and the sensation of overcoming resistance via muscles and tendons. The second system is Tactile, and it includes sensations
derived from our nerve endings, such as texture, pressure, and temperature. While hearing and vision both depend upon the central nervous system, haptic communication is unique because it unites the nervous system with the ani-motor system. Smith explains that

The human haptic system is made up of two sub-systems, the motor sub-system and the sensory sub-system. There is a strong link between the two systems. Unlike the visual system, it is not only important what the sensory system detects, but what motions were used to gain that information. (1997, p.3)

Hearing and seeing are arts of detection. The goal is comprehensive perception and accurate analysis of data. Touching differs in that it adds expressive bodily action into the mix. You are what you read or hear, in a broad sense; you are what you physically do in a much more concrete sense. Corporeal enactment of self, the idea that the same movements we use to gain knowledge also serve to express who we are, is the basic doctrine of haptic communication theory. Tactile and kinaesthetic modes of interaction are not our only avenues of expression, but they are our most basic.

In social terms, haptic communication theory directs attention to interaction patterns and space. Choosing where to go and who to spend time with are our basic kinaesthetic decisions, and, once we are there, we decide how to manage contact in that space. Public spaces have the cultural benefit of ritual “dances” to help us determine appropriate behavior, and in private settings cultural moves are blended with our more individual dances (Collingwood, 1938, Hall, 1976, Burke, 1978). Personal space is generally discussed in terms of increasingly intimate zones where symbolic and virtual strokes advance the interaction, and actual physical contact is the psycho-social archetype. Haptic researchers ask, “What kind of touch? Please describe the contact phenomenologically.”

**Haptic Meaning in Jazz**

As a musical tradition born in an aural culture, Jazz presents a strong contrast to graphic European formalism. Analysis of two variables, Timbre and Feel, can show how a haptic approach provides useful terms for understanding how Jazz music communicates.

Timbre, or tone, refers to the physical sound produced an instrument in performance. In the formalized, graphic tradition of music composition, timbre is assumed as a known quantity – notation does not allow the composer to specify any timbre beyond what instrument should play what part. There is a tradition of “good” orchestral tone, and variations on this tone are not permitted in “serious” music because the composition, an abstract thing, is most valued. The first violinist in the Boston Symphony Orchestra is supposed to produce the same basic timbre as the first violinist in the Berlin Philharmonic (Francesconi, 1986, p. 43). 11

In Jazz, the reverse is true. Individualistic and unique performances are valued, and one primary way to personalize expression is through timbre. Where the goal of orchestral performers is a standardized pure tone, jazz performers seek a distinct and instantly recognizable timbre. A good jazz performer is identifiable, as an individual, after hearing only a few notes. Derivative performances, where the soloist sounds generic or like an imitation of an established artist, are considered substandard. In a 1999 interview, Saxophonist Tim Berne described his quest for an individualized Jazz timbre.

The thing that I’m attracted to, probably the first thing I started seriously studying, was the actual tone that I produced, and how to command attention through your sound. Because the people I’m really attracted to in terms of horn players, they all had a really beautiful and distinct sound. I remember, like with Julius and stuff, really dealing with
that, and being obsessed with having my own sound. The more people told you that was
difficult, the harder I tried. (as cited in Vega, p. 3)

Within the Western orchestral tradition, individualized timbre is discouraged precisely
because it is a graphic tradition. The rise of notation as a medium created and then valorized both
composers and their pieces of music. Today’s orchestral performer, like Plato’s rhapsode,
subordinates individuality to the demands of the composer and the piece.

Jazz, as an aural tradition, makes use of notation, but does not depend upon it. While Jazz
composers and compositions certainly exist, improvisation and group creativity are at the heart of
the tradition. In terms of electronic media, Jazz developed in the 20th century. Its growth was
intertwined with radio and the phonograph, both aural media that capture what notation never
could – the precise timbre of a musical event. Performers, not composers, became the stars of the
twentieth century because electronic media enabled aural, rather than graphic, access to music.

From a haptic and phenomenological perspective, timbre is the quality of sound that is
actually experienced, or felt, at any given moment of the performance. Hearing is sensitivity to
air vibrations, and the unique pattern of vibrations of any given musical moment is the point of
contact between audience and performer. With this sense of aesthetics, hearing as feeling,
Berne’s stroke asks the critic to address the sensuous quality of tone. This question simply
cannot arise if the critic is operating in a graphic mode because timbre is impossible to notate.12

On the performer’s side of the exchange, haptics directs attention toward the muscular process
of producing sound. The stroke that produces a percussive tone is brief and sharp. Strokes
producing a bowed tone are smooth and extended. A brassy tone is round yet harsh. The issue
here is not merely the instrument itself, it is more about the unique and characteristic timbre that
the musician uses to express herself. On their side the audience feels these qualitative aural
choices, and in true cases of musical communication, resonates with them. It is not only the air in
the room that the performer moves, it is the people themselves – musicians create haptic fields.
Live Jazz is considered an intimate form of music because this particular performer, not any
distant composer, is making contact right here in this room. The immediate meaning generated
by timbre is not coded or representational, it is as direct and personal as any “real” touch.

Our second haptic variable in Jazz meaning, “Feel,” refers to a more general rhythmic style.
Where individual timbre operationalizes the musical moment, Feel directs attention to actions that
create a sense of time. In group performances, this sense of time is created cooperatively – all
individual expressions are defined in relation to a group pulse. Within the logic of notation, two
of the most basic symbols are the time signature and measure or bar line. The time signature
denotes the general metrical pulse by defining the number of beats per measure and stating what
type of note-head will represent a beat. In common time, there are 4 beats to a measure and a
quarter-note gets one beat. Each beat has precisely the same duration as every other beat, and
therefore each measure is precisely as long as every other measure.

*Figure 1 – Graphic Foundations of Musical Time*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Signature</th>
<th>Measure Line</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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A strong metrical pulse is characteristic of music in a graphic tradition because the structural prominence of the bar line itself directs the composer to think in terms of regular units of time.\textsuperscript{13}

Music from aural traditions also has a strong sense of time, but this sense is not the regular metrical pulse of the European graphic tradition. Rather than recognizing any barline as a boundary, the aural performer routinely stretches and contracts the beat as a basic means of expression. Many traditions are non-notatable, because the performer’s sense of time is more complex than notation will allow. Maconie describes how the introduction of electronic recording media brought an appreciation for the limits of notation home to graphic composers.

A hundred years ago composers such as Bartok and Vaughan Williams were touring country pubs recording grizzled old folksingers (male and female) on Edison cylinder phonographs, recordings which they then had to transcribe into standard notation. These were real live performances of music from unwritten oral traditions, and they proved difficult or impossible to notate, simply because the performers’ sense of time was far more refined than classical notation could handle. (1999, p. 2)

New recording media presented Americans with a new Feel for time. Jazz music, growing up with the radio and phonograph, offered audiences precisely what a grapho-metric composer could never have thought of — a plastic sense of time developed in reference to an ongoing group dynamic. Group improvisation, especially rhythmic improvisation, is a defining characteristic of Jazz music. Improvisation generates meaning by offering personalized yet cooperative interpretations of the beat, creating a general groove, or Feel.

One of the most popular Jazz “Feels” is Swing, where the beat is consistently elongated. Many Swing songs are written out part for part to enable complex performances, but our fundamental inability to graph non-metrical feel is revealed in the Jazz composers’ conventional practice — dotted rhythms are always written as straight duplets.

Figure 2

![Figure 2](image)

Figure 3

![Figure 3](image)

Figure 2 is a relatively accurate way to notate a common Swing feel, but in performance it sounds too straight. To counteract the metrical regularity of notation and its inability to represent complex rhythms, Jazz composers simply write straight eighth notes with a lexical marker indicating that the performer should play the phrase with a Swing feel (Figure 3).

With Swing, regular beats and bar lines are pushed or stretched, but later Jazz movements began to defy the bar line altogether. Following World War II, Swing gave way to Bebop, a style with smaller groups playing songs with minimally preplanned structure. Where Swing presented the individual soloist working in harmony with the group, Bebop presented a group of individuals, each creating their own line to complement or contrast with the others. Later, as African Americans worked to create a style ever more independent of European conventions,
Haptic Aesthesis in Jazz

Bebop developed into Free jazz, where artists strove develop non-metrical and atonal approaches to improvisation (Francesconi, 1986).

Ornette Coleman is an artist who pioneered the Free feel in Jazz. In his collaboration with Pat Metheny, Song X (1986), each performer plays the same melody at the same time, but independently of the others. The resulting kinaesthetic feel resembles a race, where each player speeds to the finish along roughly the same course. Free “racing” is a feel that cannot truly be notated. For the transcription in figure four, Seiz (2002) chose to omit both the time signature and the bar lines in an attempt to notate Coleman’s headlong feel. ¹⁴

**Figure 4**

![Image of musical notation]

**Conclusion**

Modern music criticism tends to feature the abstract and timeless quality of musical compositions — symbols are not dependent upon any context and performance is irrelevant. This traditional approach to criticism is a graphic mode generated by the development of Guidonian notation and printed scores in western culture. Formalist music criticism has great explanatory power when applied to music written within a grapho-metric culture, but it fails to account for musical meaning in aural traditions.

In contrast to notation and abstract representation, Haptic criticism begins on the visceral level of social exchange with *aesthetic*, the process of feeling. The Stroke is defined as the archetypal unit of interpersonal communication, and immediate touch, rather than distal sight, is defined as the most basic mode of perception. A haptic starting point enables fruitful analysis of two variables in Jazz music: Timbre and Feel.

“Timbre” denotes individualized tone and directs critical attention to the point of musical contact, the quality of sound that is actually experienced, or felt, at any given moment of the performance. Performers, not composers, became the stars of the twentieth century because electronic media enabled aural access to personalized musical tones. The structural features of notation brought composers, pieces of music, and “pure” tone to the fore in Western music. With Jazz, we have an aural tradition that valorizes individualized timbre as a means of generating an intimate bond between performer and audience.

In terms of Feel, graphic conventions such as time signatures and measure or bar lines work to create a regular, metrical sense of rhythm where each beat can be subdivided into identical sub-units. Music in aural traditions is frequently non-notatable because it does not recognize these basic temporal assumptions. Swing composers simply gave up trying to graph their feel — they may use notation to work out and communicate harmonic ideas, but for rhythm they have developed a convention that says *not* to play what is written. Instead, it is up to the performer and ensemble to create their own special groove, a unique aesthetic event where time stretches and
contracts according to their interactive group dynamic. Metrical time does not merely represent a white European interaction pattern, it is that pattern. Some Free Jazz composers have gone so far as to reject measured time altogether because it is the rigid stroke of an oppressive culture.

This analysis of contemporary Jazz has developed the idea that musical interaction is fundamentally a form of physical and emotional contact. Sound is vibrating air, and the sonic energy pattern felt at any given performance is the phenomenological ground of musical communication. Haptic aesthetics provides useful terms for explaining what is most meaningful in Jazz -- the lived, embodied, felt excitement of sharing in a unique performance improvised together, with these friends and artists, right here, right now.

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References


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**Abstract**

This essay presents a Haptic, or feeling-based, theory of communication and influence in music. Modern music criticism tends to feature the abstract and timeless quality of musical compositions – symbols are not dependent upon any context and performance is irrelevant. This traditional approach to music criticism is a graphic mode generated by the development of notation and printed scores in western culture. In contrast, a Haptic approach begins on the visceral level of social exchange with *aesthesis*, the process of feeling. Eric Berne, founder of Transactional Analysis, defined “the Stroke” as the basic unit of interpersonal communication. Here, a Bernean perspective is applied to contemporary Jazz to develop the idea that musical interaction is fundamentally a form of physical and emotional *contact*. Two variables, “Timbre” and “Feel,” are examined to show how Haptic Aesthesis provides useful terms for explaining musical communication.
Endnotes

1 One thousand years earlier, Plato was disturbed by the introduction of writing into education and social exchange. As Greek culture shifted from an Oral to a Literate mode, Plato considered the limits of reification and the word made thing.

   Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they only say one and the same thing. And every word, once it was written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself. (370 B.C.E./1998, 275d-276a)

Plato disdains the graphic arts, such as painting and writing, because their independence from their author prevents his ideal form of communication, dialectic. Truth is to be discovered via a spirited and critical exchange between living and breathing people. It is people who give life to ideas, and we ensure their growth in the minds of our fellow human beings through active conversation.

2 Incidentally, numbers are graphed both linearly and holistically; equations are linear whereas charts are immediate and holistic.

3 Edward T. Hall also uses the Extension metaphor. See Beyond Culture (1976).

4 Carpo describes a parallel case of reification in art, where printing technology limits architecture. “Medieval builders could draw up the designs of specific building projects (or maybe they couldn’t – this point is still debated), but when it came to recording and transmitting the rules of their profession from generation to generation, they relied exclusively on speech and memory. . . before the era of the mechanical reproduction of images, images were of marginal importance in communicating architectural experience” (2001, p. 33). Musical knowledge was of the same oral/aural order prior to notation.

5 Music theory prior to notation was generally non-literate and mystical (James, 1993). Early music criticism resembled what we would call “performance” criticism. In ancient Greece, musicians and poets competed alongside athletes at the Olympic games. Powerful, emotional performances were valued and the greatest artists were considered mad or divinely “inspired.” Plato goes so far as to deny the performer any role beyond “conduit” for divine expression. The “author” is the muse, and the rhapsode is himself the medium.

   . . . the Muse first of all inspires men herself; and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended from one another so as to form quite a long chain; and all of them derive their power of suspension from the original stone [magnet]. For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed. And as the Korybantian revelers when they dance are not in their right minds, so the lyric poets are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains: but when falling under the power of music and meier they are inspired and possessed; like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysius but not when they are in their right mind. (390 B.C.E./1992, p. 14)

6 Kenneth Burke’s progression from Dramatism to Logology is indicative of the dominance of the word in rhetorical theory. In his dramatistic work on action and motion (i.e., 1950/1969), Burke and the phenomenologists would seem to agree on epistemic and ontological starting points. However, in Burke’s later logological (i.e. 1961/1970) work he leaves the details of social interaction behind to focus on the grammar and logic of language as an independent system of motives.

7 In The Medium is the Message, a book whose provocative title would seem to promise a haptic approach, the closest he gets to touch is “clothing is an extension of the skin.” (pp. 38-39). Instead of clothing, which can encourage a visual approach to fashion, or perhaps a biological perspective on heat or protection from the elements, I want to focus on our physical bodies in kinaesthetic interaction. McLuhan’s placement of our organs as ontological starting points for communicative media is an important theoretical move, because it ties our highly symbolic expressions back to a living human being, but ultimately, McLuhan is most concerned with technological extensions of the central nervous system – he advocates an object rather than a process perspective.

8 Bene begins with our psychosocial need for one another and the stroke. Ultimately, he developed a theory of language games on its basis (1964). This essay accepts the same basis but explores musical communication.

9 The distinction between a noun-oriented and a verb-oriented approach to knowledge is fundamental. Consider two medical researchers – one, a chemist, studies the physical properties of an anesthetic, the other, a physician, studies the living body as it deals with this same anesthetic. Both have important contributions to make, but questions that occur to one will not occur to the other because the first has a thing, a physical compound to examine, while the second is concerned with maintaining the life processes of her patient.
With the stroke as basic unit of analysis, the range of transactions that happen in the $d = 0$ zone serve as archetypes for all interpersonal communication -- from the mother-newborn embrace to holding grandmother's hand on her deathbed, supporting a friend who stumbles, one's first kiss, or placing your hand over your own heart. Aggression is certainly included too. Our legal vocabulary is especially telling here, with fine degrees of touch clearly defined: assault, as opposed to assault with a deadly weapon, as opposed to sexual assault. Or our degrees of murder, say, in deciding a charge, "We know the touch was lethal. Intent can be inferred from the manner in which lethal force was applied." Or we could use the vocabulary of the military, or the martial artist. "Parry thrust strike."

Ingram goes so far as to blame stagnation in the orchestral tradition on notation. "The expectation, that performers be able to communicate composers' meanings without having learned their style, stems from a time at which styles were more nearly universal, and derives from the Romantic attitude in which symbols are thought to have absolute meanings from which one simply deviates by means of expressivity. This attitude underlies not only the problem of the stagnating orchestra repertoire, but also the predatory nature of institutions which support young composers for a few years, only to discard them when they have lost their novelty value." (2000, p. 6)

The Romantic movement did create Tone Color as a variable within the orchestral tradition. The particular mix of instruments selected by a composer roughly corresponds with the meaning expressed via individual timbre. It differs from Jazz because the performer is still not an individual -- the tone color mix is supposed to sound the same in all performances of the piece.

The development of the mechanical clock, and for musicians the metronome, enabled the fundamentally regular reference pulse for Western music. In performance, the precise metrical time notated on the page is occasionally stretched and contracted. This plastic time is what gives a piece of music energy and life, and what distinguishes human from mechanical/digital interpretation.

Figure five adds the bar lines and typographic notation. Note how much less "free" it looks, let alone sounds, yet the notes are all the same.

**Figure 5**

Song X

Ornette Coleman