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CGSC 130: The Musical Mind  
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### Jimi Hendrix on Musical Representation: Why Meaning Matters

When Jimi Hendrix performed his beautiful rendition of the “Star Spangled Banner” in 1969, he got a lot of criticism from people for his “unorthodox” performance<sup>1</sup> – between 1:09 and 1:37, he deviates considerably into a guitar solo that showcases the screaming sound characteristic of his musical style. But how do we recognize this deviation in the first place? First, we must recognize the original melody of the Star Spangled Banner in his performance. Peter Kivy, first and foremost a philosopher, says that music demonstrates *aided* pictorial representations of manmade sounds<sup>2</sup>. When we watch Jimi’s performance at Woodstock we know by its title that it is a musical imitation of the Star Spangled Banner.

Kivy demonstrates that when one encounters aided pictorial representation in the form of music, one hears musical structure, understands the text, and then perceives the structural analogy<sup>3</sup>. These musical structures come in the form of themes, or canons<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, we recognize the deviation because we have prior knowledge of the National Anthem in the form of its lyrics and stanzas that follow a specific canon.

Peter Kivy also shows that music can be expressively appropriate if it contains the same emotions that the text expresses, representationally appropriate in the pictorial sense if it paints a

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<sup>1</sup> "Jimi Hendrix Interview on The Dick Cavett Show (1969)," History vs. Hollywood, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Kivy, page 185.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., page 190.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 189.

sound picture of a sound event implied in the text, or representationally appropriate in the structural sense if it contains an analogy to some event or concept that the text contains<sup>5</sup>. While critics might criticize his “unorthodox” performance, Hendrix rightfully states that it is indeed a beautiful performance<sup>6</sup>. We know that his performance is beautiful because it is faithful to the original song; it has qualities that are appropriate in all three of Kivy’s definitions. At the exact moment that Hendrix deviates from the standard canon, the corresponding text<sup>7</sup> references the red glare of the rockets over the water. Thus, Jimi Hendrix’s performance, which sounds much like a rocket, could also be conceived as an analogy of the concept from the text as well as an emotive representation of the passion that the text conveys.

So in order to recognize the deviation, we first need to have a structural representation of the fundamental canon that underlies the Star Spangled Banner. In order to understand the meaning of what Hendrix does, we need to understand the text itself and the history behind it. The music that Jimi Hendrix plays would be incomprehensible if it were not for the fact that it employs aided pictorial representation in order to allow the listener to make sense of it. While it has ephemeral power in the passionate style with which he plays, it does not convey any ideas or concepts by itself. Having unconsciously rehearsed the melody multiple times within our minds, we instantly recognize when Jimi deviates from the prescribed theme.

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<sup>5</sup> Kivy, 191.

<sup>6</sup> "Jimi Hendrix Interview on The Dick Cavett Show (1969)."

<sup>7</sup> "The Lyrics." Smithsonian National Museum of American History gives the text of the Star Spangled Banner.

Like Peter Kivy says, absolute music doesn't have much meaning on its own<sup>8</sup>. The only way that we can interpret this section of Hendrix's performance is as a chaotic interlude that eventually gives way to the rest of the song, suggesting the victory of the American independence movement after the poem. And in order to hear this we need to have a structural representation of the music as corresponds to the lyrics within our musical minds.

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<sup>8</sup> Constantijn Koopman and Stephen Davies, "Musical Meaning in a Broader Perspective," page 261.

## References:

"Jimi Hendrix Interview on The Dick Cavett Show (1969)." Interview by Richard Alva Cavett.

History vs. Hollywood. 2018. Accessed May 8, 2018. [http://](http://www.historyvshollywood.com/video/jimi-hendrix-interview-dick-cavett-show/)

[www.historyvshollywood.com/video/jimi-hendrix-interview-dick-cavett-show/](http://www.historyvshollywood.com/video/jimi-hendrix-interview-dick-cavett-show/).

In this special interview, Jimi talks about performing at Woodstock, specifically commenting on the peaceful atmosphere during his rendition of the National Anthem of the United States.

Key, Francis Scott. "The Lyrics." Smithsonian National Museum of American History. Accessed

May 8, 2018. <https://amhistory.si.edu/starspangledbanner/the-lyrics.aspx>.

This contains the history and lyrics behind the poem called the Star Spangled Banner.

Kivy, P. (2002). Introduction to a philosophy of music. Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press.

This summarizes Kivy's skeptical philosophy about what music can do. In Chapter 10 we learn all about how music uses structural representation to make analogies to the same concepts that are explicitly defined by pictorial representation ala the Mona Lisa.

Koopman, Constantijn, and Stephen Davies. "Musical Meaning in a Broader Perspective." *The*

*Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, February 12, 2003, 261-73. [https://](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1540-6245.00024)

[onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1540-6245.00024](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1540-6245.00024).

This article explores the true meaning within music in the semantic context and alludes to Peter Kivy's idea that absolute music can do very little.