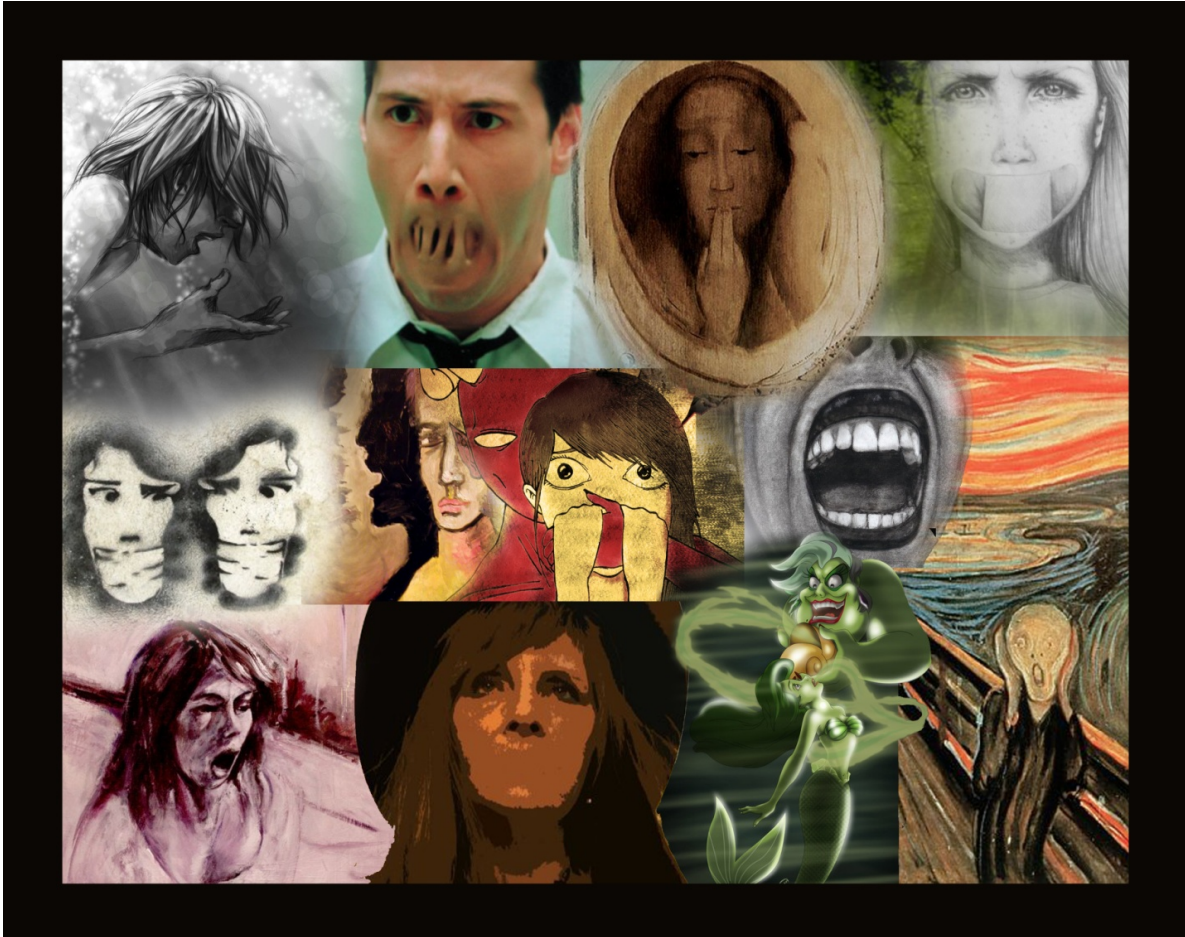


Sounds as Symbols in Archetypal Studies

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Crash. Tick. Stomp. Crescendo. Whistle. Scream.

I wanted to know why none of these “symbols,” or any remotely like them, were listed anywhere in the large stack of books that I had piled in front of me. After all, I was at the mecca for symbol studies: the C.G. Jung Foundation Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism (ARAS), located across from the New York Public Library. If it wasn’t here, I surmised, it probably wasn’t anywhere.

Flipping through the indexes of numerous symbol dictionaries spanning several decades, I couldn’t help but notice that all of the symbols listed were *images*. Must something be *visible* in order to be a “symbol,” I wondered? Surely sounds can be symbols too. My fascination with this question came about as the result of a recurring dream I’d had for about a year, in which I found myself in some state of emotional distress, but when I tried to scream no sound would come out. These “silent screams” led me to seek out the symbolic meanings associated with sound, but even in the exhaustive review of the human body in *The Book of Symbols*, I found no mention of the human voice.

The Book did include one “sound,” and that was silence: the sound that is said to encompass all sounds. ((ARAS), 2010) This was, however, the shortest entry in the book, and not very helpful. I decided to pose my question to the three women behind the desk, the compilers of *The Book of Symbols* themselves. I asked if they had ever thought that sounds could be symbols. Their eyes seemed to light up at the question, and all three exclaimed, “Well yes, of course! *Of course* sounds can be symbols!” Yet they had trouble laying their hands on any materials for me related to the topic. I got the impression that this was not something they had ever seriously considered.

One of the women then remembered that “music” was originally proposed for *The Book of Symbols*, but that it was cut due to space. “Let me go get the materials for you,” she offered, and brought out a dusty file folder labeled “music/musician.” The file contained information and images of instruments, musicians, and different kinds of musical notation from all over the world. It also

included several variations of the Orpheus myth. All of this was very interesting, but again, not wholly satisfying, for it struck me that even here, they were engaging with the symbol of “music” in varying ways as though it were a *visual* object. I wanted to know about symbols *in* music – sound-symbols, so to speak – and how these might function in relation to archetypes.

“The power of the human voice,” writes Peter O’Loughlin, “is unmistakable.” From the moment we unleash our first cry at birth, our contact with the world is being carried out in the medium of the voice through speaking, singing, shouting, crying, laughing, and groaning. (O’Loughlin, 1995, p. 162) In his book *Music Quickens Time*, Daniel Barenboim points out that our relationship with sound develops even earlier than that, since the ear comes to life in the fetus of a pregnant woman on the forty-fifth day, giving it a seven-and-a-half-month advance over the eye. (Barenboim, 2008, p. 22) Why, then, do we find this bias towards the visual in the study of archetypes and symbols? Barenboim argues that we live in a “primarily visual society,” which tends toward identification with the sensory experience of seeing over hearing. (Barenboim, 2008, p. 22). Indeed, visual images are often the common reference point for human mimetic experience, even though studies suggest that auditory memory is, for most people, more acute.

In oral cultures, where a stronger emphasis on aural capacities is required, there is a more heightened awareness of the power of sound. But even in modern Western society, this perspective has been retained in religious cultures, for it is still the case that virtually all human communities use some form of communal music-making as an integral part of their religious rituals. Among religious communities, the experience of music is commonly understood to serve as a bridge between the ordinary consciousness of our everyday reality and an expanded, more unitive consciousness relating to the infinite. (Bruscia, 1998) Indeed, music is frequently cited along with religion and language as one of the major distinguishing factors between humanity and the rest of the animal kingdom.

Given the power that the voice and various forms of auditory expression defined as “music” have in human society, particularly in terms of opening us up to “numinous” experiences, the lack of

discussion in Jungian literature about how sound-symbols function is particularly striking. Perhaps Jung's own ambivalence about music contributed to the oversight, since he never embarked on any scholarly pursuits of his own regarding music or sound. Thus, he did not leave behind any literature on the subject for future scholars to develop. Moreover, Jung was frequently cited as being unsympathetic to music, musicians, and the role of sound in archetypal studies and analytic psychology for most of his career. (Tilly, 1982, p. 124)

However, a turning point occurred for Jung in 1956, when he called on musician Margaret Tilly to visit him at his home in order to discuss a paper she had given on the potential role of music in psychoanalysis. He told her he had dismissed all previous literature on music therapy because it was too "sentimental." When he was asked about his own relationship to music, he confessed that he never listened to it anymore, saying, "It exhausts and irritates me." But when Tilly inquired as to why, Jung apparently replied: "Because music is dealing with *such deep archetypal material*, and those who play don't realize this." (Tilly, 1982, p. 125, emphasis mine) Apparently it was not the case that Jung did not think music or sound to have any significant relationship to symbolic or archetypal material. On the contrary, after a long session with Ms. Tilly he exclaimed,

this opens up whole new avenues of research I'd never even dreamed of...I feel from now on music should be an essential part of every analysis. This reaches the deep archetypal material that we can only sometimes reach in our analytical work with patients. (Tilly, 1982)

It is furthermore reported that just before Jung's death he had plans to construct an "Aeolian harp" at Bollingen that would hang from a tree to be caressed by the wind, producing "a music of the spheres: archetypal and primordial." (Knapp, 1988, p. 212) It appears that Dr. Jung experienced a significant change of mind about the relationship of sound to archetypal studies at the end of his life, but was not able to fully pursue further study on the topic in his lifetime. Fortunately, a growing number of musicians, musicologists, and music therapists have begun to start putting the pieces

together, which I will compile here in an effort to begin shaping an understanding of how we might understand and work with sounds on a symbolic or archetypal level.

I suspect that part of the difficulty with approaching sounds as symbols rests in the complications inherent in addressing the subject of symbols and archetypes altogether, for we are forced to use a conflagration of both signs and symbols in order to communicate in the first place about archetypes at all, since we have no direct access to them. Taking into consideration the distinction that Jung makes between symbols and signs, the matter can get quite confusing: all language is composed of symbols, which are used to create words. Those words then become signs, signifiers of known referents. But they also can become signs for symbols, which are signifiers for archetypes, referents that are known to us *only* by their symbols. The word “water,” for instance, can call to mind the symbol of water, but also becomes a signifier for the deeper, collective sense of water that is embedded in our unconscious, which enables and activates the human experience of water. Within this linguistic schema, sounds serve as the symbols upon which all other signs and symbol-objects are built. As such, they can represent even deeper layers of signification, and can bring us much closer to the archetypes themselves. Sounds, and the meaningful arrangement of sounds into words or music, come to serve as something like symbols of symbols.

Richard Wagner claimed something along these same lines when he said that music “speaks out the very thing which word speech in itself cannot speak out...that which, looked at from the standpoint of our human intellect, is the *unspeakable*.” (Lipscomb, 2005, p. 389) This, of course, is the basis for the development of leitmotifs in opera, sound-symbols that function to accompany drama that have been developed even further in the context of film music. Suzanne Langer writes that “music has all the earmarks of a true symbolism except one: the existence of an *assigned connotation*,” making music what she calls an “unconsummated symbol.” (Lipscomb, 2005, p. 389) This unconsummated symbol is experienced as archetypal whenever its meaning is derived from – and reenacts or reflects – universal human experiences that reside within the collective unconscious.

There, at the deepest subliminal level of the psyche, which is usually inaccessible to the conscious mind, “the great artist descends for inspiration [and] is exposed to a living system of reactions and aptitudes that determine the path his work will take.” (Knapp, 1988, p. 1)

Kenneth Bruscia delineates the archetypal functions of music into two categories: *referential* and *non-referential*. He argues that *referential* music seeks to express or depict archetypal symbols like the hero, the dragon, the quest, etc., while *non-referential* music “reenacts the energy forms that precede and underlie the myth, as indigenously nonverbal experiences of the human condition (e.g. conflict, balance, harmony) that come into consciousness through reenactment.” (Bruscia, 1998) It is in the first, *referential* sense that Carolyn Kenny discusses the archetypal nature of music, suggesting that it is able to represent themes like birth and death through tension and resolution in the music, or through the relationship between various textures and timbres. (Kenny, 2002) Knapp, alternatively, describes music as archetypal in the *non-referential* sense, endowed with “repetitions, modulations, leitmotifs, associations, multiple variants, and combinations” that emanate from “the matrix of life.” (Knapp, 1988, p. 3) Schopenhauer seems to suggest that music can only be archetypal in a *non-referential* sense, writing:

[Music] never expresses the phenomenon, but only the inner nature, the in-itself, of every phenomenon, the will itself. Therefore music does not express this or that particular and definite pleasure, this or that affliction, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety...but joy, sorrow, horror, gaiety...peace of mind *themselves*, to a certain extent in the abstract; their essential nature...we understand them perfectly in this extracted quintessence. (Knapp, 1988, p. 12)

Quoting from Meyer, Ian Cross speaks of music’s capacity to hint, allude, connote, and refer both *to* itself and *beyond* itself, simultaneously in such a way that can be both *referential* and *non-referential*. Musical meaning is therefore created through “connotative complexes”:

Music does not present the concept or image of death itself. Rather it connotes that rich realm of experience in which death and darkness, night and cold, winter and sleep and silence are all combined and consolidated into a single connotative complex... What music presents is not any one of these metaphorical events but rather that which is common to all of them, that which enables them to become metaphors for one another. Music presents a generic event, a

‘connotative complex’, which then becomes particularized in the experience of the individual listener. (Cross, 2005, p. 34)

Regardless of *how* sounds are understood to convey symbolic and archetypal content, numerous thinkers from a variety of fields have expressed a sense that sound’s ability to access deeper layers of human experience is innate. Recalling experiences from her many years working as a music therapist, Carolyn Kenny noticed how her patients seemed to “just know” where to go on the piano and other instruments during their improvisational healing exercises, writing that it was “as if their brains were programmed with forms. This could be pre-cognition.” (Kenny, 2002) Astronomer Johannas Kepler was also known to have speculated from his work concerning music interval ratios and the space between planets that “the musical proportions must be inborn in the human soul,” using language similar to that of Carl Jung. (Hamel, 1979, p. 121)

Of course, the idea that music is foundational to human existence is by no means a new hypothesis. In the educational systems of medieval Europe, music was part of the *quadrivium* curriculum, studied alongside geometry, arithmetic, and astrology as one of the four foundations for all philosophical and theological knowledge. Musical laws and techniques of “acoustic self-realization” were believed to be central to the ancient Greek understanding of the universe. (Hamel, 1979, p. 100) Hamel furthermore points out that:

among the ancients...music was seen as part of the terrestrial blueprint, as the foundation of the world, even as the world-soul itself...music was inaudible; only its symbol was audible...The unheard substance of the cosmos, the Essential, was in both cases sound and tone. These demanded expression and representation by means of notes and instruments. (Hamel, 1979, p. 93)

Placed at the center of all archetypal expression, music and other sounds are recognized as having a power that exceeds other forms of communication. Taking this a step further, Bettina Knapp goes so far as to suggest that the archetypal layer of existence actually *is* music. In other words, whatever we hear *as* “music” is archetype in its most direct symbolic form. Knapp’s argument

that musical archetypes underlie all other forms of literary human expression is itself poetically expressed, and worth quoting here at length:

As custodians and channelers of creative energy, musical archetypes dictate the creative individual's verbal composition: the manner in which fantasy images are conveyed and laid out acoustically, the intensity of the feelings expressed, the sensations and behavioral trajectories of the characters, and the linguistical schemes of the prose or poetry used....The writer transforms the sound waves leaping up from within his collective unconscious into words endowed with their own auditory, rhythmical, and sensory motifs....If the reader is affected by the archetypal music picked up by his inner ear, whose rhythms are scanned by his senses, his heartbeat might accelerate, his muscles tense, his blood pressure increase, and his entire emotional system marvel at this collective power alive within him. As a suggestive power, archetypal music may summon up infinite musical resonances within the reader; sound waves of different lengths and traveling at a variety of speeds open up fresh causeways of feelings. Love, rage, hatred, violence, passivity, serenity, may be regarded as cathartic or abreactive, may stir, build, beguile, or repel a whole panoply of affinities within the reader, as archetypal music had done within the author when he was the recipient of this spellbinding force.” (Knapp, 1988, p. 4)

One way to make sense of why music is widely thought to be fundamental to archetypal expression and our spiritual or religious connection to the universe, is to consider what music actually *is*. Music consists in a meaningful arrangement of sounds, and sounds are essentially vibrations. Vibrations are a kinetic source of energy that exists within and through all objects in the entire universe. (Amir, 1995, p. 52) O'Loughlin observed that on both a metaphorical and metaphysical level, “movement is life, and lack of movement is death.” (O'Loughlin, 1995, p. 164) Although music is, for many people, is felt to be a more “abstract” form of human expression than other artistic mediums that are more visually engaging, sound is unique in its ability to convey both essence and being – both spirit and matter – simultaneously. Music connects us to the transcendent at the same time that its vibrations imbue us physically with the movement that is intrinsic to all life. This inspired semantic scholar and music therapist Carolyn Kenny to describe music as “distinctly ecological.” (Kenny, 2002)

The ancient Greeks believed that song was the first manifestation of thought that created the world, and that “the sound of the primal vibration sacrificed itself so that it might become progressively transformed into an upward-spiraling rhythm of ever-higher, newly-formed vibrations.” (Hamel, 1979, p. 109) Even modern physicists agree that every organism – from the smallest grain of sand to the stars and the planets – exhibits its own “vibratory rate.” Because of this, the Greeks believed that a body could be disintegrated and/or cognized simply by knowing its rate of vibration and harnessing its note or basic resonance-frequency. By this same understanding, singing and rhythmical speech may be considered, in the deepest ritual sense, an “active conjuration, a creative act within the world’s acoustic foundations,” which has the power to transform human beings on both physical and spiritual levels of existence. (Hamel, 1979, p. 109)

Thus, we find instances in which various cultures have found ways of connecting with and manifesting their understanding of the Divine through sound. In the ancient near East, for example, the *pneuma* – the breath – was understood as the living manifestation of the spirit of God. Because each vowel penetrates a different breath cavity, ancient papyri would speak of the ruler of the Gods, King Adonai, as Lord I-A-O-U-E-Ae, or the “Eye of the World” I-E-O-U-E-Y. Likewise, the Jewish name of God, *Jehovah*, was based on the vowels I-E-O-U-A. By utilizing every vowel, sounds filling every breath cavity with the name of God were used as the sonic signifier for God. (Hamel, 1979, p. 115) Similarly, the Upanishads of the ancient East speak of the OM as being “in truth the whole universe.” The OM is the sound from which all other words originate, the primal vibration or basic natural force inherent in all phenomena, from which everything emerges. It is upon this mantra that yogis are encouraged to focus most, if not all, of their meditations. (Knapp, 1988, p. 5)

“Mystically speaking,” writes Knapp, “*voice* combines the collective creative breath of spirit (pneuma) with the individual breath of the performer,” and Hamel therefore cautions,

the power of a *mantra*, of whatever materiality or purpose, is intimately bound up with the state of consciousness of its performer. A *mantra* is not a sound-wave phenomenon of

the physical sort, and has no effect if it is performed by one who is ignorant. (Hamel, 1979, p. 110)

This is what I call the *aesthetic necessity*: while it may be tempting to think of sound's power as an inherently physical, mystical force that has inherent meaning embedded in the frequencies and rhythms of the phenomena itself, as Lisa Summer puts it, "the real power of sound is always symbolic and humanistic." (Summer, 1995, p. 60)

The ancient Greeks (and as a result, the early Christians) drew moral distinctions between various modes of music based on their understanding of the laws of interval ratios. The octave, fifth, and fourth intervals were considered *pneumata* or "spiritual sounds," while seconds and thirds, called *somata*, and were thought of as "bodily sounds." This perspective continues to have a profound influence on the way that many modern musicians and music theorists think about sound's power. From medical science to New Age healing practices, the quest to discover a systematic, universal, and objective theory of sound that allows people to apply healing techniques through the manipulation of tones continues. (Hamel, 1979, p. 121)

Lisa Summer recognizes that this approach to music therapy is "seductive," but argues that "any serious therapeutic application of the power of sound must take into account the human element of compassion," by which she means to emphasize the need for a music practitioner to be fully present and capable of improvising within the context of their own aesthetic sensibilities, as well as creative spontaneity and genuine human empathy. (Summer, 1995, p. 64) Christopher Tree furthermore observes that the tendency to approach music as a systematic study of intervals, mathematical frequencies, and rigidly-defined scales will always be a poor substitute for the psychoactive energy of spontaneous creativity: "If it is so that creativity is essentially spontaneous," he writes, "then it follows that the more spontaneous the music, the more creatively essential it should be." (Tree, 1995, p. 83)

Ironically, the emphasis on the aesthetic necessity and creative spontaneity from the field of music therapy raises an important caution to those who might be interested in pursuing scholarly efforts to outline sound's symbolic nature. Any writing about music must be tempered with humility, and with deference to the primary experience of direct individual encounters with the archetypes through sound. "Archetypal music," writes Knapp, "implies the emergence of a primal force which conveys the fruit of an inner experience of soma and psyche." It is only after such "fruits" have arisen that the rational, disciplined, and ideational factors can enter in, to distill the raw materials of the unconscious by applying the aesthetic sensibilities of one's cultural context. (Knapp, 1988, p. 212) Much in the same way that Jung resisted Freud's application of rational, fixed meanings to particular dream symbols, we must also resist any temptation to narrowly define sound-symbols within music.

Kenneth Bruscia argues that therapeutic healing in music is available through the aesthetic experience itself, and that this is because of the ontological coherence coded in music's revelation of beauty. He writes,

Music imparts ontological meaning on two levels: from within – as a rich texture of sounds in various relationships within one another; and from without – as part of a larger pattern of human life and as a manifestation of the larger order of the entire universe. Beauty is implicated in that it is no more or less than a phenomenon of universal order that we experience as an affirmation of ontological meaning.
(Bruscia, 1998)

It is because of this inherent ontological meaning that musical experiences provide listeners (including performers) with peak or unitive moments that suspend the ordinary boundaries between self and music, or self and other, forming a new expanded whole in which music is no longer a mirror of the self, but "the music *is* the self on the way to becoming Self....The three components (self, other, and music) become indistinguishably one as part of the greater Self." (Bruscia, 1998)

The paradox of my silent screams, presented as a persistent dream symbol, ultimately led me down a strangely fruitful trajectory of research that has opened up new pathways of understanding. In “Meetings with the Unsounded Voice,” Peter O’Laughlin writes, “while the power of the vocal expression is readily apparent, the power of the unsounded voice holds its own profound influence on the individual and those around him or her. These are the sounds which are held back in silence, in secrecy, in respect, in silent rage, in love.” (O’Loughlin, 1995, p. 162) Silence is more than the peaceful, spiritual place “where the sacred traditions meet,” as *The Book of Symbols* suggests. Silence is, for many, the non-acoustic sound of oppression and imprisonment, a sound that is used to contain “the well containing the primary feelings of pain, rage, and shame, as well as joy and love, [and] practices a kind of death in which life force arising is always swallowed back down into the bruised stillness.”

In his depiction of a particular kind of vocal opening therapy that seeks to overcome this kind of entrapment, Peter O’Laughlin describes the sound that often comes from the eventual unleashing of an unsounded voice:

[It is] a groan which grows with repetition into something more like thunder, a startling sound which is no longer human nor identifiable in human terms, but rather is the pitch of life itself swelling from a source larger than this one being’s body. In unison it is the bellow of a lion and the howl of the wind, a cry of death and a call of the newly living. We know that later we will hear the stories of trauma and abuse which led to this outpouring of unlimited feeling. But right now the sound is the story, complete and wholly authentic in its resonance. Each of us in the room is encompassed by its force in a way which gathers all our stories and unexpressed longing into its reverberations. There is no one person making this sound. (O’Loughlin, 1995, p. 164)

In his Epistle to the Romans (8:26), the apostle Paul acknowledges that most of the time, we do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit (*pneuma*) intercedes for us in “sighs too deep for words.” In the Greek, it is something more like the silent scream, the unutterable groan or shout. It has been said that when you hear a scream in the hospital, it helps to know whether you are in the maternity ward or the ICU. On an archetypal level, I’m not sure that it makes much of a difference.

There is a place within all of us where all of those shouts reside, and in the sounds of cries unleashed, we are connected to the deepest part of ourselves, walking alongside the cloud of witnesses who proceeded us.

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