Music surrounds us. It is inescapable, and we have no desire to escape it. Our culture may think of itself as visual but it is in fact intransigently aural. From the opera stage to the ipod, we listen avidly. And when we do this, we make meaning. That is what culture is. It is our making sense of the world that we live in. We make sense of the world in many ways. Yet the most potent way we do is indirect. We appropriate artworks and then untangle the curly tangles of the world by coming at the world through the medium of art. Our meaning making strategies are oblique. Amid the complexities of life, art, somehow, makes things simpler. This is true even of the most abstracted kind of art. It is especially true of music.

As Suzanne Langer puts it, the ‘more one reflects on the significance of art generally, the more music appears as a lead’.¹ It is—in her words—the quintessential ‘Significant Form’.

If the outside world is constantly transformed from sense-perception into something ‘intelligible’ or ‘rationalizable’ it is done through symbols. But as Langer reminds us, music is a model for all symbolic transformations to the extent that it is logical without being fixed in connotation, expressive without being literal in its symbolism. Her formulation in *Philosophy in a New Key* is that ‘music articulates forms which language cannot set forth’.  

In other words, music is a powerful medium for making meaning. Perhaps this is because music is so abstract. No effort to label music, to turn it into a species of ‘program’ music, has ever worked. We write about music, but we are aware when we do that writing is not music making, and that something is always lost in translation between different mediums. But that should not worry us, for the most potent human meanings are generated out of the gap between media. Human beings live a double life. Everything that we listen to and look at is capable of being symbolic of something else. There is nothing in the human experience of the world that cannot be a symbol, metaphor, analogy, cipher, allusion, intimation, or mask of something else. Music epitomizes this doubling. It is the symbol par excellence. Communication embodies such doubling. All communication, not least artistic communication, re-presents the phenomena of one medium in another medium. The fluid body is carved in stone, the lyric is sung, and the three-dimensional figure is painted on a two-dimensional surface. So it is hardly surprising that when we come to deal with the everyday world, and make sense of its often scrambled nature, we do so via the media of art.

Artworks contain meaning in highly condensed forms. It is generally true that the more abstract artworks are, the more meaning they contain. Agnes Heller, in this collection, observes this in the case of Wagner’s operas. These operas illustrate something that is true of all great works of art. They are capable of multiple interpretations. They can be endlessly interpreted because they contain highly condensed meanings. Because they embody such a density of meaning, audiences return to them time and again. They never tire of the works. Devotees of Wagner never get bored by them. As Heller remarks:

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