

‘Sound’ or Style?

Rather than using the term *tone* or *timbre in music*, I prefer the word *sound*. Despite its somewhat vague meaning, it is widely used and generally understood.

When people talk about music, they often use the terms *sound* and *style* as if they meant the same thing. Yet they refer to different aspects of musical identity. We clearly recognise the difference between the style of a Bossa Nova and a Tango, just as we recognise the different sounds of individual singers. Understanding this distinction helps explain why we immediately recognise some artists, while certain composers remain recognisable even when their music is performed by entirely different musicians.

Sound refers to the actual sonic character of a performance. This includes such elements as a singer’s voice (timbre), the tone colour of instruments, and characteristic performance practices. Sound is closely connected to the performers themselves. In popular music, sound is almost always the primary means by which listeners recognise an artist.

Style, by contrast, refers to the musical language underlying a composition. Style encompasses characteristic melodies, harmonies, rhythms, forms, and compositional techniques (such as those associated with Bossa Nova or Tango). Unlike sound, style can survive changes of performers because it is embedded in the music itself rather than in any particular performance.

The distinction becomes clear when we compare a pop group such as The Beatles (or, for example, ABBA) with a classical composer such as Anton Bruckner (or, for example, Jean Sibelius). Many people claim that Paul McCartney possesses a highly recognisable style. After the release of his most recent album, *The Boys of Dungeon Lane*, the press was quick to write about McCartney’s unmistakable style. This is a claim I am inclined to question, because when another singer performs these songs, the qualities that people immediately identify as “Paul McCartney” become far less obvious, or even disappear altogether. I.e., not recognised as a typical McCartney song.

As an aside, I have not actively listened to popular music for many years. What I hear usually reaches me by chance. The same is true of McCartney’s new album, yet when I do encounter one of his new songs, I become all ears.

Shortly after the album’s release, I heard one of the songs, *Days We Left Behind*, performed as a cover version. Had you not known who wrote it, it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to identify its creator. I suspect the same would be true of almost any other song. What listeners often recognise as “McCartney’s style” turns out to depend heavily on his voice, phrasing, accent, and characteristic manner of performance. These elements belong more to his sound than to the composition itself. In short, much of what listeners recognise is not merely the composition but McCartney’s unique vocal timbre.

This phenomenon becomes even stronger when listeners are already familiar with the original recording. It is difficult to separate the song from the memory of its first performance. As a result, what people frequently call McCartney’s “style” is in reality a combination of compositional features and the distinctive sound of his voice. In popular music, the identity of a song is almost always inseparable from the performer who first recorded and released it.

The situation is different in classical music. Any orchestra or conductor may perform a symphony by Anton Bruckner or Jean Sibelius, and listeners familiar with their music will still recognise it as Bruckner or Sibelius. The orchestra may differ in size, interpretation, tempo, or sonic character, yet the essential musical identity remains intact. This is because the style of these composers resides

primarily within the composition itself: in the monumental structures, long melodic lines, rich harmonic language, and characteristic orchestration.

A performance of a Bruckner symphony does not depend upon a unique vocal timbre or a specific recording style. Rather, the stylistic fingerprints of the composer are embedded in the score. Different orchestras may therefore produce very different sounds while preserving the same underlying style.

This comparison suggests that popular music often relies heavily on sound for its recognisability, whereas classical music depends more strongly on style. In popular music, the characteristic voice and performance of the artist form a central part of musical identity. In classical music, the compositional structure and musical language are the principal carriers of that identity. Although both sound and style are present in every musical tradition, their relative importance differs considerably.

Understanding this distinction helps explain why a song by Paul McCartney may lose much of its recognisability when sung by someone else, while a symphony by Anton Bruckner remains unmistakably Bruckner, regardless of who performs it.

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