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Among the things that I do as a music theorist is to examine the ways that music can have meaning, to articulate more fully what those meanings are, and to discover how such meanings are possible in music, which is really a system of aural relationships whose features and interpretations change over time. What one discovers is that most of the meanings we ascribe to music are “conventional”; that is to say, a particular meaning has become associated with a particular musical passage through cultural conventions that can be both deliberate and non-deliberate. For example, the difference between minor and major modes is typically understood in terms of tragic vs. non-tragic, yet this correlation does not hold in every culture at every point in time.

I remember being somewhat disconcerted by this insight when I first understood it fully. It seemed to make music somehow less powerful, since it apparently possessed few universal, immutable meanings. But of course we see something similar in language? The world’s great religious literature was written in languages that change over time and that determined to a degree what can be said in what way. What I have come to feel is that music’s spiritual meanings, however systematic or historically contingent they may be,

do not lose their force even when we know how they are being conveyed. Just as our knowledge of human anatomy does not obscure our sense of wonder at our creation, so too does our response to the divine in music shine through, whatever we might learn about its structure and its relation to human history.