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## IS THAT A NEW LANGUAGE COMING? SOME QUESTIONS CONCERNING MUSIC SEMIOTICS VOCABULARY

Music semiotics is a branch of music theory that has been particularly developing since the 1960s. As semiotics moved from general linguistics, structuralism and theory of communication to cognitive and psychological linguistics, as sources of understanding music cognition – that is, as it moved from “hard” to “soft” semiotics as Agawu calls them (1999: 154) – its vocabulary became strongly metaphoric and complex. At the same time, there was no strict convention concerning the usage of the vocabulary in question.

In this paper, I will focus on some important interrelated issues of music semiotics vocabulary, such as the concept of *meaning*, and all rhetorical variations regarding this term in music. Special attention will be given to explanation of terminological issues of the two most prominent “languages” of music semiotics, that of Robert Hatten and Eero Tarasti.

### **1. Introduction**

Music semiotics has gone a long way since the first semioticians of music started to analyze music using the theory of signs, a subdiscipline of general linguistics. Before I present a brief view, from my own perspective, of how we ended here but started there, let me tell a small anecdote which illustrates how we perceive music. While working with a group of students, I gave them a simple task – to listen one musical excerpt and think of the best words for describing the sound.

Since music had overly calm and peaceful character, almost all students came up with words which described exactly that. Still, in one student the same music provoked a state of anxiety, so he came up with the words of totally different character. Perhaps it was the result of a previous negative experience with the piece in question or no affinity to genre or style, but what struck me was the fact that no matter how motivated the music (rarely!) as a sign is, how we interpret, associate, communicate, in other words, understand it, sometimes depends exclusively on the last link of the communication chain – the receiver him/herself and his/her experience. This instantly reminded me of Saramago’s story “Black snow”<sup>1</sup> and that the way in which a sign works depends on who interprets it and how that person interprets it. Interestingly, according to the theory of mimesis and mimetic participation, what is usual and common is not always true for everybody (Cox 2016).<sup>2</sup>

Music semiotics vocabulary is very complex and the reason for this lies in the past. As we know, at the beginning, semioticians were taking natural language as a system analogous to music, which is justified by the long pre-history of the language-music relationship. Comparisons were based on three fundamental components: phonetics, syntax and semantics, and since the 80s their relationship has been deepened by inclusion of cognitive aspect. Since then, cognitive linguistics has illuminated the deep connection of language and music with physical experience and cognitive processes. It led to birth of semiotic theories grounded on corporeality, energeticity and processuality of music. Therefore, the vocabulary of music semiotics is very rich since its constituents come from various domains, but also because so many concepts go under the umbrella term *semiotics* or *semiology* or, more precisely, under the morpheme *séma* (Greek. *sign*) with some of the terms being used interchangeably.<sup>3</sup> The theory of signs

<sup>1</sup> Namely, in Saramago’s story “Black snow” a teacher gives children the task to illustrate Christmas. While the majority of children had a very positive notion of Christmas as a symbol of birth, wealth, beginning, life, one child painted black snow since his mother passed away on Christmas.

<sup>2</sup> Cox developed mimetic hypothesis and proposes that imitation on the part of listeners clearly seems to play a role in musical experience. A listener could be wrong about the way of creating the sound, and that infects mimetic participation, musical affect and aesthetic evaluation. Cox’s premise is that when we conceptualize music, we are conceptualizing musical experience.

<sup>3</sup> *Semiology* (French. *Sémiologie*) as a term was first used by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who defined it as a science which studies “life of signs within society.” The term *semiotics* was introduced by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and refers to study of sign systems. *Semantics* as a term was introduced by the French linguist Michel Bréal in 1897 and it is generally used for the study of interpretation, message and meaning of any communicational system.

is related to many disciplines<sup>4</sup> and embraces a large number of terms.<sup>5</sup> If we only take into consideration Saussure's basic dichotomy of a sign – *signifier* and *signified*, we find it rhetorically varied as: sound image and concept (Saussure), expression and content (Hjelmslev), sign vehicle and designatum (Morris), form and content (Mukařovský), sign and object (Peirce). We must not be surprised then that establishing music semiotics as a discipline brought the same challenges as the vocabulary of its “mother” science did.

## 2. How to name musical meaning?

No question of music theory has brought more disagreements than the discussion over musical meaning. Perhaps composer Aaron Copland gave the most interesting illustration of the issue. He begins his book *What to Listen for in Music* (1939) with two questions and two answers: “Is there a meaning to music” – “Yes,” “Can you state with so many words what the meaning is?” – “No” (12). With the breakthrough of music semiotics and New Musicology, discussion on musical meaning has significantly moved from the question *whether music is or is not a semantic art to where to look for musical meaning?*<sup>6</sup>

In relation to the answer to this question, one can distinguish between two possible concepts of meaning in music: 1) **internal**; the musical meaning is internal or relational, i.e. *it is in the context of the work itself*, and 2) **external**; music has the ability to communicate *meanings related to the external world of concepts, actions and emotions*. To echo Jakobson, we may conclude that, in general, meaning could be regarded as being either syntagmatic or paradigmatic in construction, since the former is located on syntagmatic axis (horizontal), and the latter

<sup>4</sup> General linguistics, structural linguistics, cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics, generative theory, theory of communication, theory of information, theory of system, narrative theory, biosemiotics, cybernetics, structuralism, hermeneutics, syntax, pragmatics, glossematics, Extended Mind Thesis, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Denotatum, representamen, semiosis, interpretant, denotation, connotation, monosemy, polisemy, homology, analogy, object, reference, substance, signification, message, motivation, moneme, phoneme, semes, isotopies, code, encoding, entrophy, decoding, convention, symbol, icon, index, firstness, secondness, thirdness, qualising, sinsign, legesign, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Agawu concluded that New Musicology actually appeared as a reaction to formalism, as anti-formalism (Agawu 1996). Discussion on musical meaning usually has two opposite views: Formalistic (Hanslick, Wagner, Stravinski, Schönberg) music express itself and the sound world, and Expressionist, which acknowledge that music is capable to express emotion, states and extramusical content. Similar tipology is to be found earlier in Meyer (1956), Fubini (1967) and Kneif (1974).

resides on paradigmatic axis (vertical), i.e. on the axis of combination and selection. The practice, however, shows frequent usage of different terms (Table 1).

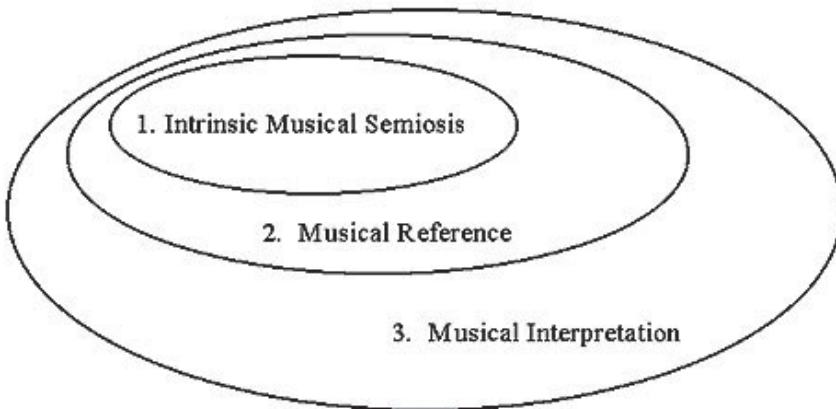
**Table 1.** Terminology for the two types of musical meaning

|                 |              |             |       |           |              |              |               |           |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------|-------|-----------|--------------|--------------|---------------|-----------|
| <b>External</b> | Extroversive | Referential | Outer | Extrinsic | Extrageneric | Paradigmatic | Exteroceptive | Exogenic  |
| <b>Internal</b> | Introversive | Relational  | Inner | Intrinsic | Congeneric   | Syntagmatic  | Interoceptive | Endogenic |

We can also conclude that the first type – internal, is *abstract*, referring to another musical sound, and the second – external meaning, is *concrete*, referring to a concrete object, emotion, or character. But, what about their relationship? Wilson Coker (1972) coined the terms *congeneric* and *extrageneric* to distinguish internal *structural* meaning from external *cultural* meaning, defining them according to the theory of expectation, but he offers little explanation of mediation between the two. He finds congeneric meaning more present in instrumental music where signification process is done by the principle of repetition: “in order to achieve the meaning the sounds have to refer (repeat) to other sounds” (Rosu 2016: 12). Actually, terms *congeneric/extrageneric* parallel Roman Jakobson’s opposition between *introversive* and *extroversive* meaning, which was later adopted by Kofi Agawu (1991) in his blending of Schenkerian introversive voice-leading with Ratner’s extroversive list of topics. Correspondingly, Agawu’s method balances between two types of musical meaning and two types of signs: *topical* (or referential), and what he calls *pure signs* (1991: 51), that is, harmony. In the model of introversive semiosis Agawu unites Schenker’s middle graph, Rosen’s descending thirds, Ratner’s structural line and Mattheson’s narrative model: beginning-middle-end led by tonal harmony rhetorics. This fact, that modern semioticians of music did not want to give up traditional analysis, has led to semiotic redescription and the emergence of the problematic term *pure musical sign* (Agawu 1991: 51), which tautologically signifies itself, in opposition to any normative sign definition, as Tibor Kneif noted (1974: 37). Indeed, Tarasti recently introduced new types of signs: *pre*, *act* and *post-signs*, unquestionably based on logical relation with a referent within the musical process, so the real question is whether the term sign is exaggerated in these cases, not to say underestimated, or the concept of sign is enormously expanded for music?

Fifty years ago it was written that the nature of a sign specified two approaches: for the signifier (material aspect, firstness) – formal analysis, and for the signi-

fied (mental concept, secondness) – semantic theory and practice (Stefani 1975: 80). There was no, at least subtle, mediation between the two possible meanings. Only penetration of Peirce's third aspect of the sign – interpretant and the level of Thirdness brought the necessary new dimension, of how musical sign is related to its interpretants. According to Peirce's three-dimensional concept, José Luiz Martinez (1998) elaborated music semiotic inquiry divided in three fields of study: 1. Intrinsic Musical Semiosis, 2. Musical Reference and 3. Musical Interpretation. Musical Interpretation deals with the action of musical signs in an existing or potential mind and it is comprised of three sub-fields: 1. musical perception; 2. performance; and 3. musical intelligence (analysis, criticism, teaching, theorizing and musical semiotics) and composition.



**Figure 1.** Logical relations among the three fields of music semiotic inquiry

There is a logic determining the interdependence of the three fields, so it is possible to study the field of Intrinsic Musical Semiosis in an independent way, but that is included in the field of Musical Reference. In this way, the field of Musical Interpretation is the widest and the most complex field of musical semiosis, and even though it depends on forms of intrinsic semiosis and musical reference, it is in the complexity of musical interpretants that music is actually presented, exists and signifies. More efforts in studying mediation between possible musical meanings could be seen in David Lidov's work, where he proposed as a rule that there are competitive relationships between *structure* and *reference* in each semiosis (Lidov 1999: 127). Moreover, Agawu's efforts to overcome the gap in his dialectical approach could be seen in placing topics as functional signs on

both plans – paradigmatic and syntagmatic (Agawu 129). Finally, in Tarasti’s vocabulary we see that signs participate in inner and outer space and time, through interoceptive and exteroceptive iconicity, indexicality and symbolicity.<sup>7</sup> In turn, it led to the fact that *signification*, not the meaning, is the major issue of semiotics. The meaning is only one aspect of signification, since signification “means the process of sign formation: how the signifier – the material aspect of a sign or ‘sign vehicle’ – is connected to the signified – the content or meaning of the sign” (Tarasti 2012: 450). That was what Roland Barthes meant when he asserted that signification is a *process which led to meaning*, it is not the meaning itself, but *the act of meaning production* (1979). Unlike in the first dialectical approaches to meaning, meaning today is perceived as something less fixed and ‘dead’, as Mead observed it. Echoing previous statement, we can say that Tarasti brings *concreteness into abstractness*. Hence, in Barthes’ theory, paradigmatic meaning is *in absentia*, while syntagmatic meaning is *in presentia* (Barthes 1979). In other words, *what is concrete is absent, what is abstract is present*.

It can be concluded that there is a considerable overlap between scholars who investigate one of the most complex questions in music theory that inherits a rich semantic legacy. To sum up, the birth of semiotic theories grounded on the corporeality, energeticity and processuality of music is interrelated with: 1. *the expansion of the sign concept in music*, in internal signification process – through inner iconicity, indexicality and symbolicity; 2. the influence of the concept of interpretant in more flexible triadic sign concept. 3. the change of focus from meaning to signification – the perception of music as a constant transformational process of signs, and 4. finally, I will argue that the development of performance studies and the theory of performance have been *raison plus* for more dynamically oriented approaches. Recently, the theory of performance gave considerable contribution by explaining how performers understand music and what their main analytical and interpretive concerns are. Rink (2002) noticed that performers understand music in the same way as analysts, but they use different terms in verbalization; they perceive music more as a process, less a structure, more like a shift of stable – unstable, static – active, melody as a curve, not a syntax, etc. Moreover, evidence on conceptual metaphor, that is, embodied cognition, gave

<sup>7</sup> Two aspects of the cognition of a sign, the former refers to what happens within a mind; for instance, a receiver of a sign. The latter refers to an external source of signs, say, the sender, but in any case something outside the subject (Tarasti 2012). Tarasti also uses terms *endogenic* and *exogenic* for signs, and modalities either.

insight into how natural metaphorical mapping of musical and physical domain is, so talking, for example, about musical gestures or space in music is not something superficial, but the most natural way of describing music.

### 3. Hatten's and Tarasti's "language"

As semiotics moved from general linguistics, structuralism and the theory of communication to cognitive and psychological linguistics as sources of understanding music cognition, that is, as it moved from "hard" to "soft" semiotics as Agawu calls them (1999: 154) – its vocabulary became strongly metaphoric and complex. At the same time, there was no strict convention about the usage of that vocabulary, which led to a terminological disorder. The growth of number of researchers and subdisciplines of music semiotics caused such a state that now *everyone has their own semiotics*. In order to understand it, you have to learn "the language," you have to *codify by learning the code*. In the end, I will address the two most elaborated and sophisticated ways of thinking in music semiotics since 1990, that of Robert Hatten and Eero Tarasti in brief overview, since deeper analysis exceeds the length of this paper.

Hatten's vocabulary includes several major concepts: **musical gesture, Pierce's sign classification (icon, index, symbol), interpretant, markedness, topics and troping**. Most of them are familiar from the theory of literature and classical semiotics. The term *correlation*, for example, which Hatten popularized, derives from Eco's semiotics and it is a synonym or a neutral version for more, in Hatten's opinion, problematic concepts such as 'reference' or 'denotation'. The term *markedness* has proved to be a useful tool for explaining the asymmetrical valuation of musical oppositions and their mapping onto cultural oppositions.<sup>8</sup> *Topics* are, according to Hatten "patches of music that trigger clear associations with styles, genres, and expressive meaning" (2),<sup>9</sup> but a novelty in his understanding

<sup>8</sup> The same concept was applied to phonology by Nicholas Trubetzkoy, to linguistic case structure by Roman Jakobson, and to poetics by Michael Shapiro. Jakobson defined it as: "Every single constituent of any linguistic system is built on an opposition of two logical contradictories: the presence of an attribute ('markedness') in contraposition to its absence ('unmarkedness')." (Jakobson according to Chandler, 2002: 93–94).

<sup>9</sup> Grabócz (2002) noticed that musical topics are discussed under various terminologies in different cultures: in East European countries they are referred to as *intonatsia*, in cultures influenced by French studies they are *genres* or *stylemes*, while in English speaking countries the term *topics* is the prevalent one.

of topics is *expressive genre*, which he describes as a more elaborated topic. Expressive genres are: “those dramatic trajectories that encompass changes of expressive state, and which are not limited to a single formal genre” (2005: 14), and they are “stylistically encoded” (2006: 63). For example, he showed that Beethoven used the *tragic-to-transcendent* expressive genre for the single slow movement of the “Hammerklavier.” The heart of his theory is the idea of *troping*, i.e. where possibility of creating new meanings appears: two distinctive gestures [or topics] could be fused to make (metaphorical) expressive third meaning (Crnjanski 2017). What Hatten discovers is that topics or gestures may be combined to produce striking new meanings akin to metaphor in language. However, the notion of a *musical gesture*, based on an analogy with human gestures, affect and communication, occupies the central place in his theory of meaning. It is interpreted as a movement, energy, a sign in the process of communication in which it provides information about the gesturer. For him, gesture is “any energetic shaping through time that may be interpreted as significant” (Hatten 2006: 1). Lidov admitted that he used to avoid the term “musical gesture,” since we employed the word with considerable metaphorical range, but he was finally convinced by Hatten’s work that is a perfectly good term “so long as we think of ‘musical gesture’ as *one* compound term, not a noun with a contingent adjective” (Lidov 2005: 132).<sup>10</sup> Apart from some problematic terms such as *gesture under fermata*, *ambiguous distinction of spontaneous gesture*,<sup>11</sup> and *unmarked musical flow* in defining rhetorical shifts and abrupts, he developed a comprehensive theory and vocabulary, applicable in music theory and performance, as it was recently confirmed by the work of Alexandra Pierce (2007). In relation to Tarasti’s proclivity to too much determinism and meticulous working out of his analytical stances through semiotic square, Hatten prefers using more general, simple and isolated methods and develops them freely. Accordingly, his “language” is much easier to understand. Tarasti’s vocabulary is a complex metalanguage, and a consistent multilanguage. At the time when he presented his generative course in analysis of Waldstein Sonata (1991), there was no doubt that his vocabulary seemed quite incomprehensible, even to those involved in semiotic studies of music. His semiotic approach is strongly predicated on French semiology – ideas of A. J. Greimas, ideas on

<sup>10</sup> Emphasis by Lidov.

<sup>11</sup> For example, that sort of movements, usually called gesticulation, for some theoreticians are not gestures at all. See more: Crnjanski 2017.



musical actors by Russian Formalist Vladimir Propp, Swiss musicologist Ernst Kurth, and modal logic by Finnish philosopher Georg Friedrich Wright. In the last 20 years he has developed refined philosophy of music that he named *existential semiotics*, where his interest remains in interoceptive readings or what Ogden and Richards call “intrinsic property.” Altogether, the theory is upgraded by the influence of the German speculative philosophy (Hegel, Kant), Biosemiotics (from Baltic biologist Jakob von Uexküll), and ideas of Julia Kristeva, Paul Ricoeur, Roland Barth, Jan Mukarovsky, Yuri Lotman, H.H. Unger, Halm, the theory of information, the theory of literature, linguistics and Richard Wagner’s aesthetics. Besides basic terms of his vocabulary such as: **isotopies**,<sup>12</sup> **spatial**, **temporal**, and **actorial**<sup>13</sup> categories, and **modalities**,<sup>14</sup> Tarasti abundantly uses terms in the original languages, mostly gallicismes and germanisms, in a manner similar to philosophical writings: **engagement/disengagement** (*embrayage/debrayage*); **modalities** – Being (*etre*), Doing (*faire*), Becoming (*devenir*), Willing (*vouloir*), *Zielstrebigkeit* or Obligation (*devoir*), Being Able To or Ability (*pouvoir*), Knowing (*savoir*), musical *Dasein*<sup>15</sup> or *Umwelt*, *Ich-Ton*,<sup>16</sup> *Moi/Soi*,<sup>17</sup> *Schein* and *Erscheinung*,<sup>18</sup> Hegelian terms *an-und-für-mich-sein*, and *an-und-für-sich-sein*, and the same Sartrean terms *être-en-et-pour-moi* and *être-en-et-pour-soi*, which are *being-in-and-for-myself* and *being-in-and-for-itself* in English.<sup>19</sup>

Terminological inconsistency could be exemplified by the term *actor*, since his rhetorical variations include *themes-actor*, *actant* and sometimes even *subject* or *motif*, thus indicating its structural value. Neologisms in his vocabulary and some difficulties in analytical steps<sup>20</sup> are obvious obstacle for performers in

<sup>12</sup> Deep levels of signification that determine all subsequent levels situated closer to the surface.

<sup>13</sup> According to Greimas, *actants* are syntactic units in the form of binary oppositions, that precede semantic investment.

<sup>14</sup> Modalities are general human ways of evaluation; in language, for example, the subjunctive tense colors speech with wishes and beliefs.

<sup>15</sup> Eng. Existence. Term used by German philosophers from Heidegger to Karl Jaspers, to designate the world in which we live, not only “me”, but also other subjects and objects.

<sup>16</sup> *Ich-Tone* determines which signs a composer accepts from his *Umwelt*, and which ones he rejects, and how these elements unfold and behave in the course of a musical piece (Tarasti 2012: 388).

<sup>17</sup> Terms developed by Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Fontanille. *Moi* is organic, *Soi* is conventional.

<sup>18</sup> He uses the concept of *Schein* (ger.) (in the sense of Kant, Schiller and Adorno) to state that music manifests itself “vertically” in every musical utterance, but at the same time, music has a horizontal, linear and syntagmatic appearance, which is essentially processual and dynamic.

<sup>19</sup> Hegel’s categories *an-sich sein* and *für-sich-sein* (*being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*) which mean our unique being, and our being observed and defined by others, our social roles, and the like (Tarasti 2012: 449).

<sup>20</sup> One of the difficulties is to determine the norm of the outer spatiality, that is measuring the inner-spatial *debrayage* – should it be reckoned from the basic tonality, or from another topos which has been strongly tonicized?

using his analysis as a guide for interpretation. Alike thinkers such as Kurth, Schenker and Asafiev, who share a dynamic conception of musical form and have a common epistemological foundation in the idea of music as an energy, Tarasti considers how to present music graphically as a transformational process or “Erscheinung.” Actually, he recently proved that semiotic analysis could be used to elucidate ready-made model of Schenkerian analysis with consideration of linear categories in an actant manner.

**Figure 2.** Tom Pankhurst’s Schenkerian analysis of a children’s song (2004) with semiotic categories added by Tarasti

#### 4. Is that a new language coming?

The thoughts which are expressed by music are too indefinite to be put into words. In every effort to express such thoughts, we find that something is right, but at the same time that something is lacking in all of them. Then, probably, there is a new language coming, because there must be room for change in any theory or method which strives to ameliorate language of music. It leads to what Kevin Korsyn calls *narratives of disciplinary legitimation* (2004), i.e. the employment of certain discipline in research, which author must explicate, defend and convince in its validity and purposefulness.

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## Stiže li to novi jezik? Neka pitanja koja se tiču vokabulara glazbene semiotike

### Sažetak

Glazbena semiotika grana je teorije glazbe koja se posebno razvijala od 1960-ih. Kako se semiotika odmaknula od opće lingvistike, strukturalizma i teorije komunikacije ka kognitivnoj znanosti i psiholingvistici, kao izvorima razumijevanja glazbene kognicije – tj. prelazeći iz „tvrde” u „mekanu” semiotiku, kao što ih Agawu naziva (1999: 154) – njezin je vokabular postao izrazito metaforičan i složen. Istodobno, nije bilo stroge konvencije o upotrebi toga rječnika.

U ovome su radu razmatrana neka međusobna i važna pitanja glazbene semiotike, kao što je koncept *značenja* i sve retoričke varijacije u vezi s tim pojmom u glazbi. Posebna je pozornost posvećena objašnjenju terminoloških pitanja dvaju najistaknutijih „jezika” glazbene semiotike, Roberta Hattena i Eera Tarastija.

**Keywords:** music semiotics, meaning, sign, signification, Hatten, Tarasti

**Ključne riječi:** glazbena semiotika, značenje, znak, označavanje, Hatten, Tarasti