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INHALT ('CONTENT') AS A TECHNICAL TERM IN MUSICAL SEMIOTICS

Inhalt ('content') is so common that it could hardly pass as a technical term. The purpose of this article is to show that from the 18th to the 20th century it was nevertheless used particularly to denote the specifically musical meaning arising from what music 'contains' of notes, rhythms, melodic cells, etc. Hegel, Marx, Hauptmann, Hanslick, Schenker, Schoenberg and probably others shared the same view that music has a content of its own, one that cannot be translated in verbal language.

The German term *Inhalt* ('content') is so common that it could hardly pass as a technical term. It originated from *inne* (Latin *intus*, 'within', 'inside'), and *halten* ('to hold'). It first appeared in the 15th century, perhaps as a law term, to denote the content (the argument, the summary – also *Gehalt*) of a text. It came only later to denote volume size, capacity.¹ Applied to music, its usage obviously is metaphoric. In its most down-to-earth meaning, to which I will refer below as 'content strictly speaking', it merely denotes what music may 'contain' of notes, rhythms, melodic cells, etc. But music is not a container: it does not 'contain' such elements, no more than language 'contains' phonemes. The metaphor is not particularly problematic, however, and it is easily understood. *Inhalt* can be taken also in a more abstract and more general but no less metaphoric sense, denoting what music may comprise – or express – of meanings of all sorts.

What I want to stress is that, throughout these general (and somewhat confused) usages, the term may have taken on a particular meaning reuniting both sides of the metaphor, to denote the musical meaning (in the more general sense) arising

¹ See Grimm (1854–1971), s.v. *Inhalt*, *Inne*, *Halten*, etc.

from the musical content strictly speaking. Because it arises from the music itself, this meaning is intrinsic; it is neither based on references to the outer world, nor assigned from the outside.

The debate about the musical content originates in several writings by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, even although instances of the term applied to music can be found earlier in the 18th century.² Hegel himself, in somewhat ambiguous statements, made complex distinctions between quasi synonymous terms, *Inhalt*, *Gehalt*, *Gegenstand*, *Stoff*, etc.³ The dual meaning of *Inhalt* clearly appears in this quotation:

“Let us now consider, after the ways to conceive of the other arts, those in the form of which music, be it accompanying or independent from any determined text, may capture and express a particular meaning. I already said before that music, among all arts, encloses in itself the highest possibility to free itself not only from any real text, but also from the expression of any determined content, and to satisfy itself with a self-contained process of combinations, variations, oppositions and interpositions falling within the purely musical domain of the sounds. But the music then remains empty, meaningless, and cannot truly be counted as art, as it lacks a principal feature of all art, the spiritual content and expression.”⁴

Hegel makes here several distinctions. First of all, he distinguishes between the possible existence of a ‘determined content’ – a content of the kind that could be determined by a text set to music – and ‘self-contained processes within the purely musical domain of the sounds’ – technical musical processes (combina-

² Musical content is mentioned for instance by Carl Philip Emanuel Bach, when he discusses how to play the ornaments according to the ‘content’ of the work (1753, Chapter 2, *passim*); or when he explains that sight reading too often fails to express “the true content” (*der wahre Inhalt*) of the piece (1753: 115–116). In these passages, *Inhalt* could be understood as denoting some sort of musical meaning.

³ The distinction between *Inhalt* and *Gehalt* corresponds closely to that in French between *contenu* and *teneur*, but it has no direct correspondence in English. *Inhalt* merely refers to what is contained, while *Gehalt* denotes a substantial content, an aesthetic value. See also note 13 below.

⁴ *Fragen wir nun zweitens nach der von den übrigen Künsten unterschiedenen Auffassungsweise, in deren Form die Musik, sey sie begleitend oder von einem bestimmten Text unabhängig, einen besonderen Inhalt ergreifen und ausdrücken kann, so sagte ich bereits früher, daß die Musik unter allen Künsten die meiste Möglichkeit in sich schieße, sich nicht nur von jedem wirklichen Text, sondern auch von dem Ausdruck irgend eines bestimmten Inhalts zu befreien, um sich bloß in einem in sich abgeschlossenen Verlauf von Zusammenstellungen, Veränderungen, Gegensätzen und Vermittelungen zu befriedigen, welche innerhalb des rein musikalischen Bereichs der Töne fallen. Dann bleibt aber die Musik leer, bedeutungslos, und ist, da ihr die eine Hauptseite aller Kunst, der geistige Inhalt und Ausdruck abgeht, noch nicht eigentlich zur Kunst zu rechnen* (Hegel 1838: 142–143). What Hegel calls “accompanying music” obviously is music setting a text.

tions, variations, oppositions and interpositions) in the sound domain. He further distinguishes between these technical processes and the 'spiritual content and expression' that form the principal feature of all arts, and that must also be considered distinct from the 'determined' content.

Mark Evan Bonds (2014: 88), among others, quotes this passage in support of the idea that instrumental music, for Hegel, is empty and meaningless and could hardly be considered to have risen to the level of art at all. This however fails to acknowledge the declared purpose of the passage, which is to show *how* – and not *whether* – music may express a particular meaning. It fails to take account of the distinction that Hegel makes between "determined content" (*bestimmter Inhalt*) and "spiritual content" (*geistiger Inhalt*). Hegel's determined content is verbally determined: it belongs to verbal texts (literature, poetry, etc.) in general, and to music with text in our case. If no text determines the content, and if music satisfies itself with purely technical processes, it may indeed remain empty and meaningless. But Hegel continues and stresses that instrumental music, in order to count as art, must express spirituality. Its content may then remain indeterminate, but it nevertheless can be deduced from the harmonic and melodic situation:

"Only when spirituality is expressed in adequate manner in the sensual element of the sounds and their diverse figuration does music rise to [the level of] true art, regardless whether this content obtains for itself a more detailed description in words, or must be indeterminately perceived from the sounds, their harmonic relationships and their melodic animation."⁵

Discussions about these continue throughout the 19th century and later. The term is soon discussed in connection with musical form, either to claim that music has no content, only form; or to demonstrate that the content of music is its form; or to oppose content and form in music. Adolf Bernhard Marx confirms Hegel's statement that musical devices alone (sounds, vibrations, tones, noises, temporal events) cannot produce content if they lack spirituality. It is only through musical form, he adds, that musical spirituality (*Geist*) is able to produce its own

⁵ *Erst wenn sich im den sinnlichen Element der Töne und ihrer mannigfaltigen Figuration Geistiges in angemessener Weise ausdrückt, erhebt sich auch die Musik zur Wahren Kunst, gleichgültig, ob dieser Inhalt für sich seine nähere Bezeichnung ausdrücklich durch Worte erhalte, oder unbestimmter aus den Tönen und deren harmonischen Verhältnissen und melodische Beseelung müsse empfunden worden* (Hegel 1838: 143).

musical content. And what Marx considers ‘musical form’ must be of the same nature as what Hegel had described as the harmonic relationships and the melodic animation of the sounds. Marx writes:

“Form is not the opposite of content but its determination. Form’s opposite is not content in general but rather formlessness – content that is unformed and thus, in its formlessness, undetermined and totally indeterminable. Sounds, vibrations, tones, noises, temporal events: these are not music but for it merely the shapeless materials out of which the spirit shapes music. [...] Form in music is thus nothing other than the shaping and hence determination of content that is originally shapeless and undetermined but lies ready and awaiting in the spirit, and only then through shaping, through form becoming music. The spirit sets its musical content in the musical form, sets it firmly and, by so doing, comes in it to itself, its law, and its consciousness.”⁶

Moritz Hauptmann was one of the major German music theorists of the 19th century. His dialectic approach to music theory, based on ideas of unity, opposition and synthesis, has been at the origin of Hugo Riemann’s dual theory of tonal functions. Hauptmann does not evidence much interest for the content of music. He views musical content mainly as ‘content strictly speaking’. One of his statements nevertheless deserves being singled out here, when he writes that

“Much as discourse (*Rede*) does not consist in words combined together, but in words put asunder and united in the thought, so the musical expression, which consists in putting asunder successions and consonances of notes, becomes united only in the content of the musical thought to be expressed; its isolated moments are but members of an organic unity.”⁷

⁶ *[Form] ist nicht Gegensatz zum Inhalt, sondern dessen Bestimmung. Ihr Gegensatz ist nicht der Inhalt überhaupt, sondern die Formlosigkeit, – der nicht gestaltete, also nicht bestimmte und in seiner Formlosigkeit gar nicht bestimmbare Inhalt. Schalle, Klänge, Töne, Laute, zeitliche Momente – sind nicht Musik, sie sind für sie nur jener gestaltlose Stoff, aus dem der Geist Musik gestaltet. [...] Die Form in der Musik ist also nichts Anderes, als Gestaltung und damit Bestimmung des Inhalts, der ursprünglich gestaltlos und unbestimmt, aber musikalischer Gestaltung gewärtig und begehren im Geiste gelegen, und nun erst – durch Gestaltung, durch die Form – Musik wird. In der musikalischen Form setzt der Geist seinen musikalischen Inhalt, setzt ihn fest, kommt in ihm zu sich und seinen Recht und Bewußtsein (Marx 1856 :25). See Marx 1997: 60–61, translation slightly modified.*

⁷ *Wie aber die Rede nicht in zusammengesetzten Worten, sondern in auseinander gesetzten besteht, die im Gedanken Eins sind, so ist auch der musikalische Ausdruck, der sich in Folge und Zusammenklang in Tönen auseinander setzt, nur Eins im Inhalte des auszusprechenden musikalischen Gedankens: seine Einzelmomente sind nur Glieder einer organischen Einheit (Hauptmann 1853: 7).*

Hauptmann recognizes here that the musical content does not result from musical units put in succession, but from their organic unity in a discourse expressing a musical idea. This may be viewed merely as another way to state that form determines content, as already stressed by Adolf Bernhard Marx in the text quoted above. Form indeed is what organically unites the succession of isolated moments. But Hauptmann's statement is interesting also because it anticipates on an idea that was developed only a century later in linguistic semiotics, that the meaning properly speaking "results from the succession, the appropriation to circumstance and the adaptation of the different signs to each other."⁸

The discussion of musical content and form takes a more dramatic turn in Eduard Hanslick's *The Beautiful in Music*. Hanslick opens the last chapter of his book, "The concepts of content and form in music", with the question *Hat die Musik einen Inhalt?* 'Has music a content?'. This question is surprising, especially so late in the book, because musical content had been a concern of all the previous chapters. Hanslick asks the question rhetorically, as that which many of his readers may still have in mind despite what he wrote before. His last chapter is both a final attempt to convince and a final vindication of his argument.

Hanslick's object is 'the musically beautiful',⁹ a type of beauty that exists only in music. His aim is to describe the specific beauty of music itself, that which is conveyed by the music itself, independently of any external reference arising from the text set to music or of any other descriptive function, a beautiful that, independent and in no need of content coming from outside itself, resides only in the notes and in their artistic combination.¹⁰

But this raises the question of the identification and description of the content of music:

⁸ *La sémantique, c'est le « sens » résultant de l'enchaînement, de l'appropriation à la circonstance et de l'adaptation des différents signes entre eux* (Benveniste 1968: 21).

⁹ See Payzant 1986: 95–96.

¹⁰ (...) *ein Schönes, das unabhängig und unbedürftig eines von außen her kommenden Inhalts, einzig in den Tönen und ihrer künstlerischen Verbindung liegt* (Hanslick 1854: 32); see Hanslick 1986: 28, translation modified. Payzant 1986: 95–96 stresses that the term *Ton* should not be translated as 'sound' because *Töne*, for Hanslick, are sounds of determined, measurable pitch. "In this sense, a 'tone' is a sound, actual or imagined, perceived as occupying a position in a diatonic musical scale" (Payzant 1986: 95). However, that a pitch is perceived as a step in a (not necessarily diatonic) musical scale does not make it measurable, it merely identifies it as a semiotic category: this is what we mean by the word 'note', which I prefer as a translation of *Ton*. See also Payzant 1981: 45, where he correctly identifies *Töne* as "relata in an intentional system of relationships", i.e. what I consider semiotic categories.

“It is extraordinary difficult to describe this autonomous beauty, this specifically musical. Since music has no model in nature and expresses no conceptual content, it can be talked about only in dry technical definitions or with poetical fictions. Its realm is truly ‘not of this world’. All the fanciful portrayals, characterizations, circumscriptions of a musical work are either figurative or fallacious. What in every other art is still description, is in music already metaphor. Music demands once and for all to be grasped as music and can be only from itself understood and in itself enjoyed.

In no way is the ‘specifically musical’ to be understood as mere acoustical beauty of as symmetry of proportion – it embraces both as ancillary – and still less can we talk of an ‘ear-titillating play of tones’ and other such images by which the lack of a spiritual inspiration tends to become emphasized. When we insist on *musical beauty*, we did not exclude the spiritual content (*Gehalt*); on the contrary we presupposed it.”¹¹

Hanslick stresses here – almost a century before it was raised in linguistics – one of the major problems of semiotics, the question whether a semiotic system can be translated in another; or, to put it otherwise, whether all meaning must be expressible in words. The real difficulty, he says, is to acknowledge that music may have an *Inhalt*, a content, a meaning that would depend in no way on the outer world, that would remain ‘not of this world’. Such content could neither be of the order of the ‘subject’ (*Gegenstand*) of music, nor of its ‘matter’ (*Stoff*).

“When one raises the question of the ‘content’ of music, one has in mind the idea of ‘subject’ (*matter*) which, as the idea, as the ideal, stands directly opposed to the notes as ‘material ingredients’. Music in fact has no content in this sense,

¹¹ *Es ist von außerordentlicher Schwierigkeit, dies selbständige Schöne in der Tonkunst, dies spezifisch Musikalische zu schildern. Da die Kunst kein Vorbild in der Natur besitzt und keinen begrifflichen Inhalt ausspricht, so läßt sich von ihr nur mit trocknen technischen Bestimmungen, oder mit poetischen Fictionen erzählen. Ihr Reich ist in der That „nicht von dieser Welt“. All' die phantasiereichen Schilderungen, Charakteristiken, Umschreibungen eines Tonwerks sind bildlich oder irrig. Was bei jeder andern Kunst noch Beschreibung, ist bei der Tonkunst schon Metapher. Die Musik will nun einmal als Musik aufgefaßt sein, und kann nur aus sich selbst verstanden, in sich selbst genossen werden. Keineswegs ist das „Spezifisch-Musikalische“ als blos akustische Schönheit, oder proportionale Dimension zu verstehen, – Zweige, die es als untergeordnet in sich begreift, – noch weniger kann von einem „ohrenkitzelnden Spiel in Tönen“ die Rede sein und ähnlichen Bezeichnungen, womit der Mangel an geistiger Beseelung hervorgehoben zu werden pflegt. Dadurch, daß wir auf musikalische Schönheit dringen, haben wir den geistigen Gehalt nicht ausgeschlossen, sondern ihn vielmehr bedingt (Hanslick 1854: 34). See Hanslick 1986: 30, translation slightly modified.*

no *matter* in the sense of the subject treated. Quite rightly, Kahlert vigorously argues that no 'verbal description' can be provided for music as it can for painting (Kahlert 1846: 380), but his subsequent supposition is wrong [when he goes on to say] that such verbal descriptions might in some case afford 'a remedy for a failing artistic pleasure'.¹²

And Hanslick concludes by explaining how the musical content is in fact a spiritual substance. For this conclusion, he replaces *Inhalt* by *Gehalt*, not really opposing these terms, but using the second to stress the spirituality, the ideality of the content.

"From the fact that music has no content ([in the sense of] subject) it does not follow that music has no *substance* [*Gehalt*].

[...]

Regarding the *accusation* of contentlessness, music has content, but only musical content, which is not lesser spark of the divine flame than the beauty of any other art. But only by implacably denying any other 'content' (*Inhalt*) to music can one preserve its 'substance' (*Gehalt*). This is because no spiritual meaning can be determined from any *undetermined feeling* to which at best such content leads back; but well from the *determined tonal structure* as free creation of the mind from a material without concept, compatible with the mind.¹³

Heinrich Schenker's first important book, *Der Geist der musikalischen Technik* (Schenker 1895), mentions *Inhalt* on almost every page, but never in a very spe-

¹² Bei der Frage nach dem „Inhalt“ der Musik hat man die Vorstellung von „Gegenstand“ (Stoff, Sujet) im Sinne, welchen man als die Idee, das Ideale den Tönen als „materiellen Bestandteilen“ geradezu entgegensetzt. Einen Inhalt in dieser Bedeutung, einen Stoff im Sinne des behandelten Gegenstandes hat die Tonkunst in der That nicht. Kahlert stützt sich mit Recht nachdrücklich darauf, daß sich von der Musik nicht, wie vom Gemälde, eine „Wortbeschreibung“ liefern läßt (Aesth. 380), wenngleich seine weitere Annahme irrig ist, daß solche Wortbeschreibung jemals eine „Abhilfe für den fehlenden Kunstgenuß“ bieten kan (Hanslick 1854: 96). See Hanslick 1986: 78, translation modified.

¹³ Daraus, daß die Musik keinen Inhalt (Gegenstand) hat, folgt nicht, daß sie des Gehaltes entbehre. [...] Gegenüber dem Vorwurf der Inhaltslosigkeit also hat die Musik Inhalt, allein musikalischen, welcher ein nicht geringer Funke des göttlichen Feuers ist, als das Schöne jeder andern Kunst. Nur dadurch aber, daß man jeden andern „Inhalt“ der Tonkunst unerbütlich negiert, rettet man deren „Gehalt“. Denn aus dem unbestimmten Gefühle, worauf sich jener Inhalt im besten Fall zurückführt, ist ihr eine geistige Bedeutung nicht abzuleiten, wohl aber aus der bestimmten Tongestaltung als der freien Schöpfung des Geistes aus geistfähigem, begrifflosem Material (Hanslick 1854: 102 and 104). See Hanslick 1986: 82 and 83, translation modified; in addition, the text of Hanslick's eighth edition is slightly modified compared with that of the first. On Payzant's translation of *Gehalt* as 'substance', which I retained here, see Hanslick 1986: 114–115, note 9.

cific sense: the word, for him, is at that time merely a generic term. The title of the book deserves more attention. It easily translates as “The Spirit of the Musical Technique”, but ‘spirit’ (*Geist*) must obviously be understood with reference to the so many mentions of ‘spirituality’ and of ‘spiritual content’ since Hegel. A better translation might be “The Spirituality of the Musical Technique”. Schenker’s intention was to show how the musical technique differentiated itself from that of verbal language – and, at the same time, from referentiality (Meeùs 2016).

Schenker’s monograph on Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony has the title *Beethovens neunte Sinfonie. Eine Darstellung des musikalischen Inhaltes unter fortlaufender Berücksichtigung auch des Vortrages und der Literatur*, “Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. A Presentation of the Musical Content under Ongoing Consideration of Both the Performance and the Literature”. According to Nicholas Cook, the basic purpose of the book “is to refute the whole edifice of Wagnerian interpretation, and to reclaim the work for what Schenker calls ‘absolute music’” (Cook 1993: 83). Schenker’s more precise purpose, as mentioned both in the title and throughout the book, is to describe the “musical content” of the symphony, a purely musical content that in no way depends on words or on a program, and that can be produced by purely musical technical means, without any external reference. The *Inhalt* of music has been a constant concern for Schenker during the forty years between his *Geist der musikalischen Technik* in 1895 and his posthumous *Der freie Satz* in 1935.¹⁴

Arnold Schoenberg wrote in 1912, the same year in which Schenker published his Beethoven monograph, an article that begins with these words:

“There are relatively few people able to understand in purely musical terms what music has to say.”¹⁵

The difficulty mentioned here is of the same nature as that about which Hanslick had written, that of describing the autonomous, specifically musical beauty of music.¹⁶ And one cannot refrain from thinking that the understanding in purely musical terms to which Schoenberg refers also is that of understanding what music means in purely musical terms, its truly musical meaning.

¹⁴ For more information about Schenker’s conception of the *Inhalt* of music, see Meeùs 2017.

¹⁵ *Es gibt relativ wenig Menschen, die in der Lage sind, rein musikalisch zu verstehen, was Musik zu sagen hat.* Schoenberg 1912:27.

¹⁶ See note 11 above.

Schoenberg later clarifies that the real musical content is what Hegel would have described as 'indeterminate',¹⁷ and that understanding this type of content results in a better understanding of the music itself:

"I was deeply ashamed, a few years ago, when I discovered that I had no idea of what happened in the poems at the basis of some Schubert Lieder that I knew well. [...] It appeared to me that, without knowing the poems, I had grasped the content, the real content, perhaps more deeply than if I had remained at the surface of the particular thoughts expressed in words."¹⁸

My purpose, in this paper, was mainly terminological. I tried to demonstrate that, from Carl Philip Emanuel Bach to Arnold Schoenberg, but probably also before and after, the German term *Inhalt* has been used among others to denote a specific musical content, a musical meaning expressed and understandable only in musical terms. But I don't think that terminology can be an end in itself, at least in such a case. My underlying purpose concerns general semiotics. My conviction is that no truly general semiotics can be developed without admitting that semiotic systems other than verbal language can have a meaning of their own, utterly untranslatable in words. I hope to have shown that this also was the conviction of many a German aesthete from the late 18th century to the 20th and probably later.

Ferdinand de Saussure's definition of the sign as a double entity associating signifier and signified (Saussure 1967: 98–99) had for a while limited the project of a general semiotics to systems derived from verbal language. Linguists soon realized that this mainly lexical conception of semiotics was not tenable. Ricœur (1975: 88–100), following Benveniste (see note 8 above), describes two linguistics, one purely formal and the other referential. Jean-Jacques Nattiez (1988: 189–190) similarly describes a double conception of the musical signification, one that views musical meaning as "a play of forms and structures" and the other as "cultural symbol". Raymond Monelle (1991; see also Monelle 1992) recognizes the possibility of a structural semantics of music. I myself pleaded

¹⁷ See note 5.

¹⁸ *Ich war von ein paar Jahren tief beschämt, als ich entdeckte, dass ich bei einigen mir wohlbekannten Schubert-Liedern gar keine Ahnung davon hatte, was in dem zugrundeliegenden Gedicht eigentlich vorgehe. [...] es zeigte sich mir, dass ich, ohne das Gedicht zu kennen, den Inhalt, den wirklichen Inhalt, sogar vielleicht tiefer erfasst hatte, als wenn ich an der Oberfläche der eigentlichen Wortgedanken haften geblieben wäre.*

for an autonomous musical semiotics, independent from any external references and untranslatable in words (Meeùs 2009). But such considerations lead us away from terminology properly speaking and will have to be left for another occasion.

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***Inhalt* ('sadržaj')** **kao tehnički termin u glazbenoj semiotici**

Sažetak

Riječ *Inhalt* ('sadržaj') toliko je česta da bi se teško mogla smatrati tehničkim terminom. Svrha je ovoga rada pokazati da se bez obzira na svoju uvriježenost u razdoblju između 18. i 20. stoljeća upotrebljavala za označivanje specifično glazbenoga značenja koje proizlazi iz toga što glazba „sadržava” u notama, ritmovima, melodijskim ćelijama itd. Hegel, Marx, Hauptmann, Hanslick, Schenker, Schoenberg i vjerojatno drugi dijelili su gledište da glazba ima vlastiti sadržaj koji se ne može prevesti u verbalni jezik.

Keywords: *Inhalt*, Hegel, Hanslick, Schenker, Schoenberg

Ključne riječi: *Inhalt*, Hegel, Hanslick, Schenker, Schoenberg

