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Do Semantic Aspects of Music Have a Notation?

According to many scholars and philosophers, music is not the same thing as the sounds and notes but only manifests through them. Some scholars think that the real music lies in its values, ideas, noemas, which are transcendental in relation to empirical sound realities. However, the extent to which the purely human side of music, its ›modalities‹ – in the philosophical and semiotic sense – can find their equivalent sign-vehicles, and the importance of their fixation into concrete visual or other signs in the music history is an ever changing variable. The relativity of notation was noted early by François Couperin when he said: »Nous écrivons différemment de ce que nous exécutons«. Later Charles Seeger spoke about prescriptive and descriptive notation. When conductor Serge Koussevitzky was dissatisfied with a musician’s performance and he asked which note was wrong, the maestro answered: »no, it is between the notes«. Hence notes, the notation does not say all about music and what makes it music in the end.

The ›modalities‹ have been an essential component of the generative models of musical semiotics. In language they appear through verbs such as ›to be‹, ›to do‹, ›want‹, ›can‹, ›must‹, ›know‹ and ›believe‹. Applied to music, they have been described by a notation system stemming from modal logic and Greimas’ semiotic system. However, the symbols of formal logic are not quite apt to portray this type of living and processual musical semantics devoid of any concrete ›meanings‹. Firstly, they are difficult to grasp for a non-specialist, and secondly, music cannot be entirely digitalized into discrete units of notations, because it is a continuous process. Music is a constant transformation from pre-signs into act-signs and from act-signs into post-signs. Other such new sign categories – discovered by the existential semiotics – are endo-signs and exo-signs, pheno-signs and geno-signs, quasi-signs or as-if-signs, and trans-signs. Music consists in a continuous dialectic among them. It is thus a constant flux between transcendence and ›Dasein‹.

How could music be analyzed and the results notated in the light of this fundamental view of its significative and communicative nature? Certainly this level could be described, but could it ever be ›prescribed‹ in the sense that musicians would understand it and take it into account in their renderings? My hypothesis is that a new notation can be found in order to reveal and communicate this essential aspect of music. This could happen by combining the Greimassian-based formal grammars of modalities and the theoretical ideas of Heinrich Schenker. That would be the next step in the elaboration of theories in musical semiotics.

1 See Jean-Claude Veilhan, Les Règles de l’interprétation musicale à l’époque baroque (XVIIe–XVIIIe s.) générales à tous les instruments, Paris 1977, p. iii.
At first glance one would think of musical notation to be the primary object of such a discipline as semiotics when it is applied to music. However, it is amazing how few scholars have addressed notation in this field. The late Ingmar Bengtsson in his panoramic study *Musikvetenskap* had some ideas on it. But regardless of the Gregorian semiology, the term ›semiotics‹ appears seldomly in specialized studies of the field. The medievalist Leo Treitler has written a lot on this topic in his recent study *With Voice and Pen*, in his attempt to relate theories of general semiotics to notational problems of musical discourse and its history in the Middle Ages. So a historically-oriented musicologist certainly would see our problem as a variable of historical contexts, and if we accept the principle of Treitler that we always write history from the point of view of our own time, we would think that since we are living in the age of semiotics, this is only another new interpretation in a series of diverse paradigms and scientific contexts of our musical studies. In fact, some examples by Treitler display interesting aspects of medieval notation, like the score in the form of heart and using red and black colours to notify time values of performance. On the one hand, the ›Gestalt‹ here is an iconic sign of the contents of the song whereas the colours indicate what we called modalities above – in the linguistic and philosophical, not the musical sense – influence the time values of performance.

Yet, our title contains another item which is at least as problematic, namely ›semantics‹. Semantics has been often confused with semiotics. The latter is of course the umbrella title covering the meanings, semantics as one of its subfields, whereas the study of significance i.e. semiotics, also concerns those signs which carry meanings or what we call ›sign vehicles‹. Semiotics is often considered a combination of significance and communication. This poses a very simple question: how does musical semantics differ from verbal semantics? In spoken and written language, where we have a ›word‹ as the basic semantic unit, we do not often need to ask what it means. No special sign or notation is needed to semantics on the side of syntax. When we read or hear a verbal sign, we automatically associate its meaning by convention and by using codes of grammar. If there is a problem, i.e. we do not directly understand what it is, we use a dictionary or use other words to clarify the situation.

In music this is much more complicated. Musical signs of notation refer first to performance instructions and aural manifestation. This of course passes through mediation of gestural language, i.e. the notation is first rendered via tactile signs or ›gSigns‹, to use Thomas A. Sebeok’s formulation. Only thereafter we think further what this sound form or ›Gestalt‹ might mean. Some scholars say that those ›tönend bewegte Formen‹ do not mean anything and so they stop the discussion there. To their mind music is only a ›Form im Spiel der Empfindungen‹ as Immanuel Kant put it, or mere design (David Lidov), or what is called ›absolute Music‹, totally abstract. Such a formalist attitude is considered a totally le-

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8 Oral communication with the author.
gitimate aesthetic standpoint from Eduard Hanslick to Igor Stravinsky and Claude Lévi-Strauss. There is no meaning, no semantics in music, we only add it there later for various reasons which may be a social habit (contextual theories), due to the fact that all music is communication (as the mediating theories of music argue, exemplified by Antoine Hennion), because music evokes other artistic texts or events in its external world (intertextual and programmatic tendencies) or because music is one of our subject strategies by which we orient ourselves within our deep psychic lie (psychoanalytic theories). Some adopt a more moderate view that music does not convey meanings but only expresses something which is meaningful. At the same time we come close to the problem of representation. It is the strongest relationship between a sign – in music notation – and something to which it refers (renvoi by Roman Jakobson). Nelson Goodman has pondered the ontological status of the score in his study Languages of Art, where he claims that musical performance is an exemplification of the score, calling this relationship type/token (borrowed from Peirce) as well. Another approach to this problem in the Anglo-analytic tradition has been made by the Finnish musicologist Kari Kurkela in his work Note and Tone: A Semantic Analysis of Conventional Music Notation which applies Montague’s semantic theory to music. Moreover the issue can be scrutinized from the viewpoint of computer-assisted studies such as those by Kai Lassfolk in his Music Notation as Objects: An Object-Oriented Analysis of the Common Western Music Notation System. However, we have to remember that we have less strong meaningful devices such as to signify, to express, to convey etc. concerning representation.

In spite of all these sophisticated musical theories, we should take into account one general truth revealed by general semiotics concerning all sign systems and symbolic forms invented by a man/woman. Namely that something which does not have a meaning can appear only as a negative side of its primary meaningfulness. This was noticed as early as 1976 by one of the Tartu school scholars, Boris Gasparow. This means that although music is an absolute and abstract form it is always a symbolic form and even when negating any overt and explicit meanings, it contains something of it, even if it is only a Hegelian negation through a kind of negative Dialektik. The problem of this paper is how such meaningfulness is approached and how that which is implicitly semantic in every, even tiniest musical utterance can be made audible, visible and ultimately explicit by some kind

12 »La Musique, c’est le langage moins sens«. Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mythologiques IV: L’Homme nu, Paris 1971, p. 579.
of notation. Some scholars such as Algirdas Julien Greimas in general semiotics speak of "structural semantics" and some, such as Leonard B. Meyer, of "embodied meanings".

Does our conventional musical and prescriptive notation contain anything of this implicit or hidden semantic aspect of music? Have methods of analysis developed by music semioticians been able to find an appropriate notation and visualization for it? In order to answer these questions we have to make a short overview of the history of musical semiotics and its analytic procedures to find out whether there is anything like "semantic analysis" or descriptive notation of musical semantics. Of course, such an overview cannot be given without simultaneously questioning what the epistemic foundations of each scholar about the nature of such implicit semantics are. Is it anything which can be grasped by verbal reactions to music, when we suppose we can only try to find a successful verbal meta-language to such entities? This would be the same as Nattiez' Aisthesis viewpoint or "Rezeptionsgeschichte" of musical works. We look at traces of musical meanings as experienced by listeners and their verbal commentaries as the ultimate form of musical hermeneutics of, for example, Arnold Schering's romanticism. Or is it something of which we become aware when dealing with either verbal or notational indications of performance by composers: when Robert Schumann writes "rasch" (studied by Roland Barthes) or "durchar phantastisch und leidenschaftlich" or when such conventional signs as crescendo, diminuendo, sf, pedal etc. are used? In these cases musical semantics would be something like the aspectual semes in verbal language: i.e. grammar forms which determine whether something is said sufficiently, insufficiently, too early, too late, with certainty, uncertainty, with hesitation etc. Ultimately we have to admit that without such aspects music would not be music but rather something lifeless – although again some periods such as ours, with its passion for "Urtext", deny the relevance of this level. Moreover we have to admit that the "isotopies", i.e. deepest semantic categories, are decisive for what communicative devices a composer/performer/listener applies. For instance, in a piece like Robert Schumann's Phantasy in C major, he uses isotopies which allow us to grasp the musical surface and "notes" in a semantically correct manner. I have always been convinced that the music in its last movement "Langsam getragen, Durchweg leise zu halten" evokes the end scene of Goethe's Faust II through its temporal, actorial and spatial disengagements. This is a musician's and a semiotician's intuition. But how can we prove and justify it on the basis of the notation, i.e. by interpreting what the composer wrote down in notes? We must go far beyond the concrete visible signs of the score to legitimize such a reasoning. Ultimately, it is possible only if we are competent in the "isotopies" of romantic culture and its intertextual field or what Umberto Eco called "encyclopedia of culture".

So if we address the question whether musical semantics has a notation we move in these lines, and try to grasp what Ernst Kurth understood by his idea that music is kinetic energy. Something similar was later stated by L. B. Meyer when he said that music is basi-

cally implication. These ideas would preclude that musical semantics is essentially of temporal nature, i.e. very much in line with Heidegger’s sense. Yet Meyer thought that the archetypal cognitive ›Gestalten‹ of music, such as axis, symmetry, scale, triad and so on lie behind the implication. From an energetic point of view, these ›Gestalten‹ are not the primary thing, they are rather chosen by a composer when he wants to express a certain type of kinetic energy and its unfolding. Altogether, we see here how musical semantics is irrefutably connected with postulates on the epistemic nature of music itself.

To refer to my own recent theories on existential semiotics, I would argue that music is a kind of ›Schein‹ (in the sense of Kant, Schiller and Adorno), in the sense that something immanent, ›semantic‹ manifests in every musical utterance, vertically. But at the same time music is a horizontal, linear and syntagmatic appearance, i.e. essentially processual and dynamics – just like Kurth thought. I have already underlined the importance of Kurth’s view on music and its essence in A Theory of Musical Semiotics. We also know how crucial Kurth was to Heinrich Schenker. But now if we accept that music is ›Erscheinung‹, namely ›horizontal appearance‹, we reach a very profound epistemic level to build an entirely new theory of musical semiotics. This should also include a new type of notation of such ›appearance‹.

My earlier solution was to use symbols borrowed from formal logics, the same ones which Greimas used in his extremely formalized analytic meta-language. I refer for instance to my study of Chopin’s G minor Ballade in which such formalized procedure reaches its culmination. I still think this is possible, but in a pragmatic sense it is not yet fully realizing the potential of modal aspect of music, i.e. modalities (›to be‹, ›to do‹, ›will‹, ›can‹, ›know‹, ›must‹, ›believe‹). Neither is it very comprehensible for musicians without education in formal logics. Therefore, I strongly believe that Schenkerian notation could be developed in that direction. Its advantage is that it portrays music as a temporal unfolding, i.e. appearance, and second, every musical event can be shown its place in the whole process. Tom Pankhurst has already proposed that Schenkerian ›Stufen 3-2-1‹ could be equalled to Greimassian modalities like ›want to do‹, ›be‹ etc. This idea could now be elaborated further by studying the ›existential‹ moments of musical work, i.e. moments in which the necessity of Schenkerian generative course – and the freedom of choice which a composer always has within the limits of the grammar – meet each other. Many leading Schenkerians like Eduard Laufer admit that this method would also need such kind of semantic aspect in order to legitimize its meaningfulness in the musical process. This would enable us to interpret music as an existential and even transcendental phenomenon. But it would also bring this idea quite concretely into the practice of musical analysis and its rigorous notation.

24 Meyer, Explaining Music.
26 See ibid., p. 154–180.