

Musical Content, Musical Purport, Intrinsic and Extrinsic Meanings in Music

Nicolas Meeùs (Sorbonne University; IReMus)*

Modern conceptions of musical signification evidence a divide between a mentalist view of music as self-contained and auto-reflexive, and a realist view according to which music connects to a “real” or imagined world. My purpose today is to show that the semiotic process always involves both aspects, that semiosis itself is a two-phase process, the first phase the mental one and the second phase the referential one.

Aristotle had said that the sounds emitted in speech and their graphic representation in writing are symbols of the states of the mind, which themselves are images of things.¹ This already presented the semiotic process in two phases, the first one by which the verbal signifiers are symbols for the ideas, and the second by which ideas are images for their referent. The dual process has been confirmed by many authors since: Locke², Frege³, Ogden and Richards⁴ and many others have shown that there is no direct relation between the “symbol” (the sign) and the referent, that signs can have worldly significations only through the mediation of ideas or concepts.

In the early 20th century, however, structuralism ejected the referential phase from the description of the semiotic process, viewing language (and semiotics) as structurally autonomous. Saussure⁵, Hjelmslev⁶, Greimas⁷ in *Sémantique structurale*, and even the early Benveniste⁸

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¹ Ἔστι μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐν τῇ φωνῇ τῶν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ παθημάτων σύμβολα, καὶ τὰ γραφόμενα τῶν ἐν τῇ φωνῇ. Καὶ ὥσπερ οὐδὲ γράμματα πᾶσι τὰ αὐτά, οὐδὲ φωναὶ αἱ αὐταί· ὧν μέντοι ταῦτα σημεῖα πρότων, ταῦτα πᾶσι παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς, καὶ ὧν ταῦτα ὁμοιώματα πράγματα ἤδη ταῦτά. “Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images.” Περὶ ἑρμηνείας, *On Interpretation*, Translated by E. M. Edghill. University of Adelaide, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190805111102/https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/interpretation/>

² John LOCKE, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 465.

³ Gottlob FREGE, „Über Sinn und Bedeutung“, p. 29. Frege considers that “representation” is characterized by an absolute subjectivity, while sense may be intersubjective. The meaning (*Sinn*) can be envisaged in the absolute, while the representation (*Vorstellung*) only belongs to somebody at some given instant: *Während es demnach keinem Bedenken unterliegt, von dem Sinne schlechtweg zu sprechen, muß man bei der Vorstellung genaugenommen hinzufügen, wem sie angehört und zu welcher Zeit.*

⁴ Charles K. OGDEN et Ivor A. RICHARDS, *The Meaning of Meaning*, p. 11.

⁵ Ferdinand DE SAUSSURE, *Course in General Linguistics*, pp. 11-12.

⁶ Louis HJELMSLEV, *Omkring*, pp. 47-48.

⁷ Algirdas Julien GREIMAS, *Sémantique structurale*, p. 15

⁸ Émile BENVENISTE, « La forme et le sens dans le langage ».

considered that the worldly denotation of language did not pertain to linguistics properly speaking. And, as it developed at the same time, general semiotics also was at first considered autonomous, devoid of mundane signification.

Such a view may be methodologically productive, but it cannot be maintained on the long run. While a purely “semiotic” signification was possible for Saussure’s sign (signifier + signified), it soon appeared that the case of phrases or discourses is different. Benveniste, returning to a dual conception of signification, considered that the true meaning (*sens*) “results both from an appropriation to circumstance [i.e. to worldly denotations] and from the adaptation of different signs together [i.e. a structural syntax].”⁹ For Paul Ricoeur, following Benveniste, “whereas the sign points back only to other signs immanent within a system, discourse is about things. Sign differs from sign, discourse refers to the world.”¹⁰ Ricoeur added that in the case of literary texts “the structure of the work is in fact its sense, and the world of the work its referent. [...] Hermeneutics is the theory that regulates the transition from structure of the work to world of the work” – a situation that Raymond Monelle thinks music shares with literature.¹¹

The debate is not exclusively about signification. It concerns the ontology of art in general and the possibility of its representational content. As such, the question pertains in first instance to aesthetics. Saussure’s exclusion of the reference from the domain of linguistic semiotics is of the same nature as Hanslick’s exclusion of the subject (*Gegenstand*) from the realm of music¹². In the early 20th century, formalism characterized semiotics as much as it characterized some of the main trends in music. Since then, the pendulum apparently swung back. Tarasti¹³, Hatten¹⁴, Lidov¹⁵, Monelle¹⁶ and others reintroduced hermeneutics in discussions of musical meaning, and this appears to be one of the main topics of the musical signification project and of the present conference on music signification.

What I want to stress today is that it is not either the one or the other, either intrinsic, semiotic, immanent signification, or extrinsic, semantic, transcendent meaning. It necessarily is both at the same time, because that is how our semiotic systems work, always in two phases, an intrinsic and an extrinsic one. The importance of the first phase in the semiotic process results, among others, from what Monroe Beardsley has described as the “intentional”¹⁷ and the “affective”¹⁸ fallacy: the meaning of a work of art depends neither on the artist’s intention, nor on the affective response to the work, it only depends on the work itself. Identifying the meaning therefore requires a profound knowledge of the work, of its inner construction – a knowledge that can only arise from an in-depth analytic description. Intrinsic meaning corresponds to what Beardsley called the “internal” evidence, accessible through a mere examination and description of

⁹ Émile BENVENISTE, “Structuralisme et linguistique”, p. 21.

¹⁰ Paul RICOEUR, *The Rule of Metaphor [La Métaphore vive]* quoted in Raymond MONELLE, “The Worldless Song”, *The Sense of Music*, p. 12.

¹¹ Raymond MONELLE, « The Worldless Song », p. 13.

¹² Eduard HANSLICK, *Vom musikalisch Schönen*, p. 95-96.

¹³ Eero TARASTI, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics*.

¹⁴ Robert HATTEN, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*.

¹⁵ David LIDOV, *Elements of Semiotics*.

¹⁶ Raymond MONELLE, *The Sense of Music*.

¹⁷ William K. WIMSATT and Monroe BEARDSLEY, “The Intentional Fallacy”.

¹⁸ William K. WIMSATT and Monroe BEARDSLEY, “The Affective Fallacy”.

the work of art – while extrinsic meaning belongs to the “external” evidence, the psychological and social background of the object.¹⁹

In everyday (non-artistic) usage of verbal language, the intrinsic phase shades away behind the phase of denotation; in artistic usages, on the other hand, the auto-reflexive signification becomes more important and might even surpass the extrinsic one. Even so, however, in all cases, both always are present. As Roman Jakobson stressed, the diversity of linguistic (or, in our case, of semiotic) usages does not reside “in a monopoly of one of [the] several functions but in a different hierarchical order of functions”²⁰. And the particular function to which I refer here as producing “intrinsic” meaning obviously is Jakobson’s poetic function – which perhaps should be renamed the “artistic” function.

The intrinsic meaning of music and of other discourses has traditionally been named “content” (*Inhalt*); the extrinsic meaning, the denotation, may be termed the “purport”, as in the English translation of Hjelmslev’s danish *mening*, which refers to the substance of content. These terms are not entirely satisfying, but will suffice for my present purpose. Ricoeur discusses the relation between the intrinsic and the extrinsic meanings in the terms of Frege, *Sinn vs Bedeutung*, or in those of Benvéniste, “semiotic” vs “semantic”²¹. The content is the signified, immanent in the semiotic system; the purport is the *intenté*, the intended, the transcendent. Ricoeur opposes literary studies which consider only the sense, the content, to more philosophical studies that seek the “meaning” – which for him seems always “metaphoric”.

It should now become obvious that my purpose in this communication is in defense of the intrinsic signification and of music analysis as a way to describe it. Heinrich Schenker, in his monograph on Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony (1912)²², derided Wagner’s attempt at describing the signification of the work through quotations from Goethe’s *Faust*²³. Wagner had said that Beethoven’s meaning could not be translated in words, but that it could be paraphrased. Schenker objected that the symphony had a truly musical meaning and that it was off-topic to wonder whether this could be expressed in words; and indeed, the purpose of his monograph was to present “the musical content” of the work. In later writings, about other works, Schenker more than once spoke of the “true content” (*der wahre Inhalt*), an expression that he had taken over from Carl Philip Emanuel Bach. This reminds of Schoenberg’s statement, in *Das Verhältnis zum Text* (1912)²⁴, that “very few people can understand in purely musical terms what music means”.

The extrinsic signification, the purport, is the signification of sound *as music* – and not merely as a sound-image, an acoustic stimulus. That is to say that it cannot be perceived and should not be interpreted without first considering the intrinsic meaning, the form of content as it relates to the form of expression. It is not a matter of connotation vs denotation, it really is a matter of the functioning of the semiotic process itself. The form of expression and the form of content are isomorphic: they reciprocally determine each other; but they also determine the substance of content: by informing the “matter” (*matière*) in its most amorphous existence, the form of content transforms it into a substance of content, a purport, an *intenté*.

¹⁹ Monroe BEARDSLEY, *Aesthetics*.

²⁰ Roman JAKOBSON, “Linguistics and Poetics”, p. 3-4.

²¹ Paul RICOEUR, *La Métaphore vive*, p. 97-98.

²² Heinrich SCHENKER, *Beethovens neunte Symphonie*.

²³ Richard WAGNER, „Bericht über die Aufführung der neunten Symphonie von Beethoven“.

²⁴ Arnold SCHÖNBERG, „Das Verhältnis zum Text“, p. 27.

This process also transforms the intrinsic meaning, the content, which cannot be expressed in words, into a purport that can be expressed or interpreted (Greimas would even have said “translated”) in natural language. The musical content belongs to what can be considered the “inexpressible” part of the musical language. Wittgenstein wrote, in his posthumous notes about *Culture and Value*, that “the inexpressible (what I find enigmatic and cannot express) perhaps provides the background, against which whatever I was able to express acquires meaning”²⁵. The same could and must be said of music, and this will be my conclusion: the intrinsic signification of music, its content, is the background against which whatever can be expressed about music, its extrinsic signification, its purport, acquires meaning.

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²⁵ Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, *Culture and Value*, G. H. von Wright ed., P. Winch transl., Blackwell 1998, p. 23.

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