

# Chapter 16

## Musical Signification: A Systematic, Analytical and Pedagogical Approach

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Drawing together the many aspects of musical semiotics is like rounding up a flock of particularly wayward sheep; alas, some have got away from the present shepherd (Monelle 1992: Preface).

**Abstract** The article presents a general survey of the field of Musical Signification, as it appears in a textbook that the author has published in 2014 (*Música i sentits* [Music and Senses]). The idea is to discuss the way in which the book's list of contents classifies this area of musicology, inevitably favoring some aspects over others. The book responds to frequent requests of Analysis students, who require an accessible text where all these questions are organized, summarized, explained and provided with examples, to be used in further analyses. The main concepts of scholars such as Márta Grabócz, Robert Hatten, Raymond Monelle, Philip Tagg and Eero Tarasti, have been considered and synthesized into this new text. The analytical and theoretical aspects in each chapter are presented one after the other, to allow different approaches and to promote a useful, practical reading without neglecting its musicological basis. The ultimate standpoint is that of Dario Martinelli's *Numanities*, i.e. a passionate, yet thorough reflexion about the role that traditional humanities can and should play in our time.

### 16.1 *Music and Senses: A Textbook on Musical Meaning*

The general field of musical meanings, believe it or not, had not yet a handbook in which the big questions are explained and systematized. I am the reckless one who tried to write that book, and to do it in a way that reaches both music students and

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To Esti Sheinberg, in gratitude.

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music listeners, with many examples. Robert Hatten kindly wrote in the Foreword to the first edition of *Música i sentits* [Music and Senses]<sup>1</sup>:

This is the first volume since Raymond Monelle's *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music* (1992) to offer such a comprehensive text for students of musical meaning, and its appearance is timely. It not only incorporates many of the latest theories, but also offers students immediate access to their practical application in analysis and interpretation (including performance) (Grimalt 2014a, b: 13).

The pedagogic approach arises from the need to provide conservatory students and music lovers, my two main audiences for many years, with texts that they can enjoy directly. Most musicological texts are directed to musicologists. They need to be decoded and integrated into a clear-cut whole, if we want to share their findings with the current musicians, or even with the concert-goers. Lawrence Kramer puts it even more drastically:

[T]he lack of a viable public discourse about “classical” music is one reason why the music, cherishable though it is, is losing cultural ground at an alarming rate. I am not sure how much musicology can do to remedy this situation. But I would like to see it try (Kramer 1995: xiv).

The emphasis is pragmatic. The speculative or theoretical musicology, dealing with terminology, epistemological or philosophical premises, appears only integrated into some observation around the listening phenomenon.

In the introduction to his book *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music* (1992), Raymond Monelle opposed semiotics to other attempts to investigate musical meanings. Semiotics, he wrote, is “scientific”. Only 24 years later, I wonder whether he would still speak in such terms. This is not the place to go into the new paradigms of science, or in epistemological models, nor in the beliefs and disbeliefs of a society that does not see any more in Science, with a big S, the solution to all of their problems. But here, in any case, it is not a matter of hard facts, laws, demonstrations, irrefutable proofs, but interpretation, well-founded in the history of the musical traditions. And this is not (or not only) because of the epistemic crisis around what science and research mean today, but because the object of musical signification does not invite a positivist approach. An interpreter tries to be convincing, using observation and sensibility, which can include rigor or not, just as in science. And just as in science, most interpreters are determined to avoid caprice and arbitrariness. This is the terrain of Humanities, where nobody thinks that “anything goes”, except those who wish to contribute to their stultification. As Edward T. Cone put it, in his memorable book of 1974:

It is true that arguments of this kind [metaphors, analogies] cannot lead to conclusions as firm as those of deductive logic, but it is not true that it cannot lead to reasonable and even convincing conclusions. Its method is not proof but persuasion (Cone 1974: 158).

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<sup>1</sup>The first edition of *Música i sentits* [Music and Senses] is in Catalan. A second, improved edition, translated into English, is on its way. A Spanish version is also planned. After sketching out some of the main ideas and premises which inform the textbook, the table of contents is shown, only to go into some of the chapters in detail.

## 16.2 Overview of the Textbook

### 16.2.1 *Theory, Examples*

One of the basic ideas of this textbook is: if an idea is worth it, you've got to be able to tell it in a simple way. If you can't, maybe the idea wasn't that good after all. This requires a careful choosing of examples. Collecting them for many years has led me to a keyword that is not as frequent as its usefulness suggests, i.e. the paradigmatic example. The best way to show what a serenade is, for instance, is to watch Don Giovanni's serenade, in the 2nd act of Mozart's opera. It is the reference to which you can go back and compare with other examples.<sup>2</sup>

The main purpose of the book is to enrich the listening experience of both music students and amateurs. Too often, the musician's ability to listen to music in a sensitive way is taken for granted. On the other hand, music lovers do not expect patronizing, infantile texts, but well founded information and opinions. However, in order to simplify, the focus is on the mainstream Classic repertoire, that is from Baroque and Classicism to Romanticism and early 20th century. Examples from later or earlier occur, but only if they help to identify some feature of the central, chosen period. Moreover, a whole chapter is devoted to madrigalisms and to rhetoric figures.<sup>3</sup>

There is a theoretical part, separated visually from the main text, where everything is explained in academic terms, for those wishing to go into it. Setting this apart from the main text should make the latter easily readable, without having to give up the musicological groundwork. The main text on the other hand, freed from all the academic apparatus, allows for one of the goals of the book, i.e. to empower the music lover with musicological tools, and to address the musician as a listener in the first place (Table 16.1).

### 16.2.2 *Basic Issues of Terminology*

In the Introduction, first of all the need and the relevance of the Classical repertoire is questioned. Second, the ambivalence of the musical discourse is praised, as a first step into the complex matters of musical signification. Third, music semiotics and hermeneutics are set into a historical context. The analysis of musical meanings fits

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<sup>2</sup>I've also taken care to provide audio samples, mostly from youtube, that can be accessed easily from the online part of the book. On that website, as a complement to the printed edition, the reader can also contact the author, and I can enhance the text constantly, enriching it with nuances, new versions and examples.

<sup>3</sup>Now the balance between accessibility and musicological foundation has found a solution that Dr. Esti Sheinberg kindly suggested to me, one of the colleagues to whom I am grateful for a friendly and patient reading of earlier versions of the manuscript.

**Table 16.1** Contents of the book *Música i sentits* [Music and Senses]

Introduction
Chapter 1 Musical signs. Topics
Chapter 2 Renaissance and baroque
Chapter 3 Genres and styles
Chapter 4 Semantic fields
Chapter 5 Some classical topics
Chapter 6 Narrative
Chapter 7 Some other musical meanings
Chapter 8 Steps to a meaningful analysis. Examples

**Table 16.2** Composition of Chap. 1 “Musical signs. Topics”

(a) Musical signs, topics
(b) Signifier, signified. Markers
(c) Boundaries of the topic theory
(d) Tropes. Interpretation
(e) Topics classification
(f) Primary colors. Markedness. The world of <i>flats</i>
(g) Correspondence between signs and sets of signs
(h) References: a brief review

into a general trend in humanities, that has brought about, for instance, a historically informed interpretation.

The first chapter addresses basic issues of terminology in musical meaning, including topics, tropes, or genre markers. It offers definitions and usage according to the main researchers: Ratner, Monelle, Hatten, Tarasti, Tagg, Grabócz, and Agawu. Separating, as I mentioned before, the theoretical explanation and the main analytical text, including examples. Then a classification of musical topics is attempted. There are many ways to classify musical meanings. Here I suggest my own, based on historical treatises, rather than on recent scholarship (Table 16.2).

Joachim Burmeister (1599), adapting Quintilian, distinguishes between hypotyposis and pathopoiesis. Hypotyposis includes the musical representation of movement and gestures, natural phenomena, objects, symbols and concepts, and places, like the temple, the battlefield, the saloon. Pathopoiesis, on the other hand, relates sounds to affects or to characters. It involves the ways music finds to move our passions.<sup>4</sup>

The term “Primary colors” is proposed as a useful tool to describe some frequent sets of binary oppositions. Although no topics, they are highly operative. The best example is the major versus minor mode. Finally, I tackle the correspondence between signs and sets of signs: how musical meanings tend to gather themselves into different groups.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted by Bartel (1997: 198).

**Table 16.3** Composition of Chap. 2 ‘Renaissance and baroque’

(a) <b>Introduction to renaissance polyphony</b>
Musical modernity: from mystery to rhetoric
Language and music
Classification of madrigalisms
(b) <b>Some Madrigalisms</b>
<i>Pianto</i>
<i>Sospiro</i>
Other madrigalisms
(c) <b>Introduction to Baroque musica poetica</b>
(d) <b>Some rhetoric figures</b>
<i>Interrogatio</i>
<i>Exclamatio</i>
Discourse discontinuities: <i>Interruptio</i> , <i>Parenthesis</i>
Word painting
<i>Circulatio</i>
(e) <b>Ascent to heavens (<i>anabasis</i>), descent to hell (<i>katabasis</i>)</b>
Palestrina, Valls, Verdi
Monteverdi, Bach
<i>Passus duriusculus</i> . The plea
Feet off the ground. The collapse
Bernat Vivancos’s two axes

### 16.2.3 Madrigalisms and Rhetoric Figures

Chapter 2 takes musical meanings in a historical perspective. Baroque music theory and rhetoric figures have deserved wide attention of the old-school musicology. It used to be one of the few spots where musical meaning could be dealt with. Madrigalisms instead is yet a gap to be filled. In spite of its vital historical importance, and in spite of the creativity that inspires those experiments in combining words and music, there is to my knowledge no systematic approach to our oldest source of traditions in music semiotics (Table 16.3).<sup>5</sup>

The most famous madrigalism is the *pianto*, described by Raymond Monelle.<sup>6</sup> *Pianto* means “weeping”, that is it’s signified. Its most usual signifier is a descending minor second. It is arguably the most durable musical sign. You can find them from the Renaissance up to the 20th century, with no interruption. It has been some times confused with the *sospiro*, the sigh, partly because they tend to coexist. See for example the 2nd movement of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata

<sup>5</sup>In the 4th volume of the *New Oxford History of Music*, entitled *The Age of Humanism 1540–1630*, the word “Madrigalism” appears nine times, without ever giving any example, or even explaining its meaning. Cf. Carter and Butt (2005).

<sup>6</sup>See Monelle (2000: 17, 66–69, and 73–75, 2006: 4, 5, 19, 24, 80, and 273).



Fig. 16.1 Ludwig van Beethoven. Piano Sonata Op. 2 No. 1, Part 2: mm. 17–8

Op. 2 No. 1 (Fig. 16.1), where a *piano* can be heard in the upper voice, with a sighing accompaniment.

Among the rhetoric figures, the *exclamatio* seems as suitable in music as in discourse. That might be the reason why it has found a notable continuity in modern music. In Brahms's song *Von ewiger Liebe*, Op. 43 No. 1, e.g., the descriptive beginning reads:

*Nirgend noch Licht und nirgend noch Rauch*, Nowhere a light yet, nowhere a smoke,  
*Ja, und die Lerche sie schweiget nun auch*. Oh, and the lark goes silent too.

The exclamation *Ja!* receives a tone clearly above the recitation tone that the song was using (Fig. 16.2a). Notice also how, as Brahms adapts his music to the second stanza, he leaves the *exclamatio* (exclamation *Ja!*) to the piano (Fig. 16.2b).

To round off this chapter, a whole paragraph deals with a major source of musical meaning, and to its manifold variants: the movement up and down (*anabasis*, *katabasis*), that has carried a symbolic meaning from the Gregorian chant to our present time. It is surely the most frequent of the rhetoric figures, and it has an impact on the way we relate, still today, a higher frequency with 'up' and a lower frequency with "down".

The simplest example of *katabasis* is that part of the Credo, in the Catholic Mass, where the text says "descendit de cælis" (He came down from heaven). This is nearly a cliché. Palestrina, in his *Missa Papæ Marcelli*, does this (Fig. 16.3). It is a notably iconic sign, a matter of word-painting: the musical design goes iconically down.

There are, however, more interesting, symbolic instances of such a rhetoric figure. At the beginning of a mass by Catalan composer Francesc Valls, at the turn of the 18th century, one hears first Guido d'Arezzo's hexachord go up, to the words *Lord, have mercy* (Fig. 16.4a). Where the latent genre is a march, reinforced by anapestic, martial rhythms. With the text *Christe, eleison*, however, the melodic sense is reversed, in *katabasis*, and the genre becomes a minuet (Fig. 16.4b).

Both the dance and the melodic sense point to humanity, in contrast with the divinity being invoked at the *Kyrie*. There, the prayer would go from down the earth up to the Lord. Here in the *Christe*, in a wonderful musical translation of the mystery of Incarnation, the divine becomes human, from heaven to earth.

(a)

Nir - gend noch Licht und nir - gend noch Rauch, ja,

(b)

führt sie am Wei - den - ge - bü - sche vor - bei, (Ja!)

Fig. 16.2 a Johannes Brahms. *Von ewiger Liebe*, Op. 43 No. 1, mm. 14–7. b Johannes Brahms. *Von ewiger Liebe*, Op. 43 No. 1, mm. 34–7

### 16.2.4 Genres and Semantic Fields

Genre markers obviously mark genres or styles. If a musical sign refers to an object, a gesture or a concept, it tends to be part of a semantic field. Affects can be analyzed into expressive genres, Robert Hatten's concept of narrative archetypes. Finally, stylistic emblems form stylistic isotopies. These are all chapters in the book (Tables 16.4 and 16.5).

Chapter 3 is the first of a series of chapters devoted to different ways to group musical meanings. These are different sets of topics which originate in musical traditions:

- (1) patent genres, latent genres;
- (2) vocal genres: sacred topics, Gregorian chant, *stile antico*, choral;
- (3) theatrical topics: opera *seria* and *buffa*, aria *di vendetta*, Love duet;
- (4) dance topics: aristocratic, folksy;

tem de scen - dit de coe - - - lis.  
 de scen - dit de coe - - - lis. de scen - dit de coe - - - - lis.  
 tem de scen - dit de coe - lis.  
 de scen - - - dit de coe - lis. de scen - dit de coe - lis.  
 de scen - - - dit de coe - lis.  
 tem de scen - - - dit de coe - lis.

**Fig. 16.3** Giovanni da Palestrina. *Missa Papæ Marcelli, Credo*: mm. 53–8

**Fig. 16.4 a** Francesc Valls. *Missa Scala Aretina: Kyrie*.  
**b** Francesc Valls. *Missa Scala Aretina: Christe*

(a)  
Ky - ri - e e - lei -  
 (b)  
Chris-te

**Table 16.4** Grouping of Chaps. 1–5

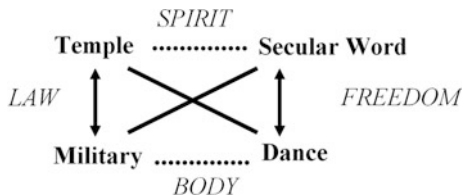
Signs	Chapter 1	Signs, topics
	Chapter 2	Madrigalisms, rhetoric figures
Sets of signs	Chapter 3	Genres, styles
	Chapter 4	Semantic fields
Examples	Chapter 5	Study of 4 classic topics

**Table 16.5** Signs and sets of signs

Signs	Sets of signs
Genre markers	Genres, styles
Objects, gestures, concepts	Semantic fields
Stylistic emblems	Stylistic isotopies
Affects, characters	Expressive genres



**Fig. 16.5** A semiotic square of the semantic fields



- (5) instrumental genres: the mixed style, Gallant style;
- (6) improvisation versus composition: prelude, toccata, fantasia.

Chapter 4 presents an analysis of musical meanings in Classical music, and in most Romantic music, according to the objects or concepts to which they refer. That results in four different semantic fields, all related to each other:

- (1) the temple: polyphony, choral, bells;
- (2) military topics: marches, calls and the Classical “Toy army”; this includes the variant of the hunting;
- (3) the Secular Word: lyricism and the pastoral;
- (4) dances.

These four semantic fields relate to each other in a way that recalls Greimas’s semiotic square: where the temple and the military oppose each other as to their ultimate goals, but have an institutional quality that unites them under the rule of Law. Freedom, on the other side, is represented by the Secular Word, including poetry and theatre, and dance. These are complementary to the first, but configure a second axis of oppositions, a very traditional one in Western culture: the spirit versus the body. Also traditional is the mutually exclusive relationship between the Religious and the Dance, in Christianity, and, only to a certain degree, between the violence of the Military and the naked power of the Word.

This square, born out of analytical findings, offers a visual map (one of many possible maps) of a virtual world, the world of the so-called Western art music. It can be useful to place many musical meanings into a whole complex of relationships, some of affinity, others conflicting (Fig. 16.5).

### 16.2.5 Some Classical Topics. Narrative

Chapter 5 bears the title “Some classical topics”, which gathers:

- (1) fire, *stile concitato*, storm: I’ve been investigating the continuity of a musical sign that combines the signifier of an irregular, flickering movement with the signified of some natural violence, as in the topic of fire, warfare, the storm, etc.;

- (2) musical laughter<sup>7</sup>: it is quite a ubiquitous topic in Classical and Romantic music, and I've been gathering examples of musical laughter from Mozart's *Figaro* up to Bartók's Concerto for orchestra;
- (3) serenade: lyricism. A classic case of a genre that works best as a topic, integrated into an instrumental, autonomous piece. An interesting variant of it is the dysphoric serenade, a paradoxical subtopic, as in Beethoven's *Moonlight* sonata;
- (4) the *ombra* topic, studied by Clive MacClelland.<sup>8</sup> The term applies to an operatic scene, from the 17th-century on, involving the appearance of an oracle or demon, witches, or ghosts. It has a great impact on the new instrumental music of the 18th century.

Chapter 6 is the crucial chapter on Narrative. After looking at topics, historical meanings, genres and semantic fields, this should be the culmination of any meaningful analysis: to try and make a global sense of the musical work. Chapter 6 is divided thus:

- (1) some topics' narrative aspects: Mozart's Sonata K 332;
- (2) syntactic meanings, firm versus loose;
- (3) oral versus written discourse in instrumental music: the Classical musical persona, the Romantic musical persona, theoretical extension;
- (4) narratives: program music (*Charakterstücke. A Masked Ball*), the symphonic poem (*Death and Transfiguration*), the Water Goblin (*Vodník*);
- (5) temporality: Classic narrative, Romantic narrative; memories: the past in the present; story versus discourse (*El Albaicín* from *Iberia Suite*);
- (6) expressive genres: humor as an expressive genre (Haydn), Mozart's Quintet K 593, Beethoven's Concertos in C minor and C major.

Here, some extensive analyses display what has been shown precedently, integrated into different ways to interpret a whole movement or a whole work. There is an analogy to language that I've found works really well in instrumental music: the distinction between oral and written discourse. This switching between a pre-established material and its elaboration and commentary, in Classical and in Romantic music, suggests the existence of a *musical persona*: another analogy to literature. This virtual character seems to be one of the main keys for a narrative interpretation of most instrumental pieces of the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Musical laughter is a topic that I described in one of our conferences in Imatra, 2007 (see Grimalt 2014a, b).

<sup>8</sup>McClelland (2012); cf. also McClelland (2014).

<sup>9</sup>In a 2013 paper for a conference on narratology (2nd International Meeting on Narratology and the Arts "Art as Text. Narratological, Semiotic and Transmedial Approaches", 5–7 December 2013, Strasbourg), my analyses found a subtle difference between the Classical and the Romantic persona: the former seems to be displaying its own capacities, whereas the latter sounds like an inner monologue, or a dialogue with itself.

### 16.2.6 Final Chapter and Annex

The last chapter of the book deals with meanings which did not find any better place in previous chapters. They are:

- (1) traces of poetic meters in instrumental music: regular metric patterns as a musical sign; Corelli in *settenari*; Schumann, quoting Jeitteles and Beethoven.; *Fantasie* Op. 17; Liszt's and Lamartine's alexandrines; Beethoven, one note longer than Mahler; Mahler's *Adagietto*, and some other songs;
- (2) tone of the discourse; musical irony: Classical irony, Romantic irony; Mahlerian irony;
- (3) stylistic isotopies: a map of Mahler's world; Wagner's Leitmotiv.

From these, let me just point out the first item, meanings derived from poetic meters or prosody. This is an issue that has been arousing my curiosity for quite some time now; there seem to be poetic meters behind many instrumental themes, in sonatas, symphonies and the like. A close look at them can confirm or question some of the meanings of that music.

Finally, a practical guide to a meaningful analysis is annexed, trying to orient the student—rather than the music lover—step by step, as well as some analyses of baroque, Classical, romantic, and 20th-century music. They should help to round off the many previous music examples and references along the book.

## 16.3 Conclusions

Teaching is one of the best ways to learn, as anybody in the field will know. Looking for the best way to express something I thought I knew, I've found a lot of stuff I did not know. In the first place, I guess you write such a book for yourself, hoping it will be useful to somebody else, but initially to make sense of something that attracts you irresistibly.

The world of musical meanings is too far away from the average music student. The music lover, on the other hand, is often longing for some foundation or historical precision to their intuitions. In both cases, our work should contribute to a new dialogue between the old Humanities and our complex world. This requires an attitude of critical awareness towards our cultural legacy, and a caring gaze for the younger generations.

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