

Numanities - Arts and Humanities in Progress 15

Joan Grimalt

# Mapping Musical Signification

 Springer

# **Numanities - Arts and Humanities in Progress**

Volume 15

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*I am glad to learn in order that I may teach.  
No good thing is pleasant to possess, without friends to share it.*

SENECA (c. 65 AD)<sup>1</sup>

*The relation that prevails between theory and practice in  
most of the arts is still the following:  
theory is far less useful for perfecting works than are works  
useful for correcting theory.*

Johann Jakob ENGEL (1780)<sup>2</sup>

*You will be most readily cured of vanity or presumption  
by studying the history of music, and by hearing the master pieces  
which have been produced at different periods.*

Robert SCHUMANN (1848)<sup>3</sup>

*The genuine way to write is to write as we translate.  
When we translate a text written in a foreign language, we  
do not try to add,  
but on the contrary, we scrupulously do not add anything to it.  
That is how we should try to translate a non-written text.*

Simone WEIL (1941)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> SENECA, *Letters from a Stoic*, book I, n. 6, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Engel, *Über die musikalische Malerey*: 230, quoted by ALLANBROOK 2014: 108.

<sup>3</sup> R. SCHUMANN, *Musikalische Haus- und Lebensregeln* (1848).

<sup>4</sup> In a letter to Gustave Thibon, September 14th, 1941: *Lettres de Simone Weil à Gustave Thibon et de Gustave Thibon à Simone Weil*: 68f.

*Για εσένα, την αγαπημένη μου αναγνώστριά.*

# Foreword

Music teachers and students, professional musicians and music lovers will all be grateful to Dr. Joan Grimalt for his new book on musical expressive meaning. 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).

In a series of theoretically informed and historically rich chapters, Grimalt offers a summary of the state of the field of musical signification, beginning with an accessible summary of recent scholarship on musical signs. Widely ranging throughout the music history, but with special emphasis on the eighteenth and nineteenth century tonal repertoire, the volume offers clear descriptions of characteristic musical types that carry expressive meanings when imported into musical works that further contextualize their meaning. Readers will appreciate Grimalt's encyclopedic references to madrigalisms, rhetorical figures from the Baroque and an impressive array of Classical and Romantic topics.

Grimalt has been an active contributor to international debates on issues in musical meaning, having participated in conferences and symposia organized by Eero Tarasti (for music semiotics) and Márta Grabócz (for music narrativity). Drawing on his interdisciplinary expertise in music semiotics, and his extensive experience as orchestral conductor and musicologist, he is superbly qualified to offer this exciting new synthesis of approaches to musical expressive meaning.

It is fitting that this book should appear in the year that Dr. Grimalt is hosting the 15th International Congress on Musical Signification, in his home city of Barcelona (postponed to September, 2021). And it is a tribute to his comprehensive vision that this historical and theoretical introduction to musical signification is informed by philosophical and aesthetic perspectives on the challenges we face in interpreting musical meaning.

Robert S. Hatten  
The University of Texas at Austin,  
Austin, US

# Acknowledgments

I wish to thank, first and foremost, my students, both at graduate and undergraduate levels. Their questioning, eager attention has been and is an invaluable precious orientation in my research.

Some of the best researchers in the field of musical meaning have privileged me with their friendly assistance, with this book and also for many years before its conception. First, it was Márta Grabócz who showed me a musicological way into musical meaning. Reading her monography on Franz Liszt's music (1987/1996), I was fascinated by the possibility of using structuralist tools to analyze musical topoi and narrative strategies in instrumental music. She supported me and this volume generously over and again.

Another pioneer that I would like to thank for his inspiration is Constantin Floros. In a time where hermeneutics was excluded from serious musicological analysis, Floros courageously devoted his efforts to meticulous research and to composing wonderfully insightful texts on the sense of music by Mozart, Ligeti, Berg, Mahler, Bruckner or Brahms, to name but a few. He was also available for friendly, stimulating talks and correspondence.

I am deeply indebted to the late Raymond Monelle, who directed my Ph.D. on Mahler's *Wunderhorn* music. His work has had a great impact on all questions around musical signification. Monelle combined a deep knowledge of history with perspicacious analysis and practical musicianship.

I am also grateful to Anatole Leikin for his patient and constructive revision of this text. Since Siglind Bruhn put us in contact, years ago, we have shared a lot of readings and hearings, starting with his illuminating writings. They always combine the great interpreter's creativity with musicological rigour, when discovering new aspects of musical signification that are directly related to interpretation. Danke schön Siglind, Большое спасибо Anatole!

Esti Sheinberg warmly encouraged this publication from its earliest stages on. She and I share the experience of having been Ph.D. students of the late Raymond Monelle. Her work on irony in Shostakovich's music has been a reference since its

appearance<sup>5</sup>. She also put William P. Dougherty and me in contact, which was another precious contribution to the book you are about to read.

Robert Hatten, author of some of the most essential works on musical meaning, has had a huge influence on any scholar working in this field. His personal encouragement and his foreword have helped me find the energy to start, carry on and finish this study.

Eero Tarasti has been arguably the leading scholar in the field of music semiotics since he and some other researchers started back in 1984 an intercontinental group that gathers regularly (International Congresses on Musical Signification) to share and discuss the issues around which this book revolves. Ever since I first participated in that forum (Rome 2006), professor Tarasti has always been personally close and ready for questions and suggestions.

Finally, I wish to thank some exceptional readers with whom I had the privilege of sharing the writing of this book. Out of friendship and out of their proficiency they enriched it with lots of quality details and fine observations: thank you very much Joaquim Badia, Laura Barlament, Antoni Bosch-Veciana, Santiago Figueras, Cristina G. Rojo, Małgorzata Grajter, Sanja Kiš Žuvela, Carme Mampel, Clive McClelland. Thanks go also to Gemma Camps who helped in preparing many musical examples. Iain Ó hAinmí, last but not least, patiently and generously edited the text into good English.

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<sup>5</sup> SHEINBERG 2000.

# Introduction

I would argue that the gradual rediscovery of ancient musical knowledge that is *musical signification*, which finds its source in musical practice and in the profound knowledge of different musical styles, has become a permanent and on-going research process involving an important number of scholars from all over the world: each musicologist making his or her own contribution to what remains presently a work-in-progress.

Márta GRABÓCZ<sup>6</sup>

## Presentation

Beethoven's Symphony No. 3, *Eroica*, starts with two orchestral strokes, *forte*, followed immediately by a *piano* melody in the cellos. (Ex. n. 0-1). This triadic melody sounds like an idyllic horn call, the  $\frac{3}{4}$  metre like some kind of waltz. However, the theme flows very soon into a dissonant C# that is sustained for two measures. As if reacting to the "wrong" C#, the first violins introduce a series of syncopations on G, then a mournful *sforzato* in mm. 10–11. Both the C# and the 6/4-chord on m. 9 insinuated a modulation to G-minor that would considerably obscure the scene. Finally, the main key of E-flat major is re-established in a cadence over the next several measures. Most listeners are touched by this gleaming start, even after repeated hearings. This book is about what lies behind that feeling involving senses, spirit and intellect.

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<sup>6</sup> GRABÓCZ 2009: 15.

**Allegro con brio**

The image shows the first 15 measures of the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 3. The score is for Winds and Strings. The Winds part starts with a fortissimo (f) chord. The Strings part starts with a fortissimo (f) chord and then moves to piano (p). A red circle highlights a section of the score from approximately mm. 10 to 15, where the strings play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and the winds play a melodic line. Dynamics include p cresc., cresc., and sf.

**Ex. n. 0-1 Beethoven, Symphony n. 3/I, mm. 1-15.**

Most of music's expressive meanings, whether in a soundtrack, a commercial or a classical symphony, build on traditions that can be researched and interpreted. The initial 'blows' of this symphony, for example, are a typical operatic device to grab the attention of the audience at the start of the show<sup>7</sup>. They also carry a rhetorical meaning with them: that of a sharp 'Exclamation'. The melody on cellos refers to a horn 'Call' and to an Alpine 'Waltz', the *Ländler*. The latter promotes associations with peaceful rural life; in the nineteenth century the horn is usually associated with the woods and its natural freedom. Narratively, the idyllic initial theme and the immediate critical descent into dissonance and syncopation can be heard as a questioning of the 'Pastoral'. Now in spite of the subtitle *Eroica*, 'Pastoral' actually opposes warfare. It is an imagined place of perfect harmony on earth, the integration of humanity and nature. The "wrong" note seems to question this idyll, as if suggesting another main key, that

<sup>7</sup> The device has been aptly called *noise-killer* by László Somfai 1974, applied to Haydn's London quartets. Quoted by LEIKIN 2001: 572.

of a tragic G-minor. A move to this key area would produce a completely different piece of music, with sorrow and tension instead of the serene beginning in E-flat major<sup>8</sup>. With the C# in m. 7, we leave the ‘Pastoral’ world for the representation of a ‘tragic operatic scene’. The syncopations, a sign of agitation, seem to confirm that tragic foreboding. However, the *sforzati*—another form of spontaneous ‘exclamation’ of vocal nature—and the weeping interval in the first violins (mm. 10–11) manage to restore the initial home key and the triadic reassuring melody.

The goal of this study is to stimulate sensibilities and habits that link listening experiences with meaning. It is addressed specifically to musicians, graduate and undergraduate, but it does not exclude informed musical amateurs.

On one hand, the book offers a general survey of the field of musical meaning, systematized in a pedagogic guise. It is intended to be used as a textbook for subjects like “Musical Signification” or “Music Semiotics”, and also to complement any course or workshop on Analysis. The need for such a systematizing effort arises from the growing awareness in colleges all around the world regarding expressive meanings. Formal analysis alone no longer satisfies an increasing majority of musicians and teachers.

On the other hand, a reflection on Musical Signification today implies a philosophical attitude that this text embraces wholeheartedly. There are two main traditions within Humanities, both an answer to the world as a question: one tends to create an alternative realm, a safe bubble built on an idealized past. The other one engages in making the present world better. The first one is exclusive or esoteric, the second one is inclusive and based on shared codes, first of all language.

Needless to say, this work and all the activities of its author should be seen as adhering to the latter concept of Humanities, or in Dario Martinelli’s humorous neologism, *Numanities*. By definition, Musical Signification is designed to be integrated into them. By humbly giving words to the ineffable, irreducible musical experience, the reflection on music’s expressive meanings has the tremendous ambition of making the world more human, less cruel and unjust. In Italo Calvino’s unforgettable words,

The hell of the living is not something that will be: if there is one, it is what is already here, the hell where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the hell and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and learning: seek and be able to recognize who and what, in the midst of hell, are not hell, then make them endure, give them space<sup>9</sup>.

The text springs from three different sources, corresponding to three distinct yet interrelated contexts. First, it is the result of many years of research in the field of musical signification. Second, it arises from analytical work, as both a conductor and

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<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed account of that hint to a modulation, and for the derivation of this beginning from the culminating *Prometheus* theme, cf. SWAFFORD 2012: 331ff. About the schema *b6-5-#4 (-5)* that underlies this, and many other passages derived from pathetic operatic moments, see BYROS 2014.

<sup>9</sup> CALVINO 2016 (1972): 160.

a pianist. Finally, it reflects my goals as a teacher, aiming to integrate both fields—performing and musicology of meaning—in a clear and pragmatic presentation.

The scope of the study encompasses Western music from the madrigal to the present day, with an emphasis on Classic and Romantic instrumental repertoire, where an expressive message was implicitly understood as a “compensation” for the lack of a text. If we are relating music and meaning, we are assuming music is a communicating device, albeit of a very special kind. The musical message is not properly linguistic, but it can be retraced and (up to a certain point) decoded to enhance the listening experience, as it has been shown in our preliminary example.

## Musical Signification

What is musical signification? In Márta GRABÓCZ’s words,

Simply put, musical signification (in works written between the seventeenth and the twentieth century) can be defined as the verbal reconstruction of a lost musical competence, a kind of musical knowledge quasi forgotten through ages, yet perpetuated in musical practice by interpreters and transmitted from generation to generation by various instrumental and vocal schools.<sup>10</sup>

So studying musical meaning would amount to *speaking* about music and its ability to awaken associations in the listener’s mind in order to try and understand its unique hold on us. If the present reader of this Introduction is an interpreter, she or he is used to relying on their intuition to decipher those meanings as described in our Beethoven example. Alas, not all schools of interpreters have been able to hand down those traditions Grabócz mentions. Too often, in concerts with students or teachers—even at excellent universities—the performers seem to be using a language that does not make any sense to them. And indeed, excellent musical intuition alone does not lead to understanding: it takes some conscious musicological research, if the musical heritage is to become relevant again to present and future generations.

In an unforgettable scene in the movie *Intouchables* (Olivier Nakache & Éric Toledano 2011), the role of art music in our time is aptly caricaturized<sup>11</sup>. Answering machines, advertisements and soundtracks of period movies seem to be all that remains of the whole Western musical legacy in the consciousness of Driss, a young Senegalese who grew up in the slums of Paris: see Table n. 0-1.

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<sup>10</sup> GRABÓCZ 2009: 19.

<sup>11</sup> Please search on Youtube for *Intouchables-Classical music*.

Actual Composition	According to Driss
1. JS Bach, Suite n° 1 for cello.	Advertisement
2. JS Bach, Suite for orchestra.	Historical flick
3. Antonio Vivaldi, <i>L'estate</i> .	Answering machine

**Table n. 0-1 The same pieces, from two different perspectives.**

In contrast, disco music seems to mean fun for everybody soon thereafter in the film<sup>12</sup>. Admittedly, this diagram is but a black-and-white caricature, but its bottom line helps to understand some of the challenges of our public music life, including most conservatories.

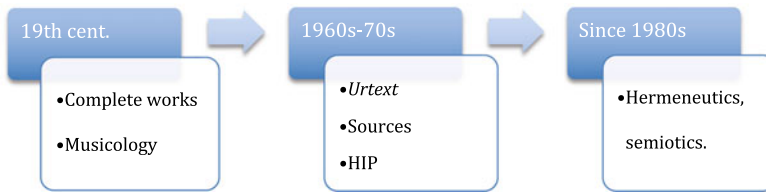
What is the role of art music in our time? How valid is it, how can it reach our contemporaries? These are inevitable questions for every young musician. Just like Driss, most of us listeners and interpreters have only indirect links to our legacy, but we naturally tend to seek profound experiences such as great music can provide. In fact, the end of the movie shows Driss getting a job and even a relationship out of his sensitive acquaintance with high-brow art. However, most of the codes that used to give sense to classical music have been lost. A bridge of words needs to be constructed to reconnect our time with Mozart's and Beethoven's. Even John Lennon's times seem often remote to young students, who require some information to grasp his lyrics' meaning.

Musical signification can be seen historically as a logical step after the establishment of a musicological science in the nineteenth century, and a Historically Informed Performance (HIP) in the 1960s–70s<sup>13</sup>. The conceptual frame for all three steps is **Historicism** (see Table n 0-2). The inclusion of musical studies in universities in the 1860s as “musicology” (*Musikwissenschaft*) amounted to putting music on a par with the rest of arts and sciences. In the 1960s and 70s, an in-depth research on old instruments and the urge to critically read ancient treatises and scores looking for hints as to how to play and sing the music of the past (HIP), on the other hand, has been regarded in the musical world as one of the most significant developments of the twentieth century. It is also an index of the central role of interpretation in postmodern times<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> You can search for *Intouchables Dance Scene*.

<sup>13</sup> DRAŽIĆ 2012: 37f.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. STEINER 1998.



**Table n. 0-2 Musical Historicism, from the 19th century on.**

Both fruits of the nineteenth century, musicology and the complete critical edition of so-called “masterworks”, culminate in the middle of the twentieth century in critical editions (*Urtext*), a procedure that parallels what happened in the seventeenth century with the Holy Scriptures: instead of relying solely on the authority of the Church Fathers, human reason and philological methods were prioritized. Similarly, a musicology of meaning inscribes itself naturally into the broad field of **Humanities**, as a musical branch of Hermeneutics.

**Hermeneutics** means the art of interpreting a text. It was initially applied to the study of the Bible, a text as vital to Christianity as intriguingly obscure. Similarly, the need of a musical hermeneutic arises from a disconnection between our time and a historical legacy that makes us who we are. Most of the twentieth century musicology focused on intra-musical processes and neglected music’s social role as a symbolic system<sup>15</sup>. The result is a general void as to what music is supposed to mean, and thus what are the best performative decisions. The syncopations in Beethoven’s *Eroica*, for example, sound differently if the violinists are aware of their expressive character—the distressed, agitated stage singer they evoke—or not.

Studying musical meaning implies asking *how* it signifies (semiotics) and *what* it signifies (hermeneutics). In addition, hermeneutics, in literature as in music, requires a previous **Exegesis**, i.e. to establish what the text ‘says’. Before analyzing a score, manuscripts and first editions have to be compared; before one can interpret what a ‘Rural waltz’ is doing in a symphony called *Eroica*, one has to recognize it as such.

Since roughly the 1980s, musicology has sought means to remedy the blatant void in musical signification. Back then, the habit of reducing music to an abstraction, as if it were a mere structure, would leave students—and professionals—with no musicological tools to interpret or analyze expressive meanings. Moreover, it led to scholastic isolation, where access to music appeared as exclusive to erudites<sup>16</sup>. To investigate how music links itself to its listeners, and thus to thought, arts, economy, sexuality and all other human activities, musicology found

<sup>15</sup> Cf. TAGG 2012/13, KRAMER 1995: 4f., ENDER/HARNONCOURT 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. KRAMER 1995, 2002, 2007.

a new tool in **semiotics**. The study of meaning and signs, with its strong interdisciplinary bias, has proven highly useful to the analysis of meaningful sound.

In spite of its theoretical power, rooted in twentieth century structuralism, semiotics is not the only tool of musical signification. Oftentimes, historical sources offer a precious clue to the expressive meaning of ‘art music’. This book uses some semiotic tools, centered on a synchronic view of the musical signs and their context, but its main source of inspiration and knowledge comes mostly from that *idiomatic* musical intuition Márta Grabócz was mentioning on the previous page. In other words, from a diachronic approach, attempting to establish the genealogy and historical connections of any musical signs.

The effort of putting words to the intuition of interpreters who have been relying on old traditions of musical expression has enlightened many great musicologists. These are all fluent in the musical idiom—something a musician can feel right away. I consider them my teachers, whether they have a semiotic background or not. Right before this Introduction, the Acknowledgments detail my debt to them.

One of the very first questions that arises when the subject of musical signification is addressed, among musicians and musicologists, is its **scientific validity**. How is this study going to be worthy of musicology? Subjectivity is not only inevitable. In art, as in history or philosophy, it constitutes an indispensable first impulse, alongside with intuition. But how much of them are acceptable in a quest for truthful results?

Since science has been freed from the urge to save the world, current scientific paradigms include forms of knowledge that are not countable. Hans-Georg GADAMER started his investigation on Hermeneutics and on truth in Humanities with a concern that we embrace as well: to *seek out the experience of truth beyond the control of scientific methodology wherever it happens and question its legitimacy in its own terms*<sup>17</sup>. ‘In its own terms’, i.e. using those methods that have been traditional in Humanities, long before positivism took the overhand. In musicology, as in the rest of Humanities, we are not constrained to use arithmetic calculation, provide irrefutable laws or hard proof. It is finally a matter of **interpretation**, well founded in musical and cultural traditions. An interpreter seeks to convince, based on observation and sensibility, which can be done rigorously or arbitrarily. Quoting Edward T. CONE:

It is true that argument 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<sup>18</sup>.

In other words, we are not looking for a positivist truth here, one that is numerically measurable, but for some sound interpretation, one that can be shared as convincing. There, the term *intersubjective* comes handy. **Intersubjectivity** is a philosophical, anthropological term that designates a consensus within a given community. It comes close to the ancient Greek *doxa*, that collective common

<sup>17</sup> GADAMER 2010 (1960): 1.

<sup>18</sup> CONE 1974: 158.

knowledge, not always explicit, that makes mutual understanding possible. The greatest advantage to us lies in overcoming the dichotomy objective/subjective, that would trap studies on musical signification in epistemological paradigms alien to their humanist tradition<sup>19</sup>.

The best foundation for a serious study of music are, of course, the works that form its history. A familiarity with them—what was called in the eighteenth century the cultivation of Taste—constitutes the best access to a tradition of musical meaning that has deep roots in rhetoric and speech, in movement and dance, and in the human need for ritual.

Studying musical signification does not mean we should try to explain everything. **Ambivalence**, on the contrary, is one of the main virtues of the musical discourse. Instrumental music has no text, it ‘says’ nothing, and yet it is so expressive precisely because it ‘says’ nothing. It is autonomous from any function, and it correlates with the human world. For Immanuel Kant, the enjoyment of beauty is a purely formal category. It arises from “the feeling of a free playing of the forces of imagination”<sup>20</sup>. That sounds very close to Eduard HANSLICK’s idea that “the music’s only content and object” are “moving sound forms”<sup>21</sup>. Hanslick had a noticeable influence on the establishment of a musical autonomism. The idea of “absolute music” is echoed in twentieth century formalism, i.e. the conviction that there is no content in art other than form<sup>22</sup>.

Contemporarily to Kant, however, Wilhelm H. WACKENRODER (1797) gave words to a new perception of instrumental music as a complex, rich message:

Some passages in the music were so clear and engaging that the notes seemed to him like words. [...] A marvellous gift of music—an art that generally affects us the more powerfully, and that stirs all our vital forces the more deeply, the vaguer and more mysterious its language is<sup>23</sup>.

For the fathers of German romanticism, in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, instrumental music can sometimes speak as univocally as language, and then again it displays its highest capacities in its ineffability, being free of normal speech. E. T. A. HOFFMANN introduces his article on *Beethoven’s Instrumental Music* (1810) thus:

When music is spoken of as an independent art, does not the term properly apply only to instrumental music, which scorns all aid, all admixture of other arts (poetry), and gives pure expression to its own peculiar artistic nature? It is the most romantic of all arts, one might almost say the only one that is genuinely romantic, since its only subject matter is infinity. Orpheus’s lyre opened the gates of Orcus<sup>24</sup>. Music reveals to man an unknown realm, a

<sup>19</sup> Cf. GILLESPIE & CORNISH 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 1790. Quoted by Joachim Hagner, in: GOETHE, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, p. 773.

<sup>21</sup> HANSLICK 1854: 31f.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. FLOROS 1989: 87f.

<sup>23</sup> WACKENRODER 1797: 240f.

<sup>24</sup> *Orcus*: in Roman mythology, the underworld or land of the dead.

world quite separate from the outer sensual world surrounding him, a world in which he leaves behind all precise feelings in order to embrace an inexpressible longing<sup>25</sup>.

Felix Mendelssohn, some decades later, insists on music's ability for communication as a unique virtue, unmatched by language:

People usually complain that music is so ambiguous; that it is difficult to know what to think when they listen to it whereas everyone understands words. With me, it is entirely the converse. And not only with regard to an entire speech, but also with individual words; these, too, seem to me to be so ambiguous, so vague, and so easily misunderstood in comparison with genuine music, which fills the soul with a thousand things better than words. The thoughts that are expressed to me by a piece of music that I love are not too indefinite to be put into words, but on the contrary too definite. Therefore, I find, in every attempt to express such thoughts, that something is right, but at the same time something is unsatisfying in all of them...<sup>26</sup>

In other words, instrumental art music is both expressive and autonomous. It has meaning, but in its own unique, ambivalent way.

As it was stated before, aesthetics and some of the music of mid-twentieth century are marked by dogmatic, intransigent **formalism**. One of the most intensely musical of philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), even said music is tautological, because it explains only itself. What instrumental music *says*, to be sure, is only music, and we appreciate it as an alternative to language, insofar as it does not need explanation, but also insofar as it conveys expression. Beethoven's *Eroica* offers an idea, the musical portrait of a hero. On the other hand, it is above all the realization of that idea, its coherent, autonomous construction—e.g. by deriving all of the musical material from the *Prometheus* contredanse at the culmination of the symphony—which gives the work its irresistible quality<sup>27</sup>.

Musical signification starts with a study of musical signs and their contextual interrelationships but enlarges its scope into the genealogy of musical styles and traditions, and indirectly to cultural history in general. Besides the knowledge of historical musical practice, this requires artistic intuition, sensibility, and familiarity with the language it is analyzing.

## How is This Book Laid Out?

This volume offers some practical tools for listening to music in a more informed manner. The reader can follow its order as in a treatise to find a systematic, pragmatic division of the field of expressive meanings and a guide to analytical

<sup>25</sup> HOFFMANN 1989 (1810): 96.

<sup>26</sup> In a letter to Marc André Souchay dated Berlin, October 5th 1842. Quoted by COOKE 1959: 12.

<sup>27</sup> For the derivation of the *Eroica* thematic material from the final contredanse, a reference to his own *Prometheus*-music, cf. FLOROS 2008 (1978) and SWAFFORD 2014: 331ff.

listening. Or one can use the reference lists at the end of the book (topoi, names), to skip and find, as in an essay, what he or she is looking for.

The meaning of any sign depends on its context. In music, the first context is the musical work and the second its stylistic frame of reference. Hence the many musical examples: the goal is to reach an interpretation taking into account the work's historical context. Also, in examples from real music, whether the theory presented is useful or not, what Gadamer calls the "artistic truth" will prevail.

The study divides itself in two parts (see Table n. 0-3). The present volume, **Mapping Musical Signification**, presents a morphology of musical signs, first as distinct units, then within different sets of signs. Chapter 1 offers some theoretical foundation to the study of music and its signs. Some musical signs have such a strong historical character that they are best described as **madrigalisms** (sixteenth century) or as **rhetorical figures** (seventeenth century). Chapter 2 is devoted to both of them and to their resonance in later art music. Chapter 3 introduces a fundamental tool for an analysis including meaning: the reference or **topos**. The many references to genres and styles, to correlates within or outwith music can be attributed to different semantic fields. These correspond, I found later, to the main venues where music was practised in the eighteenth century: (1) Church, (2) Army, (3) Theatre and Chamber (both can be subsumed as Lyricism, the secular word) and (4) the Ballroom. Each one of them carries a whole bunch of expressive meanings with it and holds relationships of opposition, exclusion or complementarity with the others that can be graphically expressed with a **semiotic square**. This square can serve as a rough map to explore and classify any other further musical meanings. The next five chapters are each devoted to one of these semantic fields: **Sacred** references (Chap. 4), **Martial** references (Chap. 5), **Lyricism** and Pastoral (Chap. 6), **Dance** references (Chap. 7) and **Theatrical** references (Chap. 8).

<b>MAPPING MUSICAL SIGNIFICATION</b>	<b>Signs</b>	Chapter 1	Musical signs
		Chapter 2	Madrigalisms, rhetorical figures
		Chapter 3	References (topoi), semantic fields
	<b>Sets of signs</b>	Chapter 4	Sacred references
		Chapter 5	Martial references
		Chapter 6	Lyricism, Pastoral.
		Chapter 7	Dance references
		Chapter 8	Theatrical references
<b>ANALYSING MUSICAL SIGNIFICATION</b>	<b>Examples</b>	Chapter 9	A study of 3 classic topoi
		Chapter 10	Musical Narrative
		Chapter 11	Practical Cases

**Table n. 0-3 Table of Contents.**

A second volume, **Analyzing Musical Signification**, will contain some more chapters devoted to the analysis of specific topoi and some particular musical works. Any significative analysis faces necessarily the question of **musical narrative**. This entails manifestations of the musical Subject or Persona in instrumental music, mostly through a musical Rhetoric that, far beyond rhetorical figures, invites one to listen to music mimicking the intonations of oral speech. Finally, the whole study reaches its culmination by summarizing topical and narrative analysis in practical cases, e.g. Mozart's String Quartet K. 421 or Beethoven's *The Creatures of Prometheus* op. 43 (1801).

In the following pages you will find an attempt to gather a significant part of the research on expressive meanings that has been carried out in the last few decades. The criterion for inclusion was didactic and pragmatic, but it does not aim for exhaustivity. Musical signification is still an emerging field where a global vision is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to attain. In Raymond MONELLE's words:

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<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> MONELLE 1992: preface.

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# Chapter 1



## Musical Signs

The veneration of the autonomous and the absolute  
has finally lost the status of a tacit value and,  
shorn of its transparency, has become available for critique,  
freeing historians and critics from the grip in which, unknowing, they were held.

WYE JAMISON ALLANBROOK<sup>1</sup>

This first chapter introduces musical signification through its smallest units, musical signs. The next two chapters will be devoted to historically limited kinds of signs: chapter Two tackles the music of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (**madrigalisms, rhetoric figures**), while chapter Three focuses on musical **topoi**, that have been described and used for the so-called Classic repertoire, and then widened to Romantic music and beyond. Here in chapter one, the musical sign is addressed as little historically as possible, as a general introduction. After a short introduction to music semiotics, one of the main tools used in the study of musical signification, several kinds of signs are introduced: among them, markers and tropes have turned out to be especially useful (Sect. 1.1). Next in Sect. 1.2 the thymic category, including the dichotomy ‘euphoric/dysphoric’ is tackled. Paragraph Sect. 1.3 describes what could be called ‘primary colours’ in music, some musical features that are not easily treated as topoi or historical signs, but that are commonly present in analyses in the form of dual oppositions. Then, different ways to group musical signs are presented (Sect. 1.4). The chapter closes with a brief review (Sect. 1.5) of some of the most prominent scholars in the field and of their contributions, as they are known to this writer.

### 1.1 Musical Signs

To reflect about musical meaning implies the premise that music is meaningful, i.e. that it can become an expressive experience to the listener. If music is meaningful, then it is made up of musical signs. A **sign**, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, is “something showing that something else exists or might happen or exist in the future”.

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<sup>1</sup> ALLANBROOK 2014: 29.

There are basically two different approaches to the study of signs. The French-speaking world, following Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), prefers the term *sémiologie*. Saussure saw a sign as a compound of signifier and signified<sup>2</sup>. In the English word ‘bird’, for instance, the **signifier** would be the word that designates the winged animal, whereas the **signified** is the animal itself. That partition in two halves contrasts with the tripartition proposed by the American school of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). In Peirce’s *semeiology*, there is a third component in every sign, what he calls the **interpretant**, i.e. another sign created in the mind of whoever is interpreting that sign<sup>3</sup>. The figure of the interpretant is remarkably apt for music, because it acknowledges the huge role interpretation has in understanding musical messages<sup>4</sup>.

Both Saussure’s semiology and Peirce’s semeiology are widely used in nowadays **semiotics**, i.e. the science that studies signs and meanings<sup>5</sup>. One of its flourishing branches is music semiotics. This chapter will present some of the tools that the science of signs offers to musicology. To be sure, we use semiotic tools in a *soft* sense, as Raymond MONELLE would put it:

The world of music semiotics is now a broad one, but its claim to supersede conventional theory has been laid aside. Finally, semiotics has come to mean ‘any scientific description’ of music (Ruwet 1975: 33), and its insights have been extremely various. The terminological precision, the declaration of explicit criteria and the clear distinction of categories remain as guiding principles, but heuristic intuition is no longer despised. The world of ‘hard semiotics’ was tough and polemic. The new, softer world is more fruitful, more fallible, more exciting<sup>6</sup>.

Rather than engaging in theoretic debates around the nature of the musical sign, or about the epistemological crisis of science in general, we are concerned with those analytical tools that have proved operative to enhance the listening or performing experience.

---

<sup>2</sup> Already Aristotle (*Organon*) distinguished signifier and signified. Augustine of Hippo, the Port-Royal grammarians or John Locke also lay the groundwork for Saussure. Cf. COLOMBO 2014: 67. In Hjelmlev’s terms, the corresponding terms are *expression* and *content*. Cf. TARASTI 1994: 11.

<sup>3</sup> For Peirce’s *semeiotic* theory, see MONELLE 1992: 193ff. See also TARASTI 1994: 54ff. and DOUGHERTY 2014.

<sup>4</sup> More about Peirce and Saussure in the last § on this chapter, *A brief review of the study of musical signification*.

<sup>5</sup> We follow Raymond Monelle’s use to unite *sémiologie* and *semeiology* into contemporary semiotics. Cf. MONELLE 1992: 193.

<sup>6</sup> MONELLE 1992: 31.

### 1.1.1 Markers

The signifier of a musical sign is a special kind of musical sign, a bundle of significative features. We are calling these features *markers*, following Philip TAGG<sup>7</sup>.

Markers are signs listeners use to place what they hear in a meaningful context. Normally, this context is a generic frame, as when one identifies a ringtone as a telephone call and not as dance music. For the process of contextualization, it is not important whether the author, the interpreter or the listener themselves are aware of it or not. Some markers are musical, some are extra-musical. A multitude of surfer caps mark quite a different context than stockings, dark suits and ties. For every genre or style, a set of musical markers can be described. Many of them will be found in the accompaniment, subliminally as it were. The syncopated rhythm in Ex. 1-1, for instance, marks *reggae*.



Ex. n. 1-1: *Reggae beat, the reggae's marker.*

A reggae beat underlies some current television commercials to convey a diffuse sense of 'coolness'. While the images are picturing some ideal holidays, a pop song with a reggae underground reinforces the alluring message with the 'take-it-easy' associations the Jamaican genre carries with it.

A couple of centuries before Bob Marley, an emphasis on the second beat of a 3/4 measure in a slow tempo was (is) the main marker of the Sarabande, a dance from 17<sup>th</sup>-century Versailles of Oriental or Spanish origin that Handel often uses in his operas and oratorios<sup>8</sup>.

At its best, a marker can be used for expressive purposes. In the aria *Lascia ch'io pianga*, e.g., the composer enlarges a rest between the words 'Let me mourn' and 'my cruel fate' (see ex. n. 1-2a). This longer rest displaces the tonic accent of the word *cru-da* ('cruel') on to the second beat of the measure. By doing so, Handel achieves an expressive emphasis on the word *cruda*, just by using the characteristic rhythmic marker of the sarabande.

<sup>7</sup> For genre markers, cf. TAGG 2012/13. In the present text the use of the term is widened to markers of any musical sign, not only genres.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. LITTLE & JENNE 1991: 92-113, ALLANBROOK 1983: 37f. Dance references are studied in chapter 7.



Ex. n. 1-2a: GF Handel, *Lascia ch'io pianga*, beginning<sup>9</sup>.

The rest interrupting the word *cru-da* is a madrigalism called ‘Sigh’<sup>10</sup>. It anticipates the ‘sighing’ in the aria’s text. Without it, the fragment could have sounded like in ex. 1-2b.



Ex. n. 1-2b: GF Handel (reconstructed), *Lascia ch'io pianga* without the sarabande marker.

In fact, the autograph confirms what Handel’s first idea was (see ex. 1-2c). The upbeat to the third measure is visibly erased, in favour of a half-note rest. The composer chose to take advantage of the ‘Sarabande’ marker to emphasize the “cruelty” of the protagonist’s fate.

An operatic reference to the ‘Sarabande’ often carries connotations of aristocratic gravity, and tragedy, as in this case. As for the structure of the piece, it is illuminating to see how the autograph, following the dance’s pattern, draws the barline through all staves every four bars. Breaking such 4+4 patterns in favour of a ‘spontaneous’ subjective response will become a favourite device of both vocal and instrumental music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries!<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This melody is usually associated to the opera *Rinaldo* (1711), but Handel had reused it already once before, as far as is known. It was originally an instrumental piece: an ‘Asian’ dance, with no text, within the opera *Almira* (1705). And even before *Rinaldo*, Handel found a place for this favourite piece in his 1707 oratorio *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno*, albeit with another text: *Lascia la spina, coglie la rosa*. Interestingly, with that text the ‘Sarabande’ marker does not come out at the corresponding spot.

<sup>10</sup> On madrigalisms and ‘Sighing’, see further Chap. 2, Sect. 2.2.

<sup>11</sup> ALLANBROOK 1983: 85-87, 108f, 126, 187f. has shown such ‘subjectivity’ signs in Mozart’s operas.