

JMM – The Journal of Music and Meaning, vol.4, Winter 2007

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**From Body Resonances to Cultural Values:
Insights on Music, Analysis and Mediations**

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Abstract

The main topic of this paper is the relationship between music and social structures. It focuses on the role of the body and analysis as grounds for mediations between both. Using music semiotics as a theoretical basis, the article proceeds with a critical, post-structuralist approach, showing how the poles of corporeal responses to stimuli, on the one hand, and of social rules of interpretation, on the other, do not retain the essential character of music. Instead, music appears as a mediation between those poles, to which analysis also responds as a cultural discourse.

Keywords: Musical semiotics – Music analysis – Post-structuralism

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"A la limite, il n'y a que des intermezzi: ce qui interrompt est à son tour interrompu, et cela recommence" (Barthes, 1982, p. 266).

Introduction

A recurring problem in socially-grounded music studies is the shift from the level of musical patterns to the general structures of society – or the other way around, the explanation of musical meaning through a correspondence to broad cultural elements. My objective in this paper is to make a brief survey of this topic and some comments on the theoretical and speculative issues involved.

In order to overcome the shortcomings of an analysis restricted to musical structure, one has also to show a possible ground for music structure to stand upon. There is a need to undertake a *contextual* analysis in addition to the *textual* analysis, because the latter is shortsighted with regard to musical meanings. In other words, understanding music as a social system also implies the assumption that its meaning cannot be restricted to the musical level alone. This is a recurrent problem in the literature of musical semiotics, since it addresses the question of where musical meaning resides. After the structuralist phase of semiotic studies on music, new developments led this trend to also encompass contextual relationships and to propose different kinds of readings of the musical structure.

Different readings are possible, but structural differences are not to be dismissed. While it is the case that within the Western art music tradition one can recognize the ideology of the autonomous musical system, the situation is completely different in the corpus of folk music. Folk music is usually defined in relation to a specific function which it performs within a socially defined environment, and as such it may be contrasted with

art music, where the latter is usually characterized as an abstract and self-contained system with an inner meaning independent from outside influences. This approach to folk music relies on an analysis of the "extra-musical" elements that might influence the musical meaning. Problems arise, however, when there are no distinct boundaries between the social and the musical meaning. Stated in a more subtle way, one might find it hard to see how the underlying meaningful structures of a culture, expressed variously through different modes, are "translated" into music, and become the core of the musical meaning itself.

The theoretical problem involved concerns the idea of an underlying structure and the possibility of translation from one mode of expression to another. The underlying "structure" of signification arguably governs the entire culture, and appears as a previous, central element. This structure is "transcendental", i.e., it is not determined exclusively by relationships among units (Monelle, 1992, pp. 57–58). On the other hand, the nature of this structure is a controversial matter, because abstract categories must be shaped according to the rules of each specific semiotic system; otherwise they become "something so vague and undifferentiated that we do not have any means to apprehend it as a 'content' distinct from the form given by language" (Benveniste, 1991 [1966], p. 69).¹ Hence, one has to show which type of system the categories are associated with: verbal, visual, musical, or otherwise. Examples of preference given to verbal systems can be seen in Barthes' stress on the linguistic influence upon all other sign systems (Barthes, 1964, pp. 91–92), and in Agawu's proposal that there is an original, spoken word rhythm governing the generative process of music (Agawu, 1995, pp. 27–30; pp. 180–185). The idea that the essential meaning is basically visual is recurrent in media studies (e.g. Goodwin, 1993), while Seeger's search for musical concepts (1994 [1965]) emphasizes a musical view of the world. As a corollary of these theories, one can define each society or group as being essentially linguistically, visually, or musically biased.

The hypothesis that music expresses a formerly existing meaning actually undermines the importance of specifically musical meaningful patterns. In other words, music is only a medium, neutral in relation to the communication process, and the message is conveyed through it without suffering important transformations. In particular, messages transmitted through music do not have their original meaning changed. One also, however, has to take into account the value of music in a broader cultural context, and to describe the musical elements that produce meaning.

The idea of musical meaning as a translation of more general meanings bears directly upon the central issue of this paper: What is the decoding key that links one level to another? To answer this question, I will comment on the specific nature of different semiotic systems, starting from those in which biological elements are of primary importance and moving further to those which involve elements of the electronic media environment.

Nature

The idea that behaviors prompted by natural instinct have an important influence on our "feeling" of music is very attractive as an explanation for any kind of "deep" meaning. As examples, I recall some references to "gesture as the primordial rhythmic event" (Agawu, 1995, p. 27); internal sounds of the body, like heartbeats and breathing (Wisnik, 1989, pp. 15–20; *passim*); the corporeal "bottom" ("*bas*"; Bakhtin, 1973 [1965], pp. 28–39; *passim*); the "body that beats" (Barthes, 1982, p. 265); and "kinesthetic activity" (Rice, 1997, p. 110). Coming from sources so diverse, and representing backgrounds so multifarious, such references indicate that the preference accorded to physical, pragmatic, phenomenological, or sensorial reality merits closer attention.

The idea of movement is implicit in the expressions above. Movement is inherent to the nature of sound – which can be roughly described as vibration of physical bodies,

including air and our own flesh, bones, and blood. In this sense, sounds resonate within us, and from such concrete experience, musical meanings arise.

While this approach affirms the central position that the body acquires in the process of musical signification, a more complex theory displaying a series of concurrent, hierarchic levels may also be proposed. Among these, the corporeal level is the basic one, but it is not the only one responsible for meaning. Furthermore, even the "sensorial" level must relate to the rules of a musical system, and not only to physiological responses while ignoring all "musical" qualities of sound signals. Taken to its limit, the focus on the "sensorial" level alone leads to the material aspect of the sign (or of the signal, trace, significant, or any concept referring to the phenomenological "starting point" of the semiotic process), which produces the whole range of possible meanings at the moment of its utterance.

As a consequence, a radical relativism is achieved: notions such as *idiolect*, *drift* and *infinite chain of interpretants* become privileged, while the concept of *langue* as a collective system guiding individual interpretations is challenged. The human body itself becomes a musical sign, as the locus where the musical sound resonates. Due to the resonance of this trace, the body also becomes meaningful.² The relationship between body and music can be purely auditory, active – when someone plays or sings – or defined by a functional context. In brief, it must be conceived as a pragmatic relationship, in which music cannot be separated from the activity of its production.

On the other hand, general theories that refer to the corporeality of musical meaning also address the value of the *channel* of communication in the production of meaning.³ In other words, the way a musical practice is conceived and actually delivered – the form in which it actually occurs in the world – is also influential for the overall meaning of the music. Thus, whether or not an occurrence is an oral performance, or on a recorded device reproduced by electronic means, or a score (eventually never performed) is of great importance. Once the trace is not only the starting point, but also the point of convergence – which metonymically shows the directions and marks the

boundaries, the physical limits of the channel demand a theory concerned with the musical media, both to complement and to complete the current proposals about the musical text and context.

When talking about music without making a clear allusion to the channel, it is usually taken for granted that the "ultimate" musical unit is sound itself. Without attempting to exhaust this topic, I will very briefly refer to Jakobson's definition of the components of communication in order to propose a theoretical framework for it: the addresser, the addressee, the message, the context, the code, and the channel (Jakobson, 1960; also in Nattiez, 1990, 18). The first two refer to the position of the individual, i.e., to the role of the subject in the process of interpretation; the message is the "traditional" object of musical analysis – the musical text itself; the context was cited in the initial paragraphs of this paper, and it is often approached as a complementary phase of the musical analysis; the code is more complicated to define when applied to musical studies, for according to different approaches it refers to the style, to a closed corpus, or even to broader scopes such as the tonal system and the channel. In what sense does the materiality of the channel influence the musical meaning – and conversely, what is the meaning of the concept of channel in this relativistic, post-structuralist realm? In other words: Is it possible to propose the idea of the human body as the ultimate channel of musical communication?

Culture

Music and individual meet when one participates in musical *practice*. This expression points out the intrinsic dynamism of music, the active role of subjects that does not allow for any sharp separation between subject and object. Hence, the distinction is subsumed under the nature of all music, and the *subject of enunciation* leaves his or her mark in every musical practice. The concrete, lived experience is fused with the sounds by means of an encompassing system, and music becomes alive.

When I speak of lived experiences and concrete impressions, at first glance, one might infer that I am stressing *substance* instead of *form* – a choice linked to a materialist or essentialist approach. Yet, music is interpreted from a stock of structures possessed by individuals, comprising all musical, gestural, linguistic and variously-mediating forms of *making* and *experiencing* music. This stock of structures – the musical *competence* – is a compound of forms, not of raw substances. Moreover, as the individuals live in groups, there are socially-based rules for musical practices, prescribing common interpretations to all individuals within the group. These rules include the roles enacted by the participants as well as the values of each single gesture, utterance, and behavior.

Thus, the body participates in the meaning of every musical practice, because each practice is *produced by someone*, by a subject with a body that resonates and that is marked as an element of the musical system. It is a valuable element – not just a "decoding machine" that transforms external stimuli into mental images, but actually a musical body in the sense that it takes an active part in music.

In this context, the body cannot be taken simply as a channel – neutral in the process of signification. Similarly, the opposition between an immanent level – the message – and a functional one – drawn from relationships among different components, including the channel – loses its importance. Instead, I am here advocating a more holistic attitude: semiotic analysis should explain the meanings of sounds and also the meaning of the resonance of the body. By paying attention to the instantaneous utterance, the analysis can reach important conclusions about sounds as music-signs, about the body as a body-sign, and about the whole musical practice as a complex sign, in which each element, regardless of its nature, has a role in the overall web of values and significations.

The notion of musical practice sketched above is close to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1972, *passim*; esp. pp. 174–175), "a mediating principle between individual practice and what he calls 'objective structures'" (Turino, 1990, p. 400). Bourdieu's

practice comprises the movement of the physical elements and of the body. In addition, it acknowledges the existence of a social orientation governing each instance of practice. The activity developed during the musical performance becomes part of music itself – the practice is both individual and social, as Turino explains regarding Bourdieu's theory: "the *habitus* operates in a dialectical relation to the external conditions because the practices it generates are externalized in forms and behavior that once again become part of the 'objective conditions' and thus reciprocally become models for shaping the internalized dispositions" (Turino, 1990, p. 400).

Bourdieu's model has been criticized for not being able to explain individual variations and different uses of the overall structure – the *habitus* – in daily life. Yet, his focus on the idea of a practice that defines both the individual role, the process of production, the status of the group or class, and the single event – e.g. the single musical work – provides a powerful tool to explain the passage from "inner musical" meaning to social rules. Hence, musical practices are forms of knowledge about oneself, about the raw materials one works with – e.g., the cork, metal, and plastic of a saxophone, and also the air, about other individuals – whose roles are reinterpreted continuously through dynamic, interactional behaviors, about the entire environment, and about one's cultural background; not just a collection of static symbols one relies on, but a dialectic, virtual system that becomes real through the practice.

Bourdieu's proposal of a shift from the *opus operatum* to the *modus operandi* in the analytical procedures (Bourdieu, 1972, p. 174) does not imply that analysis should turn its back to music-as-a-product – i.e., to the actual sounds performed. In fact, it implies that the features of the music-product should not be taken as *a priori* facts; instead, they should be redefined according to the analysis of the practice as a whole. Only when categories and concepts are perceived and described based on practice, should the actual sounds produced be taken into consideration. Only then, can the profile, boundaries, segmentation and pertinent traces of the music-product be clearly stated, by means of a theory about the structure of the music as a particular object. In this

case, the analysis is the process of building the theory together with the object, and not just the link between two previous units – on the one hand the theory, and on the other hand the object.

The concept of *habitus* tries to neutralize all movement towards reification of the practice and the social structure as an overall unit. Shepherd (1991, p. 203) gives an example of a similar effort when he criticizes the widespread use of "frozen, abstract notions such as 'rhythm' and 'harmony' " imprisoning the interpretation within a scope sometimes unfaithful to the dynamics of the style one is talking about (in Shepherd's case, Tiv music, African music as a broader context, and " 'pre-literate' societies" in general). Some expressions used to describe music's basic features are revealing, as one can see from Kerman's quotations in the same book (Shepherd, 1991, p. 193): Terms like "works of art" presuppose "framing" the whole practice within a specific system of values, which can be defined within the scope of the history of a certain group limited in time and space. Charles Keil summarized the anti-reification effort in some descriptions of his subject of research, as this one:

They [the Tiv people] have no rulers: the influence of elders rises and falls, depending upon how wisely they exercise it, and prominent men today can be ostracized tomorrow. They have no religion; in its place is an abiding and profound awareness that the survival of some is predicated upon the death of others. They have no mythology, but tales are acted out with great energy and with relevance to everyday life. *They have no art, though there are more song makers and expert dancers per capita than in any society known to me.* (Keil, 1979, p. 186; author's emphasis)

It is important to "elaborate theoretical perspectives specific to some of the music's intrinsic qualities in such a way as to force an interrogation of the cultural theory presently applied to the analysis of music" (Shepherd, 1991, p. 222). In other words, synthetic features of music should not be interpreted as "*simply* expressions, for example, of youth or gender or ethnicity" because "none of these 'variables' exists

independently of one another" (ibid.). Thus, the analysis should focus on the "complete popular music genres" (op. cit., 207). Only through music can one achieve an understanding of each of those variables beyond broad and general definitions – such definitions do not grasp the deep, unique meanings of music. By focusing mainly on the translation of musical features in terms of social meanings, one runs the risk of avoiding the question of *what is musical in music* at all.

Another work by Bourdieu (1979) stresses the distinctions among different classes that appear in every cultural manifestation – even in such "private" spheres as those involving "the tastes and the colors" (Dosse, 1992, pp. 384–388). Bourdieu suggests that each practice – notably aesthetic ones – struggles to be assimilated by the dominant classes of society. Hence, personal classifications and tastes actually occur as part of a process of legitimization of each class. In music, this broadly means that any musical practice tries to reach a status as valuable as any other "high" practice. A symptom of this state of affairs can be drawn from Agawu's statement that "it seems to me a tragedy of ethnomusicological research into African materials that individual works are reduced to the status of exemplars of larger repertoires and classified as 'types' or 'classes' rather than studied as artistic works in their own rights" (Agawu, 1995, p. 83). The explanation of this sort of phenomenon was summarized by Bourdieu: "The dominated arts of life *which have almost never received a systematic expression* are almost always perceived, even by their advocates, from the destructive or reductive point-of-view of the dominant esthetics, so that they do not have any alternative but degradation or self-destroying restorations" (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 50). In other words, Agawu feels impelled to propose almost the same category used by Kerman (see above) – namely "artistic works" – to be able to legitimate his corpus of study, turning it into an object as valuable as Kerman's Western art music. By means of a path completely opposite to that of Keil's, who departed from what music *was not*, and acknowledging his own incapacity to say what it actually was, Agawu attaches to his music a whole different system of values so that he is able to escape from prejudices

that he judged implicit in an ethnomusicological enterprise dealing with an African subject.

In attempting to avoid both types of prejudice as well as a positivist attitude limited to taxonomies of "types" and "classes", Agawu is caught in the trap of his own discursive apparatus. Luckily, this shortcoming disappears in the overall context of his book, which is accurate and complex enough to overcome the contradiction implied by this quotation alone. The challenge of a semiotic-oriented music analysis is exactly that of encompassing a wide range of features: the ones that refer to "stylistic" categories, the ones that refer to individual elements that make each piece a universe on its own – and which are responsible for Agawu's passionate defense of his music – but even more importantly, the ones that refer to the power of music in re-presenting everyday reality – i.e., re-presenting the values implied in each practice – and social structures.

Until this point in our discussion, the social structure has subsumed music as one of its practices. Now I will turn to a complementary approach, one in which social divisions are expressed through music.

Music as Mediation

One of the basic assumptions of semiotic-oriented music analysis states that musical meanings are not produced from sounds alone; such analysis is also very concerned with *music in its non-sonic aspects* – as an abstract structure of differences, a system of values. This point refers back to Saussure's definition of *langue* as the main object of research. Such a "formalist" position, however, must simultaneously consider other, "corporeal" elements, which might fill the gap between the musical *langue* and the habitus as cultural system. In this vein, I recall Barthes' focus on the "third meaning" (1982, pp. 43–61) and on the "pleasure" (1973) expressed by, through, and within semiotic practices.

The search for the "hidden" meaning beyond the limits of structure brings along with it some elements that had been avoided by "classic" structuralism – such as historical

connections and individual interpretations. Therefore, the concept of sign becomes weaker – for example, Barthes recognizes a level of meaning alien to the pair signifier/signified: the level of "significance" (1985, p. 45). On the other hand, an influential metaphor appears: Instead of utilizing an approach which focuses upon the *sign*, one should move to the *text* as the privileged object of analysis.

In music, not all the consequences of this position were fully developed in semiotic theories. Applying post-structuralist positions to music research implies going beyond inner segmentations in each piece, where the piece is approached as a message (in which case only the level of *communication*, as Barthes defines it, is addressed). The problem remains even if what is privileged is the style instead of the single piece (Nattiez, 1993), for though the corpus is enlarged, the role of the subject in the interpretation is not considered. The proposal of a musical text instead of a musical sign emphasizes the single performance as the locus of an encounter: the subject meets other individuals, other "texts" referred to by music, and, through those texts, the subject meets history and the social system.

To follow such reasoning, one has to sacrifice some of the descriptive work and shift towards a discourse – a written, verbal one – capable of *showing* the pleasure, the third meaning, the exceeding element of significance, the fluid and volatile component of music, which makes it so unique and which "escapes the prior of denotative and referential modes of signification" (Shepherd, 1991, p. 217). Such an approach recognizes the importance of the structural levels, but it also recognizes that something else is happening – and it does not fit traditional methods of analysis.

An example might make this point clearer. Brazilian samba is often referred to as a style of music that touches the body, that makes one move, and that has a strong dancing appeal. There are some recognizable, prototypical features leading to those assumptions (notably syncopated rhythmic patterns). Beyond that, there is a special flavor, more difficult to capture or describe, responsible for many individual interpretations and with no proper verbal translations. Perhaps that is exactly what

constitutes the specifically distinctive features of this practice, or of any particular song. In this sense, the "pleasure" comes from the structure, but it cannot be described with the same tools as one employs to describe the structure. On the other hand, different people from different cultural backgrounds approach music in distinct ways, but most people can make sense of it as a meaningful practice and can enjoy it in a pleasure-inducing way. This is possible because of its aesthetic components, which are responsible for the musical rules being opened for diverse interpretations. This might have been Barthes' insight: in order to encompass the aesthetic component, one cannot remain within the strict limits imposed by the structuralist tradition.

The present article was inspired by a remark made by Nattiez, in which he discussed the relationship between musical features described by structural analysis and the cultural sphere. Nattiez was worried about socially-oriented research on music, and asked: "On which *mediation* [the scholar] is grounding a link" between musical and social structures (Nattiez, 1983, p. 471)? In other words, to escape from the limits of taxonomy and description, and to propose a socially-grounded explanation, the musicologist has to leave the stable ground her methods provide her and to try an interpretation based on something else, outside the empirical data. She has to forge links between sounds and society based on criteria different from the ones that generated the descriptions.

Nattiez's position highlights a formalist bias that seeks to infer all meaningful elements from the immanent analysis, in a similar way as linguistics had done with phonological units. Yet, this approach disregards the paramount difference between musical meanings and phonological values, neither does it seem to be interested in showing this difference. If the difference relies on the "supplementary meaning" (Barthes, 1985, p. 45), then the scholarly text has also to show the "extra" meaning. This is important because the structural description is not enough to uncover all possible variations in the interpretation of symbolic practices, especially in the case of music. Thus, the moods, the sensual feelings, the gentle touches, the indescribable "dispositions of the heart",

the unique images, the impulse to move, the variegated, individual interpretations derived from making music a part of life, from being in contact with this practice, all deserve more than straight descriptions. They deserve a treatment of another kind – probably complementary to the one I pointed out above – one which reflects a different sort of joy that comes from the activity of researching and writing about music, a pleasure resulting from the text as a practice in its own right, and as a locus for the emergence of meaning. The scholarly text needs not so much to *describe* the mediation between music and society, between musical messages and social norms of interpretation, between inner recurrences and prescriptive rules on how to read them, or the mediation between musical concepts and group *Weltanschauung*. It needs to *act* as a mediation that links the readings, discussions and interpretations. Hence, instead of establishing links *between* distinct, previously existing elements, the scholarly text exists as a sign-function itself. The same applies to the musical sign: one cannot infer its essence, whether from empirical data or any hidden meaning – it is not a "ciphered secret" to be decoded. Rather, one has to retain music's nature as mediation proper. Thus, the position assigned by Nattiez to the mediation is misplaced, for the objective of semiotic inquiry is to show this aspect of the musical sign: namely, how it can act as a mediation through which sonic materials, individuals and society meet and interact to produce meaning.

Concluding remarks

I have talked about corporeal resonances, social structures, aesthetic meanings that escape structural description, pleasure and practices, and about subjects that define themselves in dialectic relationships with the dispositions that guide their interpretations. Most of all, I have tried to show that the meanings that music proposes are essentially dynamic, in the sense that they pull the surrounding signals towards a point where they can "recognize" each other as meaningful signs.

In any musical performance, sound is the *locus* where individuals recognize themselves as singers or dancers, as musicians or outsiders, as leaders or followers, as outgoing or

shy, as popular or unknown. In the same context, each individual recognizes him or herself according to corporeal feelings and capacities – the body is not merely functional, but meaningful. It is a moving body, a dancing, touching, sweating one. It becomes a beautiful body, young or old, tired or vigorous, a compound of characteristics only recognizable – i.e., only distinctive – then. In addition, one achieves an overall view of the world, of culture and of life, since a musical sense of time and space appears. Through music, the underlying, social distinctions that produce differences among the roles assigned to men, women, elders, youngsters and extended family acquire full meaning. These roles reflect and enlighten the habitus – the structure of social dispositions.

Musical performances can only happen because they give pleasure to the participants, and this pleasure remains in the core of the aesthetic meaning music is able to produce. Meaning relies neither on social symbols, nor on physical sensations – instead, these can be understood as meaningful structures thanks to semiotic systems, such as music. Moreover, musical meaning does not come through any particular channel, for it also subsumes the value of the channel as such – in other words, a CD player becomes the source of music, and not just a piece of electronic equipment that costs money and that was produced by high-tech factories. The pleasure and the aesthetic meaning do not *remain* in any structure or disposition: they are dynamic, in the sense that they come from each element and from the whole at the same time. Also, they are dynamic in that they move *in between* the parts, and link the entire structure of music with that of culture, of the body, and of nature. They link the previous moment to the next, this song to another one, and words to gestures: all behave as if in a *structured continuum*.

In Nattiez's quotation above which inquires into the grounds for establishing links between music and society, one recognizes an effort to show that musical structures are derived from former musical structures. As for his own context, this is probably enough. To propose anything that goes a step further, however – such as the socially-oriented analysis from which I started – it becomes necessary to acknowledge that

music exists within a larger environment, and that it is through the interactions with other components of this environment – the other sign systems – that the value of the whole is defined. This value corresponds to a specific view of the world and of each expression. To stay limited to a description of musical units means to turn one's back to many relationships that might be musically meaningful and that eventually might constitute an actual ground for some practices (as the music industry for pop music). On the other hand, writing about music always involves exhibiting a meaning in writing and a meaning in music through writing. There is no motive for fearing any meaning music might have, even if it is not "purely" musical, even if it is the meaning stemming from another practice. Writing about music implies bringing music to the center of discussion, instead of playing it – either way, it remains in the center.

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Note

¹ Quoted material from texts which are originally in French or Portuguese, but which here appears in English, has been translated into English by LFNL

Nota

² *Trace* is a concept used by Derrida (1967) to signify that signs are not "represented" by physical, stable marks. Instead, written (physical) signs start the meaningful process. The aim of this theory is to "deconstruct" the traditional understanding of meaning as a stable, transcendental entity mediated by signifiers. According to Derrida, the identity of the object is something always to be disputed, because there is no single origin for the meaning.

³ The *channel* is the physical medium through which a message is delivered in communication.