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THE GROWING FIELD OF MUSICAL SIGNIFICATION: ORIGINS, MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS, AND CURRENT RELEVANCE

Like any emerging field, musical signification resists methodological and epistemological unification, with several intersecting branches that draw from different academic traditions, such as semiotics, intertextuality, and hermeneutics. At times, the impossibility of offering closed definitions of even the basic concepts of the field, such as “musical *topos*” or “musical sign”, has been the subject of criticism to the discipline. Some scholars have already argued about the need for the field to adopt a single terminology and epistemological paradigm (Almén and Pearsall 2006, 4).

Meanwhile, this article aims to offer an optimistic view of all this growth, which shows a relatively young, flourishing field full of creative scholars with an exciting path ahead, and some deep roots going back to the very origins of music. The integrative tendency of musical signification in terms of its disciplines makes it a broad and diffuse field, difficult to demarcate. Therefore, this literature review calls for a positionality statement. I came to know musical signification through performance practice at ESMUC (*Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya*), later specializing in music theory, a process that I continue to this day as a PhD student in the United States. What follows is therefore a selection of “major contributions” to the field of musical signification, one that is inevitably informed by my personal experience, and which is not intended to be definitive, but rather an open list, in the manner of the Ratnerian list of topics.

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When we call musical signification a growing field, we should keep in mind that as a branch of music theory it basically tries to put words to a long-standing tradition of linking music to all possible aspects of human life. In this respect, music and the study of its meanings is part of the humanities. In Lawrence Kramer's words, music "should cease to be a silent (a silenced) partner in humanistic studies" and recover its own voice within the concert of humanities (2011, 96). Moreover, on the other hand, as Márta Grabócz points out, "musical signification has been endeavoring to theorize a musical knowledge that was previously manifest only in performance practice and carried through oral traditions by performing teachers" (2009, 19). Musical signification embraces, first, **semiotic** methodological tools, which offer a synchronic view of musical signs (including **narrativity**, how signs interact with each other and generate narrative structures). Second, it comprises a diachronic study of the **genealogy** of musical signs and their changing significations over the course of history. And lastly, **hermeneutics** plays an important role in the field, as an interpretation is always required to put all the musical signs in context, establishing a dialogue between the present and the past.

To treat musical signification as a field, the introduction to *The Routledge Handbook of Music Signification* describes it is a "sturdy disciplinary tree trunk" that involves manifold interrelated disciplines (Sheinberg and Dougherty 2020, 2). For a comprehensive overview of the sub-disciplines involved, the introductions to *The Routledge Handbook of Music Signification* (Sheinberg and Dougherty 2020, 1–9) and *Mapping Musical Signification* (Grimalt 2020, xvi–xxi) are convenient references. This article presents four contributions that can be argued as of great importance to the field: 1) remarkable contributions of two scholars active in the second half of the 20th century, 2) the ever-developing methodologies of topic theory, 3) the semiotic foundation, and 4) connections with performance practice.

CONSTANTIN FLOROS, LEONARD RATNER: HISTORICIST IMPULSE

The act of discussing music in terms of its meanings has a long history. As Raymond Monelle explained (1992, 220), music has always been described as "searching", "affirmative", "grand", "heroic", "lamentation", or given metaphoric interpretations. In this way, the emergence of musical signification may be understood as a re-emergence, an attempt to reconnect with a historical conception of music as capable of connoting and evoking diverse meanings.

Constantin Floros (b. 1930) and the late Leonard Ratner (1916–2011), in Europe and the United States respectively, are both representative of a historicist impulse, a concern with historical sources to interpret musical meaning in context.

Already in the 1960s, Constantin Floros was publishing articles and volumes on the semantic meaning of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music (Floros 1962). As Joan Grimalt explains, “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” (2020, xi). In *Music as Message* (2016), originally published in German in 1989, Floros revisits the history of the concept of musical message and distinguishes it from musical program as “pertaining to a higher level of abstraction than the latter” (2016, 18). In his historical review of Johannes Brahms’s music, *Frei aber einsam* (2010, 194ff.), Floros disproves the labels Eduard Hanslick attributed to Brahms’s music as “absolute” and “pure”, which was the source of a historical misapprehension that lasted throughout the twentieth century. His accurate insights on the history of musical culture contributed to restoring legitimacy to the question of musical meaning beyond program music.

Musical signification can be seen as one of the manifold attempts to compensate for an emphasis on musical autonomy that shaped twentieth-century aesthetics.¹ Its emphasis lies on communicative aspects, hence Floros’ programmatic title *Music as Message* (1989). From the 1980s on, this field has been developing methodologies to research how musical works signify and interact with listeners and performers. For the study of musical meaning and signs, the field found a methodological tool in semiotics, rooted in twentieth-century structuralism. Concepts such as semes, isotopies, or the distinction between euphoric and dysphoric are inherited from Algirdas Julien Greimas’s semiotics (Monelle 1992, 264). But not just semiotics; as a product of the aforementioned musical historicism, the field of musical signification is also concerned with historical sources and the clues they offer about expressive

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein went so far as to state that music is tautological because it is self-explanatory (1958, 166). In terms of music theory, *The Compositional Matrix* (Forte 1961) can be seen as representative of the 1960s formalism. After the 1960s, in Agawu’s words, “an aggressive new formalism emerges under the banner of transformational or neo-Riemannian theory.... In the hands of a small but dedicated group of younger scholars, some of them boasting degrees in mathematics, the hard end of the discipline of music theory comes to life in a way that makes the 1960s and 1970s look tame” (Agawu 2004, 268).

meanings. The genealogy and historical connections of musical signs are also invoked as a foundation for a hermeneutic analysis.

Historically, both Musical Signification and the New Musicology² (Kerman 1985) emerge as fruitful strategies to validate musicology as a broad-scoped discipline which includes the sociocultural contexts and meanings of the objects of study. After the establishment of a musicological science in the nineteenth century, under the influence of a general trend in social and humanist sciences to match the methodological rigors of hard-core mathematical science, musical meaning was sidelined due to many positivist and structuralist efforts to exclude any possible trace of subjectivity. Guido Adler includes harmony, rhythm, and melody as the main objects of critical research in systematic musicology,³ but classifies as “auxiliary sciences” aspects such as aural sensation, poetics, and psychology, “particularly in those areas concerning the mental conceptualization of tones and interval relationships, and the practical counterpart thereof, namely, the theory of musical thinking” (Mugglestone and Adler 1981, 13). In a similar vein, authors such as Waldo Pratt (1915, 14), and Wolf Franck (1949, 597) refer to musical meaning as “extra-musical”, and leave meaning outside of the main concerns of musicology.

But the counterreactions to such trends did not only come from the theoretical side; there were also responses from the performance sector, such as historically-informed performance (HIP) practices from the 1960s on. The HIP movement researched on period instruments and read period-specific treatises and scores critically, in search for hints as to how to play the music of the past. Instead of taking the score as an autonomous, unquestionable object, this movement vindicated a broader picture of the musical work, incorporating the sociocultural and performative context in which each musical work originated. In a similar way as the historically informed performance movement raised questions about how music would sound like, music theorists were concerned with how music would signify in its original context.

In line with these historicist endeavors, Leonard Ratner (1916–2011) introduced the concept of musical topic into the vocabulary of music scholars, defined in his seminal book *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* as subjects for musical discourse, “characteristic figures” that were associated

² Body of musicology that also emerged around the 1980s in the United States and that shares methodological tools with musical signification, especially hermeneutics, in a more open-ended manner.

³ Guido Adler (1885) distinguished between two branches of musicology: historical and systematic.

with various feelings and affects in the music of the early eighteenth century (1980, 9). As Danuta Mirka explains, “[Ratner’s] insight that classical masterpieces were full of references to the eighteenth-century soundscape transformed their reception by modern listeners as the discovery that the Parthenon was painted transformed the reception of monumental ruins of classical antiquity. To modern spectators of monochromatic marble, it revealed that the uniformity of color was due only to time” (2014, 1). Largely based on Ratner’s research on Classic music, a group of scholars continued exploring the possibilities and limitations of an analysis informed by topics.

WYE JAMISON ALLANBROOK, KOFI AGAWU, DANUTA MIRKA:
EPISTEMOLOGIES AND METHODOLOGIES FOR TOPIC THEORY

After Ratner’s *Classic Music*, Wye Jamison Allanbrook (1943–2010) contributed to the development of what soon would be known as topic theory by analyzing dance topics in Mozart’s operas, as in *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart* (1983), concluding that these references convey information about the social and cultural circumstances associated with them. Her research marked a turning point in the field, as well as influenced the way in which conductors have staged Mozart’s operas (Oestreich 2010). *The Secular Commedia: Comic Mimesis in Late Eighteenth-Century Instrumental Music* (2014), edited by Richard Taruskin and Mary Ann Smart, consists of a rethinking of the late eighteenth-century repertoire, considering the mimetic associations from opera buffa to better understand the significations in the symphonies and concertos of that period.

Kofi Agawu revisited Ratner’s concept of musical topic in *Playing with Signs* (1991), attempting a more comprehensive definition that included new topics and melodic figures like the “Mannheim rocket” (Agawu 1991, 86–88). Also, he reflected about the role of topics in classic music and their interactions with structural elements, applying the concepts of introversive and extroversive semiosis (Agawu 1991, 24).

Agawu’s eighth chapter in *Playing with Signs* (1991) raised methodological questions for topic theory applied to nineteenth-century repertoires, a research that saw its continuation in *Music as Discourse: Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music* (2009). Earlier insights on musical signification in the nineteenth century can be found in Eero Tarasti’s *Myth and Music on Richard Wagner, Jean Sibelius, and Igor Stravinsky* (1978), as well as in Marta Grabócz’s

La Sonate en si mineur de Liszt: une stratégie narrative complexe (1987). Janice Dickensheets's article (2003) "Nineteenth-Century Topical Analysis: A Lexicon of Romantic Topoi" enlarged the scope of the theory to include nineteenth-century topics in a productive dialogue with Ratner (1980), Agawu (1991), Jonathan Bellman (1995), and Monelle (2000), among others.⁴

Mirka's *Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* (2014) contributed to a global academic acceptance of topic theory, exploring its epistemological implications from different angles and furnishing tools for the analysis of musical topics. Although focused mainly on eighteenth-century repertoire, its last chapter by Julian Horton argues about the need to adapt topic theory to the new social circumstances and the musical discourse of the nineteenth century. Instead of fairly univocal signs, the idea of musical symbols in the sense of Paul Ricoeur seems to work better for nineteenth-century repertoire. As Agawu explains, Robert Schumann's musical *topoi* transform what was once a sign into a symbol, "loading the associative dimension in such a way that listener and performer are invited – indeed, compelled – to construct a metaphorical scenario or plot for the piece" (2014, 137–142).

The study of musical topics, whose rise coincided with the growth of semiotics in the 1980s, was eventually assimilated as part of music semiotics, as in Tarasti's, Grabócz's, Monelle's, or Hatten's research. However, the origins of topic theory can be traced back to literature studies, and specifically to Ernst Robert Curtius's use of the term *topos* in precisely the sense in which we understand a musical *topos*: a recurrent association between a signified and a signifier that evolves in time, by keeping a certain semantic consistency (Curtius 1953, 70). One of the most distinguished students of Curtius' was Manfred Bukofzer, who in his turn was one of Ratner's teachers.

But, although it comprises a substantial portion of the scholarship, topic theory is not the only focus of musical signification. The field can be understood more broadly as a hermeneutic effort to relocate music theory back within the humanities. This involves emphasizing music's close links to language, including studies in musical intertextuality, rhetoric—an influential work for the field being Elaine Sisman's *Mozart, the "Jupiter" Symphony* (1993)—and narrative. That involves the relationship between musical signs—not necessarily topoi—according to their speech-like quality and their temporal sequence. Tarasti and Grabócz, who studied with Greimas in Paris, derived their musical narrative from orthodox semiotics, but some other

⁴ To access the full list, see Dickensheets (2003, 5).

scholars such as Byron Almén have based their theory in literary narrative, in *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (2008). In the same year, Hatten published a new, idiosyncratic theory of agency in *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music* (2018).

EERO TARASTI, MÁRTA GRABÓCZ,
RAYMOND MONELLE, ROBERT HATTEN:
DIFFERENT SHADES OF SEMIOTICS

Tarasti (b. 1948), one of the leading music-semioticians, played a fundamental role in the consolidation of musical signification since he and some other researchers started the International Project on Musical Signification in 1986, a biennial conference to provide a platform for presentations and discussions of recent developments and future trends in the field. These series of conferences unite junior and senior scholars whose main interest is to talk about music and meaning, embracing the broad scope that this may entail. Music cognition, music philosophy, music psychology, music semiotics, performance studies, and hermeneutic analyses are usually represented in these conferences.

In addition to *Music and Myth* (1978), where characteristic signification processes in works by Sibelius, Stravinsky, and Wagner are discussed from a semiotic approach, Tarasti has published a great number of books on the epistemology of music semiotics, such as *A Theory of Musical Semiotics* (1994) or *Semiotics of Classical Music* (2012).

Grabócz (b. 1952) incorporates semiotic tools for the study of narrative strategies in instrumental music. From the 1980s on, with *Morphologie des oeuvres pour piano de F. Liszt. Influence du programme sur l'évolution des formes instrumentales* (1987), her work on musical narratology of nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first-century repertoires has played a leading role in the field. Her last volume, *Narratologie musicale. Topiques, théories, et stratégies analytiques* (2021) includes articles dealing with narrative analysis of works by Mozart, Chopin, Schubert, Mahler, or Carter, as well as a more reflective section that deals with narrative and topic theory.

Both Grabócz and Tarasti apply the semiotics of Greimas in their analyses, studying narrative patterns and deriving semiotic squares from the semantic structures of instrumental pieces (Monelle 1992, 258). Also forming a square, Monelle and Hatten are semioticians who have sought to take it beyond its

Greimasian origins: Hatten, by building a new theory that draws from semiotics but also incorporates concepts derived from literary theory, such as *markedness*; Monelle, by clarifying the dual nature of the term *topos*, both sign and symbol (2000, 14).

Monelle (1937–2010) contributed greatly to the field with his many articles and three books, where various elements converge: a deep knowledge of history, an understanding of modern philosophical readings—especially by Jacques Derrida, and his experience as a practical, reflective musician (Grimalt 2014, 16). In his first publication, *Linguistics and Semiotics* (1992), Monelle offers an overview of the several approaches that had so far linked music and meaning. Also, worth mentioning is *The Musical Topic* (2006), with important updates to topic theory. As Nicholas Cook stated, “the key insight behind Raymond Monelle’s groundbreaking development of topic theory was that there is no such thing as a ‘pure’ icon in music: in all musical signs there is an element of the symbolic, and hence of historically and culturally embedded interpretation” (2017, 173). Monelle’s critical views on topic theory stimulated further debate in subsequent publications such as Mirka’s (2014).

Hatten (b. 1952) is a theoretical semiotician with a background as a practical musician. These two sides can be perceived in his research, often laden with dense concepts inherited from semiotics and linguistic theory, but always guided by his performative intuitions. That makes him an instinctive theorist, in Agawu’s words (1996, 148). Hatten has published influential volumes on semiotic theories of musical meaning, including agency, gesture, topics, and narrativity, such as the aforementioned *A Theory of Virtual Agency* (2018), *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes* (2004), and *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (1994). In the latter, he adapted to music the term *tropes*, inherited from literary theory (Hatten 1994, 166), to refer to combinations of meanings. Hatten’s research showed that, in classical music, the work’s significations (topics, gestures) tend to appear combined instead of isolated. This idea had an immediate success in the field. Hatten invites the listener to a creative interpretation, establishing combinations of significations (Grimalt 2014, 41).

Hatten is the general editor of the book series “Musical Meaning and Interpretation” by Indiana University Press, that has published, up to now, more than 40 volumes on musical meaning. Just a look to the most recent volumes illustrates the wide scope of the field: *Focal Impulse Theory: Musical Expression, Meter, and the Body* (2021) by John Paul Ito, and *Storytelling in Opera and Musical Theater* (2020) by Nina Penner.

HERMENEUTICS, PERFORMATIVE INTUITIONS

The field of musical signification is so broad that there are even ongoing epistemological debates between orthodox semioticians, scholars who advocate an openly hermeneutic approach, and all the shades in between these two poles. For example, Joseph Kerman's defense of hermeneutics and cultural studies, *How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out* (1980), was countered by Agawu's *How We Got Out of Analysis, and How to Get Back in Again* (2004). Also, Cook defined Hatten as a "closet absolutist" as he "ignores the evidence of reception history" in his analyses (Cook 1996, 112–13). These criticisms are indicative of the liveliness of the field, and rich wellsprings of new questions and avenues for the development of this growing discipline.

The scholar par excellence of musical hermeneutics is arguably Lawrence Kramer who, in the wake of Joseph Kerman and the New Musicology, advocates that music has meanings "definite enough to support critical interpretations comparable in depth, exactness, and density of connection to interpretations of literary texts and cultural practices" (Kramer, 1990). Kramer, as one of the representatives of the New Musicology, has contributed to the field of musical signification with methodological tools for musical hermeneutics and his *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (2002) is often mentioned in relevant publications in the field.

Given the disciplinary divide usually described between structuralism and hermeneutics, it might seem not feasible to talk about scholars who combine semiotic and hermeneutic tools in their analyses. But indeed, several scholars well-trained in semiotics are applying it as a tool for their hermeneutic-oriented analyses. Inspired by the *soft semiotics*⁵ praised by Monelle (1992, 31), Grimalt is one of this group that brings together semiotics, history of culture, and performance practice. His *Mapping Musical Signification* (2020) is, in Hatten's words, "the first volume since Monelle's *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music* (1992) to offer such a comprehensive text for students of musical meaning" (Grimalt 2020, ix).

Several scholars with performative backgrounds have focused on musical subjectivity and signification. To name a few, Naomi Cumming's *The Sonic*

⁵ "The world of music semiotics is now a broad one, but its claim to supersede conventional theory has been laid aside.... 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" (Monelle 1992, 31).

Self (2000) has been influential for later research on music semiotics, performance, and agency; Edward Klorman puts together his experience as a violist and his own theory of agency in *Mozart's Music of Friends: Social Interplay in the Chamber Works* (2016); Anatole Leikin's *The Performing Style of Alexander Scriabin* (2011) and *The Mystery of Chopin's Préludes* (2015) offer structural and hermeneutic analyses informed by performance practice; and Dickensheets' recent book chapter reflects on the implications for performance derived from a narrative analysis (Dickensheets 2023, 124ff.).

The growing exchange with performance studies stands out as an encouraging trend in the field, exemplified by Olga Sánchez-Kisielewska's article "Performing Topics: Implicit Collaborations Between Period Performance and Topical Analysis" (2020), as well as by *Musical Topics and Performance*, a collective volume edited by Jullian Hellaby (2023).

Also informed by his performative background, Michael L. Klein, author of *Intertextuality in Western Art Music* (2005), integrates a deep knowledge of the musical narrative models of Grabócz and Almén, the semiotics of Tarasti and Hatten, and critical theory readings, especially those of Jacques Derrida and Lacan, to produce well-grounded hermeneutic analyses, such as "Chopin Fragments: Narrative Voice in the First Ballade" (2018). Klein has also edited *Music and Narrative since 1900* (2012), a collaborative volume that includes chapters by Almén, Hatten, Grabócz, Kramer, among many other scholars. Also worth mentioning is *Intertextuality in Music* (2021), a volume edited by Paulo de Castro, Violetta Kostka, and William A. Everett. Klein's chapter, among other chapters, presents topic theory as one type of intertextuality, bringing in new methodological tools.

In the last ten years, musical signification has continued find new applications. Its interdisciplinary, heterodox character makes it easy to engage with varied repertoires, among them psychedelic music (Echard 2017), jazz music (Solis and Nettle 2009), the music of Igor Stravinsky (Locanto 2014), film music (Neumeyer 2015; Mera et al. 2017; Chattah 2023), opera (Everett 2015; Decker and Shaftel 2020), pop music (Kitts and Barxter-Moore 2019), videogame music (Lavengood and Williams 2023), or advertising (Deaville et al. 2021).

Another sign of the field's good shape is the numerous congresses dealing with musical signification that are taking place at the present time (2023–2024), to my knowledge: "Musical Topics and Performance Practice: a Symposium", organized by The University of Melbourne (1–2 June 2023), "Sixth Edition of Jornades ab Sentits: Absences and Meanings", organized by

ESMUC in Barcelona (14–16 March 2024), “International Symposium on Musical Topics and Topic Theory”, organized by University of Northern Colorado (31 May–1 June 2024), “Analysing Rhetoric Beyond Figures: Voice Intonation and Discourse in Instrumental Music from the 18th Century Onwards”, organized by Centro Studi Opera Omnia Luigi Boccherini in Lucca (7–9 June 2024), “Analytical Perspectives on Music from Ibero-America”, organized by the Working Committee on Music Analysis of the Spanish Society of Musicology in Valladolid (20–22 June 2024), “Narrative Walks Through Music”, organized by the University of Arts in Belgrade (4–6 October 2024), as well as the forthcoming 16th International Congress on Musical Signification (TBA).

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THE GROWING FIELD OF MUSICAL SIGNIFICATION: ORIGINS, MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS, AND CURRENT RELEVANCE

Summary

Musical signification resists singular methodological and epistemological frameworks. Drawing from several academic traditions, including semiotics, intertextuality and hermeneutics, this article sheds light on four pivotal contributions within the field. These include the historicist impulse of Leonard Ratner and Constantin Floros, the evolving methodologies of topic theory, the foundational role of semiotics, and the connections with performance practice. Embracing an optimistic lens, this article presents musical signification as a flourishing field firmly rooted in the origins of music and rich with creative scholars forging an exciting path forward.

Keywords: musical signification; semiotics; hermeneutics; topic theory; performance