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ON SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY IN THE SEMIOTIC INQUIRY OF MUSIC

INTRODUCTION

This article juxtaposes the subjective and the objective in the study of musical signification. It makes an attempt at a vicious, debated, even sensitive core problem of notions that are general in their essence and prevalence in the discourse about music. Why the topic? The anniversary of the Musical Signification project may invite a critical retrospection of matters of music signification. However, my interests are mainly driven by more general trends that challenge the position of research in music, semiotics, and humanities. These include the competition for research resources, strivings for sustainability in its many forms, and the technological developments, such as artificial intelligence. The goal, therefore, is to help to fortify the grounds for how we argue in scholarly contexts (to younger scholars in our field, and to colleagues in other fields) and in larger societal contexts (to audience, media, and the powers that be) for what we do in the semiotic inquiry of music, and how we do it.

Considering the lay usage, dictionary definitions may be in place: ‘objectivity’ refers to “the fact of being based on facts and not influenced by personal beliefs or feelings” (CD, “Objectivity”), or “the ability to consider or represent facts, information, etc., without being influenced by personal feelings or opinions; impartiality; detachment” (OED, “Objectivity”). In contrast, ‘subjectivity’ points to “the influence of personal beliefs or feelings, rather than facts” (CD, “Subjectivity”), or “[t]he quality or condition of being based

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on subjective consciousness, experience, etc.; the fact of existing in the mind only” (OED, “Subjectivity”). It will also be useful to keep in mind the distinctions between ‘object’, ‘objectivity’, and ‘objectivism’, and the corresponding forms of the contrasting terms.

No wonder the term families of ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’, and the concepts they refer to, are pervasive across fields of research when there is discussion of the characteristics, quality, justification of—and resources for—the pursuit “to increase the stock of knowledge” (OECD) to “serve ... the humanity at large” (Parliament of Finland). Taking the different strands of analyses of music, so central to the study of musical signification, as an example, let us ask: What are the ontological and epistemological grounds for gearing towards strands of, for example, systematic musicology, music information retrieval, or empirical aesthetics operating with quantities of data *versus* more traditional construction of new knowledge by the individual analyst looking into, for example, a particular score, a work, a corpus, or a style? The former may be perceived as positioning itself amidst scientific research, either collaborating with or even seeking separation from the humanities (cf. Leman 2008; Parncutt 2007), but nevertheless making a distinction between the two. The latter, in turn, may be perceived to approach the borders of music criticism, perhaps overlapping with it (see, e.g., Cone 1981). A choice between the two leads to a different position regarding objectivity and subjectivity as the former, in their usage of quantitative methods and large bodies of data (in terms of repertoire of works or performances, or participants), tends to aim at objectivity of the results and outcomes, while in the latter choice, quoting Joseph Kerman from year 1980,

[i]t is only in more recent times that analysts have avoided value judgments and adapted their work to a format of strictly corrigible propositions, mathematical equations, set-theory formulations, and the like—all this, apparently, in an effort to achieve the objective status and hence the authority of scientific inquiry. (313; see also Samson 2001)

Similarly, it is no news that in music itself, and the arts at large, the problem of subjectivity and objectivity is omnipresent. The problem persists, for instance, in the communication of Western art music (WAM), where the performer—Adorno’s (2006, 23) “middleman”—has the task of *objectively* assessing the composer’s objectives and to mediate the “opus perfectum & absolutum” (Listenius 1537, Caput I), but with a personal, indeed, *subjective*

interpretation, for the audience to *subjectively* experience, supposedly. (For the problem of *Werktreue*, see, e.g., Goehr; Navickaite-Martinelli; and for the problem of performer's creativity and semiotic space, see, e.g., Ojala's *The Performer between Heritage and Novelty*). If the composer has a message that either codes or does not code the composer's personal beliefs or feelings (i.e., their subjectivity, whatever it may contain of the composer's being-in-the-world) and if such message is or is not impartially (i.e., objectively, "based on facts") delivered by the performer to the listener, what are the grounds, constraints, or means for the listener to reach a right, factual, i.e. objective understanding of the composer's message? If reaching such a goal is not needed but we accept or even embrace misunderstanding, does it follow that anything goes, which then appears to dissolve the justification for the communication altogether?

Furthermore, these questions extend to education (of both artists and researchers, and of music educators, as well). As far as education involves *Bildung*, traditions of which go back at least to the 17th-century origins of the learner-centredness in J. A. Comenius's thinking (Pikkarainen 2012), educational goals can be taken as goals of building a subjectivity (even as 'subjectification', see Biesta 2020). At the same time, even *Bildung*—in contrast to utilitarian views to education—requires "mediation of the elements of the subjective will with objective meanings" (Stojanov 2018, 601), let alone how the utilitarian, vocationalist, or neoliberal views pose as demands for education (see, e.g., Knowles 2023).

Descriptive of the viciousness of the problem, it extends, in short, to three social praxes: artistic, pedagogical, and research; to three what could be described as ontological aspects: existence, inquiry, and communication; and finally to three epistemological aspects of music as objects, action, and experience. Not all aspects are covered here (e.g., societal or political), nor can any aspect be thoroughly expanded in this scope. Nevertheless, as one might guess from the triadomantic outline, the attempt here starts and ends in pragmatist philosophy and semiotics, particularly that of Charles S. Peirce, and John Dewey. These are supported by some later commentators, the contemporary embodied philosophy of mind, and the cognitive metaphor theory. Striving to keep within the scope of an article, much of the earlier discussion is necessarily left for margins, or simply left out (e.g., continental embodied phenomenology). Behind the scene, I use the pragmatist conception of music for the music-ontological starting point (Ojala 2020, 304).

Jumping ahead: the juxtaposition is a false dichotomy, as I hope the text below clarifies. The gist is that the dichotomy resolves to moderation on both sides, as the absolute objectiveness is mollified by fallibility of inquiry and the absolute subjectiveness by the shared embodied experience of the world. What follows, elaborates on this.

PEIRCE AND DEWEY ON OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

Generally, Peirce's stance on research may seem to foster faith in infallibility (e.g., CP 7:78). It emphasizes the pursuit of and advancement to objective truth, away from subjectivity:

Science feeling that there is an arbitrary element in its theories, still continues its studies, confident that so it will gradually become more and more purified from the dross of subjectivity; but practice requires something to go upon, and it will be no consolation to it to know that it is on the path to objective truth. (CP 5:589)

In fact, Peirce considered this notion a necessity, and a corollary of pragmatism, but with one subtraction (CP 5:494). With that, Peirce pointed to his *conditional idealism*—to that objective truth, “truth's independence of individual opinions is due (so far as there is any ‘truth’) to its being the predestined result to which sufficient inquiry would ultimately lead” (CP 5:494). The optimism is in the trust that the settlement of opinion in inquiry—whether individual subject's practical inquiry, or scientific inquiry by a community of inquirers—not only produces provisional establishments of belief, but finally leads to asymptotically to truth. However, according to Peirce, of things that seem true, “probably the majority are approximations to the truth”, and “[w]e never can attain absolute certainty” (CP 4:71).

Despite Peirce's personal background in mathematics and empirical natural sciences, the conditionality of his idealism opens avenue for the moderation between subjectivity and objectivity. In Dewey's pragmatism, the balanced juxtaposition is clearer:

A double sense is clearly contained here: on one side, this subjective is set over against the objective, when things-in-themselves—reality in its intrinsic nature—are in mind; it is the source of the phenomenal, of that which has not unconditioned validity—tending towards the sceptical and illusory sense of the term. But, on the other hand, it is constitutive of objects as experienced, and therefore has complete (empirical)

objectivity; indeed, because of its universal and necessary character, it is more “objective” than any law or object found in experience itself. (MW 2:251)

Dewey emphasizes the social aspect of inquiry in differentiating between the *facts* (“the given, the presented, the Datum”) and *ideas* (“the Quaesitum, the conceived, the Inferential):

The meaning or idea which is growing in acceptance, which is gaining ground as meaning-of-datum, gets logical or intellectual or objective force; that which is losing standing, which is increasingly doubtful, gets qualified as just a notion, a fancy, a prejudice, misconception—or finally just an error, a mental slip.

Evaluated as fanciful in validity it becomes a mere fancy in its existence. It is not eliminated, but receives a new reference or meaning. Thus the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity is not one between meaning as such and datum as such. It is a specification that emerges, correspondently, in both datum and ideatum. That which is left behind in the evolution of accepted meaning is still characterized as real, but real now in relation only to a way of experiencing—to a peculiarity of the organism. (MW 2:337)

This may seem to underline rather than solve the traditional mind–body dilemma: how does the actual, physical world, get represented in (or by) the mental? On the other hand, the quote may seem to lead to social relativism unanchored and indifferent to the (assumed) hard facts of the (assumed) actual world (and coherence theory of truth as opposed to correspondence theory), which, after all, was the starting point of the Peircean notion of inquiry: the hard facts compelling the presences in our experience by their brute force. Here, ‘experience’ refers to the “cognitive resultant of our past lives” (CP 2:86), i.e. the accumulation of the representations of the actual world, including ourselves in that world, i.e. our dynamically evolving knowledge of the world (Ojala 2009, 13–23; Määttänen 2015, 17–27). “We wish our knowledge to conform to hard facts” (CP 7:659).

Dewey did generalize the point above, that of validity or objectivity of meaning, to that which is “identical for all consciousness” and which has “an independent reality outside of thinking minds ... but with equal validity for them all” (MW 2:358, quoting Lotze’s *Logic*, I, 3 and 16). Subsequently, Dewey posed the questions that challenge the mind–body dilemma for finding a solution to the problem of objectivity vs. subjectivity:

what is meant by a self-identical content for all thought... Does it express the fact that a given content or meaning is de facto presented to the consciousness of all alike? Does this coequal presence guarantee an objectivity? Or does validity attach to a given meaning or content in the sense that it directs and controls the further exercise of thinking, and thus the formation of further new objects of knowledge? (MW 2:358)

In the pragmatist framework, the answer seems to lie in how inquiry settles beliefs by developing habits through the dynamic interplay of the subjective and the objective: in the interplay of objects conveying hard and soft facts, their perception and interpretation, and action upon the objects, or, to put it more semiotically, through *semiosis*. In Dewey's words:

the test of objectivity is everywhere the same: anything is objective in so far as, through the medium of conflict, it controls the movement of experience in its reconstructive transition. There is not first an object, whether of sense-perception or of conception, which afterward somehow exercises this controlling influence; but the objective is any existence exercising the function of control. It may only control the act of inquiry; it may only set on foot doubt, but this is direction of subsequent experience, and, in so far, is a token of objectivity. (MW 2:360)

CONDITIONS FOR SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY IN THE EMBODIED MIND

Dewey's utterance points not only to Peircean inquiry and continuous semiosis, but also to the *embodied mind*. Mind is here taken as the brain-body-environment system's ability that guides action in the actual world, based on the representation thereof (Ojala 2009, 13; Lindblom 2020, 9; see also OED, "mind").

The clue is that not only do "we wish" to, but in our development, our "knowledge" of the world, that is, our meanings (as habits of action) *does* "conform to hard facts" (CP 7:659). Furthermore, our thinking adapts to soft facts, established by our social world—thinking being "the anticipation of action" (Määttänen 2010; cf. CP 2:86 for being *in futuro*, and also the definition of 'mind' above). According to Pentti Määttänen,

Hard and soft facts are different, but there is a connection. It is not advisable to ignore hard facts when considering how to exit a room, but also sufficient maladjustment to soft facts may lead to confrontation with some hard facts in a jail, for example. (2019, 18)

The acceptance of the fallibility of inquiry does not lead to radical ontological or epistemological scepticism: as long as our habits are sufficiently adjusted to the facts of the world, based on both perceptual judgments of and engaged action with the Object, we are all set, and if not, further inquiry, action and perception, will continue until a new belief, i.e. habit of action, is settled—or the Objects of the world adjusted accordingly. Optimistic, yes, but the burden of the proof is with the sceptics (cf. CP 1:431; Määttänen, 2015, 21).

This opens the avenue for *moderate* objectivity of experience in terms of the ability of the mind and the accumulating experience being based on facts and action in the world being successful to a sufficient degree: thanks to the Secondness, we can rely on moderate—usually sufficient albeit fallible—objectivity. However, this does not constitute a sufficient condition for objectivity in terms of the experience being “distinct from the apprehending mind”, that is, the problem of full-blown relativity of subjective experience remains.

CONSIDERATIONS OF SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY IN EMBODIED COGNITION

While there is no full guarantee of objectivity, Dewey’s question remains: Is a given content or meaning *de facto* presented to the consciousness of all alike? This of course depends on whom “all” refers to: all living beings, animals, vertebrates, primates, humans, or whom. Let us continue with the assumption of normally developed modern humans, and with the connections between classical pragmatism and current embodied paradigm of cognition. Namely, while the above is in concord with how the *body-mind problem* is answered in the *embodied turn* of mind and cognition, the *body-social problem* (Kyselo 2014, 4) remains: “how bodily and social aspects figure in the individuation of the human individual self”.

As far as we share similarities in the actual world and our corporeal existence, we share similar processes of developing our minds, including both representations of the world and meaning a.k.a. habits of action, leading to similarities in basic experiences and hence basic concepts, of which more complex concepts are constructed. As soon as we diverge from the similarities, the structuring of concepts and our experiences begin differentiating.

At the heart of the contemporary cognitive paradigm, in cognitive metaphor theory, the basic experiences gained through action with and perception of qualities of actual objects serve as a basis for primary metaphors, which in turn

are combined for more complex metaphors (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Kövecses 2002; Gibbs Jr. 2011). At first, the focus was on individual cognition—the mind-body problem in general, and the commonalities therein, that is, the *universality* (or objectivity) of the cognitive metaphors. Recently, more attention has been paid to the body-social problem and the *variation* in metaphorical conceptualization.

According to Zoltán Kövecses, the cross-cultural variation is caused by a) broader cultural context, that is, “governing principles and the key concepts in a given culture” (2002, 186) such as the culturally—socially—the near-universal PRESSURIZED CONTAINER metaphor for anger, and by b) natural and physical environment, because people

living there will be attuned (mostly subconsciously) to things and phenomena that are characteristic of that habitat; and they will make use of these things and phenomena for the metaphorical comprehension and creation of their conceptual universe. (187)

In contrast, when considering sources of individual variation, Kövecses importantly suggests *personal history*: “the salient events and experiences in people’s lives” (194). As but one example, the U.S. presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the 1996 elections used the metaphor POLITICS IS SPORTS in their speeches, but different ones, based on their own accumulated experience between the sports, for example, Bill Clinton with golf but Al Gore with American football (194–95; see also Semino and Masci, 1996). Conscious choices or not, such use of metaphors reveals how the candidates had adapted to the soft facts of the electoral discourse and developed such habits of action they believed successful. The metaphor could be traced to the levels of basic metaphor (such as CAUSES ARE PHYSICAL FORCES) and literal representation (such as the bodily experience of physical struggle to reach a desired location).

In short, the similarities and differences in the (here: verbal) usage of metaphors results from both *nurture and nature*—a continuum rather than a dichotomy. At one end, there is the variance of metaphors indicating similarities and differences in individual life-events and in the social and cultural environments that pose the facts establishing the resistance and affordance for our action and perception, the two gates of “logical thought” (CP 5:212). At the other end, there is the realm of basic metaphors and the underlying bodily experiences where the subject and the organism (as object in the world) are conflated—the operational core of the mind from which the individual development in the sociocultural context differentiates through inquiry. Importantly,

this embodied core remains in operation through the processes of learning and growth, albeit sometimes shadowed by the more elaborate complex of cognitive structures and contexts. Through inquiry, the core differentiates to an adaptation both with the physical environment and its hard facts (including those of own body) but also to the sociocultural context and its soft facts.

Let us return to the unanswered questions: the body-social problem, Dewey's question of content or meaning *de facto* presented to the consciousness of all alike, and the topical question of objectivity vs. subjectivity, our starting point. The above works towards replying to the body-social problem, and clearly, the answer to Dewey's question should primarily be a negative one, albeit the embodied core of the human beings in the natural environment well justifies to question the degree of "de facto". While intertwined, the three questions are not the same. To remind, the body-social problem was about "how bodily and social aspects figure in the individuation of the human individual self", implying a growth process involving the body and the social. This seems to leave out the starting point: what are the corporeal and environmental differences—the hard facts—between the subjects to begin with, or do we only assume a normalized embodied core (table 1)? Reversely, sociocultural agreement points to non-deviance from the soft facts of the sociocultural context versus the hard facts of the normalized embodied core.

Table 1. The differences and similarities in "nature and nurture"
in the development of the mind

	Nature	Nurture
Differences	corporeal and environmental differences	sociocultural differentiation
Similarities	normalized embodied core	sociocultural agreement

What then constitutes subjectivity and objectivity here? Let us distinguish between subjectivity and objectivity of a mind and a thing at large. Mind as the ability that guides our action necessarily involves both objective and subjective aspects. (In fact, the combination can be taken as its purpose.) Considering subjectivity and objectivity of a thing at large, the reasoning above points to considering to what extent the knowledge of the thing (our

interpretation of it) conforms to interpersonal (or rather: inter-organismic) similarities: the hard facts of the normalized embodied core or the soft facts of the sociocultural agreement. The complement—the differences, whether sociocultural or corporeal and environmental, would then be the realm of subjectivity. Even here, the fallibility of inquiry mollifies the objectiveness, and vice versa, thanks to the shared embodiment and shared sociocultural agreements, the privacy of the subjectiveness can be made public and communicated.

CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the realm of music and its three praxes, what might this entail? For artistic praxis, the argumentation hopefully clarifies the interplay of the objective and subjective in the communication process of music. Taking the WAM model again as a case here, whatever the composer's message may be, it is based on their interpretation of the world, in which the objectivity of hard and soft facts is combined with the subjectivity of the differentiated experience. The message is coded into an object (of notation or other forms of instructions) for the mediation in the interaction with the performer, whose decoding and interpretation is fallible but nevertheless potentially sufficiently accurate (in regards to *Werktreue*) thanks to the similarities between the composer and the performer in the sociocultural agreements and embodied core processes. The differences, on the other hand, reveal the separation of the two, and, considering performer's task in their praxis, launches a process of inquiry: what does the composer mean by this or that—a very common question in performer's rehearsal process, the answering of which ends up being an evidence of learning and the sharing of subjectivity.

This leeway makes it possible—and necessary—for the performer to contribute to the performance by their subjectivity and objectivity in re-coding, that is, in rendering of the interpreted instructions into sound (or other media) for the listener, where the performer is not the unnecessary middleman. The sound, in turn, is another objective fact that calls for listener's perception, interpretation, resulting, if the communication is successful, in *an esthetic experience* (LW 10:25). While failing is an option, the likelihood of success is again available thanks to both the shared similarities in nature and nurture shared by the performer and the listener, and the differences again instances for sharing and learning of other's subjectivity.

For research praxis, the argumentation strengthens the widely accepted stance that the plurality of research approaches to music is not only acceptable but a necessity. Music involves both objectivity and subjectivity in all stages of its communication. Hence we need efficient, complementary approaches to investigate both the subjectivity and the objectivity, calling for qualitative and quantitative methods, not to mention artistic research methods.

For pedagogical praxis, the argumentation has three points. First, it returns to the discussion on how *Bildung*, or education at large, finds a balance between building a subjectivity and knowledge of the world's objective facts, even instrumentalism (see, e.g., Varkøy 2010). Second, it reinforces the learned-centred (and constructivist) approach by reinstating how mind necessarily handles hard facts in ways that involve subjectivity. Third, pertaining particularly to learning (to make) music, it makes an argument for the logic of being able to share subjective aspects of experience through hard facts for others to experience.

This has been a scratch on the surface of the vicious question of subjectivity and objectivity in music. Clearly, further research and further incorporation across research strands is needed. However, I hope the argumentation made contributes to fortify the grounds on the matter both in scholarly contexts, as well as in pedagogical and societal ones.

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Summary

This article juxtaposes the subjective and the objective in the study of musical signification. It makes an attempt at a vicious core problem of notions that are general in their essence and prevalence. The interest is driven by general trends challenging the position of research in music, semiotics, and humanities. The problem persists, for instance, in Western art music (WAM), where the performer has the task of assessing the composer's objectives and mediating them, but with a subjective interpretation, for the breadth of the audience to experience.

The gist is that the juxtaposition is a false dichotomy, resolving to moderation, as the absolute objectiveness is mollified by fallibility of inquiry and the absolute subjectiveness by the shared embodied experience of the world. This is elaborated based on classical and current pragmatist conceptions of inquiry, semiosis, embodiment, hard and soft facts, and cognitive metaphors, addressing the body-mind and the body-social problem.

Keywords: subjectivity; objectivity; pragmatism; music; embodiment