2010

Understanding Semiotics in Music

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A simple explanation of Semiotic Analysis in Music and its practical applications.

One can learn to act in a language that one does not understand, and a musician can present a serviceable performance of a composition without understanding that music's structure or meaning. Still, since the ancient Greeks, a true musician has been defined as someone who understands what he is playing. Musical analysis of any kind attempts to identify structure and design, yet it is working with the elusive medium of sound. Sometimes the process feels like looking for bones in a jellyfish.

Most performers spend more time learning their instrument than in seeking an understanding of the music they play. Interpretation is often based more on what the student's teacher dictates than in analyzing different and contrasting options for performance. In implementing analytical tools such as those of Rameau, Adler, Riemann, or even Shenker, Réti or Forte, we learn much about structure, however these methodologies always begin with a set of *a priori* assumptions. With the intention of stripping away those presuppositions, I, as well as a number of musical theorists, have turned to semiotics.

The advantage of "semiotic" analysis is that signs are not defined by their function or position. Signs are simply classified as "familiar" or "unfamiliar". Once this sign charting has taken place, it can be combined with other methodologies. Harmonic function, ritornello structure, and even "Sonata Form" can be viewed simultaneously as overlays to the semiotic grid. A variety of sign aggregates and their patterns can be identified, enabling the performer to make more informed interpretive decisions. Moving from the signifier to the signified, or more simply put, understanding the significance of music, will always remain elusive. If we were to define the sign, we would only limit its value and function. Similar to sub-atomic particles, the sign's exact position or meaning may not exist at all. Who can clearly glean a denotative meaning from a musical phrase? Yet connotations exist if only in the abstract, largely as a jumble of acculturated gestures to which we collectively ascribe meaning.

When we listen, we identify what we hear as something new, something we have heard before, or something that is similar but not exactly the same as what has been heard before. These familiar or unfamiliar signs create patterns that give the music syntax. The signals, individually or in aggregate, may transmit acculturated meaning to the listener, if the listener and the composer share a certain common understanding of what a particular signal "means". Over time, those already vague signals are weakened, strengthened, or modified by both the signifier and the receiver. What does not change is the progression of these signals as they roll out before the listener in a linear time sequence. Constructing a clear visual (and less verbal) representation of these sign patterns through the use of semiotic charts enables us to see different compositional features that may be overlooked by other analytical methods.

To make a chart of what I hear, I proceed in the following manner. If what I hear is new, I as**sign**[1] it a letter. When I hear something that is different, I give it a new letter, placed to the right of the previous one. If it is something I have heard before, I identify it with the same letter as before, placing the letter below its former entry. Measure numbers are in subscript, and a variation of a previous element or sign is in superscript.

As the charting progresses, patterns of new and previously used material emerge. Rather than using a prefabricated form based on *a priori* assumptions, such as "sonata", and then seeing how our piece conforms to what we expect, the individual composition

creates its own de**sign**. In some respects, it may look like a form we have seen. However tempting it may be to generalize that form, that generalization would immediately takes the individuality of the actual composition.

Identification of what is the same or different relies on memory. Short-term memory may hold the sign's tonality, timbre, loudness, rhythm, harmony, or any combination of these. Music of the Classic and Romantic eras relies so heavily on tonality that it brings into question whether a listener can really appreciate the repertoire without the ability to retain tonal memory. With the analytical aid of the semiotic chart, these designs have a visual as well as an aural shape.

But remembering a sign on a first hearing is only a fraction of the sign's identity to a listener. There is also the acculturated and cumulative memory of pieces heard over a lifetime of exposure to a vast array of repertoire, ever more varied in today's world of mass communication and recorded sound. How many times do we find analogies to music we already know? What "meaning" do we ascribe to the new sign?

When we look for "meaning" other than the sound itself, we plunge down the "rabbit hole" into interpretation of the signs themselves. The moment we ascribe a certain meaning to a particular sign, we find that it does not withstand the scientific test by which we can replicate that meaning. Each listener will have a different combination of auditory memory, acculturated experience, and emotional response.