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GRAMMAR OF EXPRESSIVE GESTURES IN GUSTAV MAHLER'S FIRST SYMPHONY

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ABSTRACT

This preliminary step to the paper aims at sketching a theoretical framework for the discussion of the object of my analysis. In doing this I offer rather eclectic premises such as Adorno's incidental remarks on style, late Wittgenstein's concept of grammar, Hatten's definition of musical gesture, Kühl's cognitivist approach to music, and Nietzsche's claims for a genealogy of musical meaning. As a result I define grammar as a precondition for a vocabulary of expressive gestures whose formation depends on the composer's concrete choices insofar these intentionally charge specific musical patterns with meaning. Relying on this definition, the paper will deal with expressive gestures implemented by Mahler in his First Symphony through semantic correlations that arise from the shift between musical genres and discursive modalities.

STYLE

The difficulties arisen from the use of the concept of style as the foundation of music historiography since the beginning of the 20th century (Adler 1911, 1919) led in the 1970s to a harsh criticism resulting in the substantial dismantling of the concept (Dömling 1973, Dahlhaus 1983). Subsequently emerged less ambitious perspectives on style relying on the reduction of the concept to strict empirical terms. Among these, Meyer's definition of style as "a replication of patterning [...] that results from a series of choices made within some set of constraints" (Meyer 1989, p. 3) stands out. This concept of style can be directly compared to a "grammar" in the usual meaning of the term, that is, as a system of abstract rules for a correct use of a specific language.

In order to avoid these reductive definitions I take as a point of departure some incidental remarks on style forwarded by Adorno as a corollary to the idea of the "language-character" (*Sprachcharakter*) of the artwork in his posthumous *Aesthetic Theory* (1970): "With regard to individual artworks the concept of style is at best applicable as the quintessence of his language-elements. [...] That in nominalistically advanced artworks the universal, and sometimes the conventional, reappears is no sinful error but the result of their language-character, which produces a vocabulary [...] within the windowless monad" (Adorno 1997, p. 207. Translation modified in accordance with Paddison 1991).

Adorno philosophical references need some clarifications. "Nominalist" is a philosophical view claiming that only individuals exist, while "universals" (abstract objects) do not and can be reduced to properties shared by individuals (they are "terms", not "objects"). In Leibniz's terms individuals are "windowless monads"; they have no relations and do not share properties with other individuals. By referring these concepts to the realm of aesthetics, Adorno assumes that even in the completely individualized artworks appears conventional or shared elements, and that this depends on their "language-character", that is, on the necessity of producing a "vocabulary".

GRAMMAR

Adorno does not use the term "grammar". Anyway his definition of style offers the possibility of introducing a less usual concept of grammar, which does not presume the sharing of a specific "language" and can usefully apply even to artworks breaking away from genres and conventions. In doing this I will refer to Wittgenstein. Although Adorno was extremely critical towards Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, some of Wittgenstein's later remarks in his posthumous *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) can be at least discussed along aspects of Adorno's thinking (see articles in *Wittgenstein Studien*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1996).

In the light of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, to produce a vocabulary means that one must regulate his linguistic play in order to "speak" to someone; but the act of speaking presupposes the intersubjective sharing of a "grammar", and this on account of the stated "language-character" of the artwork must be valid even for artistic expression. In *Philosophical*

Investigations we find a peculiar concept of “grammar”. A recent entry of the *Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* explains that Wittgenstein intends it as a set of rules which expresses preconditions not for a correct use of language, but rather “for meaningful language”; these rules “are not idealized as an external system to be conformed to”; on the contrary, “grammar is not abstract, it is situated within the regular activity with which language-games are interwoven”. In other words, grammar “becomes, in Wittgenstein’s hands, the wider – and more elusive – network of rules which determine what linguistic move is allowed as making sense” (Biletzki & Matar 2011). On the other hand, in aphorism 495 of *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein claims: “Grammar does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfill its purpose [...]. It only describes [...] the use of signs” (Wittgenstein 2009, p. 146).

Relying on these definitions I will pursue a new concept of grammar, which I describe with the following adjectives: “descriptive” – that is: based on the description of the concrete “use” rather than on the prescription of abstract rules – and “stylistic” – that is: situated in the “style” of an individual artwork.

GESTURE

In the field of music semiotics Hatten offered a general definition of gesture as “significant energetic shaping through time” (Hatten 2004, p. 95) and connected “aural gestures” to the shaping of “sound”. Coming to musical gesture, he characterized it through the following definitions among others: it is “analog” and “continuous”, it possesses “articulate shape”, it is “typically foregrounded” and “potentially systematic” (Hatten 2004, p. 124). More recently Hatten summarized his concept in a shorter article where some further definitions come to the fore, with a particular emphasis on the role of “intersubjectivity” in the formation of “affectively loaded” gestures (Hatten 2006, p. 3).

In its recent developments, the semiotic-cognitive approach to music offers significant insights on these aspects of musical gesture. Kühl bases gestures on the “intersubjective sharing of amodal gestalts” (Kühl 2011, p. 125). This represents the basis of “primordial perception” in the earliest stages of consciousness, which “is not modality specific”, that is, “not [...] tied to the visual, the auditive or the sensory-motoric modality” (Kühl 2011, p. 124). What is particularly interesting in Kühl’s article to my purpose, is the connection between primordial experience and artistic expression: “At a later age many of us lose the ability to consciously access the level of amodal perception, but it is believed that much artistic expression originates from layers of preverbal consciousness, thus being partly dependent on functions of cross-modality” (Kühl 2011, p. 124). As we will see, this hypothesis seems to be confirmed by the formation of some gestures along Mahler’s compositional path to his First Symphony. These gestures emerge in gestalts which can be partially defined as amodal or premodal, insofar as verbal and musical expression are not clearly distinguished, thus facilitating “intermedial” processes.

Coming to meaning, a further significant point of cognitive approaches to music must be mentioned: the tendency to underline the integration of structure and meaning. In the discussion of Kühl’s idea of “proto-concept” (Kühl 2007) Zbikowski assumes that “musical semantics is [...] not something which happens subsequent to the definition of structure but which happens together with the emergence of structure” (Zbikowski 2009, p. 458). This concept will be one of the leading motives of my analytical discussion of Mahler’s Symphony.

HISTORY

A further aspect I would like to highlight is the role of history, that is, the definition of “grammar” even in historical terms. In this sense the formation of a “vocabulary” relies on a “genealogy” of musical meaning, which offers the pre-conditions of expression in music. In doing this I capitalize aphorism 215 from Nietzsche’s *Human, All Too Human* (1878):

“In and of itself, music is not so full of meaning for our inner life, so profoundly moving, that it can claim to be a *direct* language of emotion. Rather, it is its ancient connection to poetry that has invested rhythmical movement, loudness and softness of tone, with so much symbolism that we now *believe* music is speaking directly *to* the inner life and that it comes *out* of it. Dramatic music is possible only when the art of music has already conquered an enormous realm of symbolic techniques through song, opera, and hundreds of attempts at tone painting. ‘Absolute music’ is either pure form, in the raw state of music, where sounds in rhythm and at various volumes are enough to give joy; or else it is the symbolism of forms that, without poetry, can speak to our understanding (since, after the two arts had undergone a long development together, musical form was finally woven through and through with threads of concepts and feelings). [...] No music is in itself deep and full of meaning. It does not speak of the ‘will’ or the ‘thing in itself’. Only in an age that had conquered the entire sphere of inner life for musical symbolism could the intellect entertain this idea. The intellect itself has *projected* this meaning into the sound” (Nietzsche 1986, p. 128).

In this passage Nietzsche suggests that meaning and expression in (absolute) music cannot but rely on the original formation of meaningful gestures or gestalts that emerged through the close interaction with words. In this view it is the compositional process in its concrete endowment with (verbal) meaning through technical construction and the role of intentionality what

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charges music with expression and signification processes. To my purpose, rather than the critical and skeptical position included in the aphorism I will highlight the constructive conception of musical meaning; and rather than the rationalist position resulting in the idea of a one-way process of “fertilization” from meaningful words to in itself unmeaningful music I prefer to underline processes of cross-fertilization and reciprocal influence.

MAHLER’S FIRST SYMPHONY

In the application of this eclectic framework to Mahler’s First Symphony I will distinguish the compositional process (1887-1888, then different versions until publication in 1899; see Wilkens 1992) from the original formation – and the subsequent recurring – of expressive gestures. Significant points of interest will be the role of the earlier Lieder and the long-lasting indecision about the characterization of the work as a symphony. The occasion of observing the formation of a “vocabulary” will permit me to define in historical terms the “genealogy” of musical meaning in Mahler – in the light of Nietzsche’s aphorism – along the formation of his personal style in the path to his First Symphony.

In my presentation I will choose expressive gestures charged with meaning through the shift between different genres and discursive modalities; I will thus analyze the re-use of gestures (1) from the Lieder – where meaning emerges from the presence of a text – and (2) from the symphonic poem in five movements – where meaning relies on Mahler’s titles and programmatic descriptions. The role of residual indications in the symphony in four movements will be also considered.

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