

The Emancipation of the Sign: On the Corporeal and Gestural Meanings in Music

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Anglo-American musicology is at the moment quite obviously embracing a semiotic approach. The fact that so many scholars are now writing about the Otherness in music, differences and how they emerge, and the construction of social reality, as well as about the implicit meanings hidden in musical institutions, about body as a social and ideological product, gendering etc. is, after all, a consequence not only of the assumption of post-structuralist, sociologist, post-modern and feminist premises but of one aspect without which none of these approaches would have been possible. This phenomenon could be termed the emancipation of the sign.

What is involved here is that scholars have recognised that music always has a content, and that this content has a conventional, arbitrary relationship to its signifier, the aural physical embodiment of the musical sign. Since this relationship is arbitrary, one might exclaim: "Let us find other kinds of agreement! *Un nouveau contrat sémio-social* in the manner of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Let us no longer accept conventional traditions." For surely we want to make a new start which is no longer ideological, essentialist, racist or secretly nationalistic. In other words, a new beginning which is inherently neither consciously nor unconsciously making differences and evaluations. As extreme examples we may consider certain feminist analyses like Susan McClary's famous image of Beethoven as a rapist in the Ninth Symphony finale's recapitulation. In such analyses, the cards of the musicological play have been dealt again, as it were, and

the game is played from new starting-points on – but whether it is also played with new rules is not so certain, I suspect.

In this light feminism could be even interpreted as a new form of racism. Yet it is true that feminist scholars have been able to reveal the centuries-long oppression of women in our music culture as well as the immanent masculine patriarchal systems of signification in the musical discourse itself. But when at the same time one attempts to raise the concealed, rejected “feminines” as hidden musical traits, one has to ask: Where do they find their origin? Are they only Hegelian negations of the dominant being or masculine culture, negations which now have their turn to emanate in the dialectics of becoming? Then one has to ask, where are the categories of men’s culture or “being” originally from? Are they due to his corporeal qualities? Is, as Freud said, anatomy destiny? If this is true, then the negation is itself bound with the essentialist assumption on the corporeality of masculine culture. From a man’s body one can iconically infer, if you will, all symbolic forms in Western culture. In this way we can never exceed the corporeality thesis and consequently the feminine culture always would carry in it the negation of men’s culture, and would thus remain altogether dependent on it (before genetic engineering technology clones new types of men).

Let us then suppose that the features of feminine culture are the result of woman’s corporeality, and the recognition of its autonomy that which has been suppressed under the patriarchal order. In this light, “progress” would be the valorization of signs of feminine corporeality. Unfortunately this is very far from the other key idea, namely the artificial, deliberate construction of social reality. If women have been oppressed, it is now their turn to oppress the men and banish all the quasi-universal masterworks of patriarchal culture (like Beethoven’s Ninth). This idea has a similarity with Marxism, which supposed that since the bourgeois class has always subordinated the workers, now it is time the latter transform themselves into a “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Therefore, basically the thesis is founded on a determinist and in some senses fanatical thinking, a thesis according to which it is gender which absolutely determines the whole human being. This cannot be dismissed arbitrarily, but at the same time one should recall what Merleau-Ponty writes in the chapter “*Le corps comme être sexué*” in his *Phenomenology of Perception*:

(La vie sexuelle) est ce qui fait qu'un homme a une histoire. Si l'histoire sexuelle d'un homme donne la clef de sa vie, c'est parce que dans la sexualité l'homme projette sa manière d'être au regard du monde, c'est-à-dire à l'égard du temps et à l'égard des autres hommes. Il y a des symptômes sexuels à l'origine de toutes les névroses, mais ces symptômes, si on les lit bien, symbolisent toute une attitude, soit par exemple une attitude de conquête, soit une attitude de fuite... et la question n'est pas tant de savoir si la vie humaine repose ou non sur la sexualité que de savoir ce qu'on entend par sexualité... Quand on généralise la notion de sexualité et qu'on fait d'elle une manière d'être au monde physique et interhumain, veut-on dire qu'en dernière analyse toute existence a une signification sexuelle ou bien que toute existence a une signification existentielle? Dans la première hypothèse l'existence serait une abstraction, un autre nom pour désigner la vie sexuelle... mais comme la vie sexuelle ne peut plus être circonscrite, comme elle n'est plus une fonction séparée et définissable par la causalité propre d'un appareil organique, il n'y a plus aucun sens à dire que toute l'existence se comprend par la vie sexuelle, ou plutôt, cette proposition devient une tautologie. Faut-il donc dire, inversement, que le phénomène sexuel n'est qu'une expression de notre manière générale de projeter notre milieu? (p. 185).

The causality mentioned by Merleau-Ponty between the human body and its symbolic manifestations is just what was above indicated by its “iconicity.” Merleau-Ponty’s warning is quite reasonable: one can also think that the so-called gendered meanings reflect some more general human existence, they are themselves signifiers of something else and not definite signifieds. In any case, the problem is that when the emancipation of the sign has taken place, one can use semiotics to “prove” almost any thesis whatsoever, so that one’s reasoning gives the overall impression of a convincingly cogent scholarly discourse – supposing that there is some social motivation making people listen to our “semiotician.” The danger in semiotics is based upon the fact that its tools are neutral, that they can serve virtually any ethics and any ideology. What then is a good or evil ideology is outside its scope. Therefore, if semiotics endeavours toward the status of a universal method, which it clearly does, one cannot exclude ethics. This was realized as early as the great nineteenth century semioticians such as Charles Peirce as well as pre- or would-be-semioticians like Vladimir Soloviev.

One good illustration for the combination of semiology and musicology is offered by Marc A. Weiner’s study, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination*. He scours Wagner’s operas for various signs, for semiological qualities and their “concrete logic,” like Lévi-Strauss, with undeniable success. His book has opened a new chapter in the semiotics of Wagner by scrutinizing the Wagnerian odours, colours, gestures,

sounds and other signs. He even deals in passing with Mussorgsky, referring to the composer's "*Nibelungen*" in the form of Goldenberg and Schmuyle in *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Then what is involved are "sonic signs" (p. 144) or "speech patterns" (p. 146). In *Parsifal*, though, the olfactory signs play a significant role evoking compulsion, entrapment and sexual urgency (p. 229). In Weiner's reasoning the German body does not appear as iconico-indexical signs as such but as pure metaphor. Moreover he notices how "the foot has an iconic function in Wagner's works for the stage" (p. 264). But when he seeks the signifieds of these signs he can find only one: anti-Semitism. So all the negative and dysphoric types on stage come to represent Wagner's hatred for the Jews and concretize his racism.

The author claims that these signs were apparent, although implicit, for the entire nineteenth century audience. Only we, at the end of the twentieth century, have lost our ability to decode these signs, since we are blinded by the musical genius of Wagner. However one has to put the question: If Wagner's intentions in all his major operas were to pursue racist and anti-Semitic distinctions and differences, why did he not express them overtly just in his operas but was satisfied to convey this aspect of his vision only through pamphlets? Why these immanent but according to Weiner so vital significations had to remain immanent, concealed? Would he not have exposed his ideology even more efficiently using artistic signs, a theatre man as he was from head to toe?

Therefore Weiner's analysis and interpretation serve, to me, as an illustration of the way in which, with semiotics, one can prove almost anything, if the scholar so desires, in the absence of any reason not to do so. But what could such reasons be in the present world, dominated by the desire to be impressive on conference stages, publishers' flyers, and so on?

In any case, if we now return to the gendering problem, which ultimately means, as Ruth Solie shows in her preface to the anthology *Difference in Musicology*, to create differences, then we could truly think there are corporeal messages in music itself, messages which could be studied and further analyzed. Weiner's theses are based on the idea that the bodies Wagner created on stage represented, to his contemporaries, an immediate ideological reality which brought these bodies to life. Then one can only ask, how do they spring to life in our time? They are still fascinating characters. Are all the admirers of Wagner's operas then implicit anti-Semites – among whom Lévi-Strauss included those who considered Wagner a "god" in mythology.

In other words, is there a level of corporeality in music which would perhaps be situated somewhere deeper than other musical signs and would determine them?

It is interesting that in American musicology very frequently semiotics is identified in a Kristevan way with the bodily level of music. Let us take another example which is not so extreme, namely Richard Taruskin's book *Defining Russia Musically*. It is noteworthy that whenever he explicitly uses the term "semiotics" it occurs in the context of body in music. Particularly when dealing with orientalism as a manifestation of the Russian school in music history, he quite consciously foregrounds the role of semiotics. He juxtaposes the "Eastern theme" which is neutral to "Orientalism" which "is charged" and from which one can presume "semiotics, ideological critic, polemic, perhaps indictment" (p. 152). "If one is going to talk about oriental style as a sign, one must specify its referents" and so "let the music speak [for] itself...so as to let a certain semiotic point emerge." Taruskin then gives a series of illustrations, compositions on a Pushkin's poem with a certain "oriental flavour" from Glinka (*Ne poy krasavitsa*) to Rachmaninov. In the piano accompaniment he picks up "a characteristic semiotic cluster: a drone (drum) bass ...and a chromatic accompanying line that in this case steadily descends along with the sequences of undulating melismas." This cluster of signs, to Taruskin's mind, evokes not just the East, but the seductive East that emasculates, enslaves, renders passive. He states that the "syncopated undulation itself is iconically erotic, evoking languid limbs, writhing torsos, arching necks." All these signs he designates by a term from old Russian literary style – "*nega*." The network of such signs can be easily discerned in Tchaikovsky as well, whose overture to *Romeo and Juliet* he discusses speaking of its "frank sensual iconicity" particularly in the "strongly marked chromatic pass between the fifth and sixth degrees." Of course likewise many classic works from the Russian repertory have plenty of similar illustrations from Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* to Borodin's *Prince Igor* (it is certainly not an accident that the dance of the Polovetsian imprisoned girl slaves has the same undulating motif as which Wagner used in his "oriental" second act of *Parsifal*, to depict the gestures of the "*Blumenmädchen*").

Nevertheless, from our point of view it is interesting how the semiotic moment in music is so strongly interwoven in these studies with the human body, not expressly of men or women, but body in general. Intuitively this seems to be justified, but could we make a method of analysis on the basis of this statement?

How could body in music be studied semiotically in the proper sense? Of course we may say that not just any semiotics would be appropriate for it, since it is general labelling for extremely varied methods and approaches ranging from Nattiez' paradigmatic model to Monelle's deconstructions and some Greimassians' (like Grabocz and myself) seme analyses and modal grammars.

One traditional way to realize this issue would be to study gestures. This has been in fact already done by Adorno in his study on Wagner, in which he however, comes to the discouraging results that gestures cannot be developed, they can only be repeated. But some late semioticians of music have paid much attention to gestures in their various forms from Gino Stefani in his study of accents in music to Robert S. Hatten's quite recent explorations in the Classical and pre-romantic style where, as Adorno said, the gestuality has been sublimated into an expression.

Some hints at what corporeality could be in a new music semiology can be again found in Merleau-Ponty, as he deals with *signification gestuelle* (Op. cit., p. 209). It is, in his mind, like a first sketch drawn before the receiver has conceived the semantics of a message: "*Une musique ou une peinture qui n'est d'abord pas comprise finit par se créer elle-même son public, si vraiment elle dit quelque chose, c'est-à-dire par sécréter elle-même sa signification.*"

One could thus think that a musical work yields a certain implicit meaning before it is connected with any ideological, aesthetic or other significations determined by its historical situation. Should we not first examine this level, both feminists and traditionalists together, so that we could agree about what corporeality is in music? Most probably the gender analysts might refuse this offer of reconciliation, since their thesis is that everything is, from the beginning, gendered, there being no previous, "lower" level to which things could be reduced. Yet by saying this they fall into and remain in the trap of the difference-ideology, and cannot see how one could get out of it by developing on a sound semiotic basis for what body is, whether feminine or masculine, in music.

On this "road less travelled," one can find guidance in the theories by the American pragmatian George Herbert Mead, who has studied "I" as subject and object, or the notions "I" and "me." It was also an important achievement of phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty and before him Husserl of course, that body can never appear as mere object to a subject. Also feminists like Teresa de Lauretis distinguish between experiencing body and the body experienced by others (in German the words "*Körper*" and "*Leib*" contain this difference). A subject's relationship to

his/her body essentially changes when he/she notices it is perceived by someone else. We do not need to resort to the everyday experience of any musician that the same piece played alone for oneself and to even minimum audience becomes a greatly different experience.

When in the following text I speak about the corporeality of music I am not so interested in it as it were a “body” experienced by others, “me,” since then its corporeality would be determined from outside, in an “ethicist” manner joining there all one’s surrounding ideologies.

We can argue that a musical piece is in a metaphoric sense like a “living organism,” it is a kind of “body.” Then the only way to get under the skin of this “body” is of course to perform it. Now, is there then any method by which we could study this kind of “musical body” from inside?

George Herbert Mead sees that symbols emerge from a continuous interplay of inner impulses and outer responses. He speaks of gestures in a conversation as vocal gestures. He says they are

significant symbols, and by symbol we do not mean something that lies outside of the field of conduct. a symbol is nothing but the stimulus whose response is given in advance. That is all we mean by a symbol. There is a word and a blow. The blow is the historical antecedent of the word, but if the word means an insult, the response is anew now involved in the word, something given in the very stimulus itself. That is all that is meant by a symbol. Now if that response can be given in terms of an attitude utilized for the further control of action, then the relation of that stimulus and attitude is what we mean by a significant symbol (Mead, p. 181).

So Mead argues that our thinking goes on in these lines, inside of us as one might say, and it is to him a “play of symbols (p. 181, *Mind, Self & Society*) through gestures responses are called out in our own attitudes. What was the meaning now becomes a symbol which has another meaning. The meaning has itself become a stimulus to another response” In this way as Mead reasons, the conversation is continually going on, and what was response becomes in the field of gesture a stimulus, and the response to that is the “meaning.”

The great advantage of Mead’s approach to meaning is that he does not see it as anything static, but as something going on all the time, in a processional manner. In my own sketches for a new semiotic theory – which I hope will ultimately help lead into a new method of music analysis – I have more explicitly distinguished between three stages of

signs in such a “conversational” process, between the inner and outer, stimulus and response (trying to avoid the dangers of behaviourism) which are pre-signs, act-signs and post-signs.

The pre-signs are “stimuli” or gestures used to produce secondary signs which are “responses” to these initial gestures (it does not matter whether this pre-sign is immanent or manifest i.e. whether it is really existent or not). Furthermore they become “stimuli” to signs which they in turn evoke. These post-signs coming afterwards can also be either existing only in the minds of receivers or something concrete, physically new signs. They are traditionally called in semiotics as “interpretants,” whereas the first-mentioned pre-signs could be called as “enunciants.”

So there is an alternation between affirmation and negation gestures in this type of “inner dialogue” in a piece, in its “intra-textual” relations as my colleague Tomi Mäkelä has called it (Mäkelä 1989: 38).

The image shows a musical score for a piano quartet by Ernest Chausson. It features two vocal lines and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are "en di - mi - nu - ant" and "re - te - nu". The score includes a "1er Mouvt" marking. The music is in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. The vocal lines are in treble clef, and the piano accompaniment is in bass clef. The lyrics are written below the notes.

My intention is to apply this simple method to the analysis of one particular piece, which I have been practising with my students for several years already and which fascinates me because its very organic and lively gestural level ceaselessly question any kind of pre-established sonata or other forms. This piece is the piano quartet by Ernest Chausson. This is music which is very semiotic, in the Kristevan sense. In Chausson’s works the German-type formal hegemony, patriarchal order, is all the time broken on this more ‘corporeal’ level of its signs. In order to realize this one only needs to compare it to, say, Gabriel Fauré’s piano quartets,

whose texture is congenially idiomatic but whose formal outline is not as radically individual, anti-German and un-angular as is Chausson. One need only consider its opening gesture, a very energetic motif. Quite suitable as a gestural, masculine sonata first movement beginning in all its Mediterranean energy with plain colours and clear rhythms (*viz.* the quite similar opening of Milhaud's Piano Sonata, above.)

It is true that gestures have their "home" in music, their proper "place" in which they live. They are like organs of a "body." However, in its rhythmic form the four-eight-bar periodic form is immediately questioned by a rhythmic asymmetry, and as late as in bar 27 we notice in which country and which century we are, i.e. which is the real musical situation of this message. This occurs with the dominant ninth-seventh chord with its impressionist flavour:

The image shows a page of a musical score for Ernest Chausson's Piano Sonata. The score is arranged in four staves: Violin, Viola, Cello, and Piano. The title "ERNEST CHAUSSON (1855-1899)" is printed at the top right. The tempo marking "Allegro" is above the Violin staff, and "Animé" is above the Piano staff. The score begins with a clear rhythmic motif in the piano accompaniment, which is a four-note pattern. The string parts (Violin, Viola, Cello) have a more complex, asymmetrical melody. The piano part is marked "PIANO" and features a clear rhythmic motif in the right hand and a more complex, asymmetrical melody in the left hand.

This opening seems so innocently positive in its clear form, that one only later notices that this sign, felt as a real "First" in the Peircean sense, has one pre-sign at least, in the French music history: It is namely the same as the motif of the Chorale in César Franck's *Prélude, Chorale et Fugue*. But even this pre-sign has its own still earlier pre-sign, such as Wagner's bell motif from the Grail scene in *Parsifal*. Here, that which at the outset seemed to be a purely masculine, naively corporeal vital sign of a musical body seems to be a parody of a much more profound, inner, psychologically complex Choral-motif. So there was an Otherness looming behind this seemingly purely corporeal gesture. However, even this sign brings us in this reversed direction to another sphere of Otherness, from

the Gallic spirit to the Germanic one, namely with the evocation of Parsifal.

Yet, the process also goes on in other directions. Later this main motif is not only formally repeated in the recapitulation but it is reintroduced quite at the end of the piece, when Chausson plays with the cyclical form. First he seems to let the main theme for the first movement return, via its fragments in a long development. Then as a surprise in the psychological and tensional climax of the whole piece which I have called, in terms borrowed from the French existentialist philosopher Jean Wahl, a trans-descendence and trans-ascendence, it gives place to the main theme of the second movement. But this theme of redemption, as if the Proustian “lost Fatherland” were now rediscovered, does not remain the last word. The bold gesture of the beginning also recurs but is now united in a stretto in the bass with the cantabile theme in an overwhelming reconciliation and closure of all previous gestures in this piece. From here on the conversation can continue no longer. The music has stopped time. What has been Other has become the Same.

In fact this narrative technique is rather far removed from the German type of thematic construction which produces the “Greatness” in the music. Chausson very frequently lets the flow of gestures be stopped in the timeless feeling of *verweile doch Du bist so schön* series of dominant-seventh and ninth chords which do not serve any structural tension but which foreground the colour. This is what we easily consider to be something very “French.”

However, the aim of my analysis, which I am currently preparing, is to represent a kind of “semiotics without semiotics” as an answer to the question of what can remain of semiotics when all previously-articulated semiotic theories have been forgotten. Elsewhere, I have classified all the musical semiotic theories – in the epistemic sense – into two groups, the first of which starts with rules and grammars belonging to all music, emphasizing music’s surface, which supposes that before the rules set by a theoretician there is just nothing – and consequently when the rules stop their functioning there remains nothing. This type of semiotics, as a philosophical ‘style’ rather than a systematic classification, I would call as “classical” semiotics. Here I am inspired by Taruskin’s wonderful distinction, itself conceived after Boris de Schloezer (a music scholar Greimas

once highly recommended I read) between civilisation and culture, beauty and profoundness, the sublime, etc. (Taruskin, p. 257).¹

The other trend is to think that all signs exist only on the basis of an order which is there before the scholar starts his/her work and which remains there when he/she has finished. This semiotic philosophy approaches the meaning (1) as a process, i.e. supposing that signs cannot be defined without taking into account the time, place and subject (actor), (2) as something immanent, i.e. believing like Mead and Merleau-Ponty primarily that meaning is produced within a given system, body, organism, in the first place without any meaning coming from outside as a *deus ex machina* (like in the ‘redemption’ at the end of Chausson’s piece, the reconciling themes do not stem from outside but are generated from the materials within the piece); (3) by giving emphasis to the content, the signified, which however, can be something non-verbal, “ineffable,” expressible only in terms of a quasi-corporeal experience. Thus it is the latter type of semiotics of music I was aiming for in my arguments for and

1. Here I cite Taruskin; these dichotomies seem to fit amazingly even in the area of science, and I feel that my own theory of “existential semiotics,” of which I consider all my present “fragments” and essays to be parts, could *mutatis mutandis* be defined in quite similar themes. So: “The other main idea...consists in the radical dichotomization of beauty on the one hand, and a whole discourse of profundity/strength, loftiness/seriousness/power – in a word – greatness, on the other. The distinction was perceived, at the end, in national terms, and so we had best translate our operative term into German: *das Erhabene*...”

“These transgressions arose out of a stubborn adherence – from the German national perspective an outmoded and treasonable adherence – to the ideology of the Enlightenment which is to say the ideology of *Zivilisation*, which is really to say the ideology of the hated French...” (p. 261) “As the discourse of romanticism achieved its maximized expression in what we now look back on as the modernist period, the dichotomies we have so far encountered, all of them variations on the same theme, took on an even more radical aspect. What had formerly been expressible as a cleavage between national schools or between the cultivation of the beautiful and the cultivation of the sublime, or between the aesthetic of enjoyment and that of contemplation, or between the aesthetic of pleasure and that of disinterestedness, or between the discourse of enlightenment and that of transcendence, or of utility vs autonomy, or of convention vs originality, social accommodation vs social alienation, opera vs symphony, motley vs wholeness, melody vs motive – all this eventually came down to a gross discrimination between the serious and the popular, or even more grossly and peremptorily, into that between art and entertainment” (Taruskin, p. 265).

This also concerns semiotic theories, which in the twentieth century, have inherited much from the classicist/romantic dichotomy semiotics of the nineteenth century, a dichotomy which, particularly towards the end of our century, has become trivialized, rendered banal, and mediatized into such forms of semiotics as are only a kind of postmodern entertainment. Also the romantic tradition has had its moment of decline in semiotics, leading to the exaggeratedly introverted, solipsist approaches dangerously detached from the social context and ethical values in the basis of this approach. However, what is essential is that we be able follow the romantic “line” from Hegel via Kierkegaard to Peirce – who kindly said of Hegel that “there is music in his philosophy” (see Max Fisch) – and even to Soloviev, Bakhtin, Lotman, Lévi-Strauss and Greimas. But there is also the “classicist” line which follows instead the logical empiricism of Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophy.

against certain current theories and achievements springing from the so-called “new musicology.”

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