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ed. by Eero Tarasti

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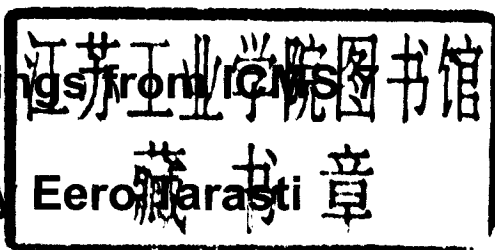
Approaches to Musical Semiotics 10

Acta Semiotica Fennica XXIII

Music and the Arts

Proceedings from ICMS

Edited by Eero Tarasti



Associate Editors

Paul Forsell

Richard Littlefield

Acta Semiotica Fennica XXIII
Approaches to Musical Semiotics 10

Finnish Network University of Semiotics, Imatra
International Semiotics Institute, Imatra
Semiotic Society of Finland, Helsinki
2006

This book is a publication of
The International Semiotics Institute

<http://www.isisemiotics.fi/>

Telephone orders +358 5 681 6639

Fax orders +358 5 681 6628

E-mail orders majja.rossi@isisemiotics.fi

Cover design Dario Martinelli

Printing of this book was funded by the State Provincial Office of
Southern Finland and by the ESR (EU Structural Funds)



EU Structural Funds



STATE PROVINCIAL
OFFICE OF
SOUTHERN FINLAND

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Printed by Hakapaino, Helsinki 2006

ISBN 952-5431-09-6

ISSN 1235-497X ACTA SEMIOTICA FENNICA XXIII

ISSN 1458-4921 APPROACHES TO MUSICAL SEMIOTICS 10

Preface

This anthology contains papers from the Seventh International Congress on Musical Signification, held on June 10–15, 2001 at the International Semiotics Institute in Imatra, Eastern Finland. The editorial process has proved exceptionally daunting, because of the size of the congress: with its almost 150 papers, it takes its place as one of the largest symposia in the history of the International Musical Signification Project. Since then, the Eighth International Musical Signification Symposium has taken place (Paris, October 2004) and another anthology has appeared. It consists of papers from international doctoral and postdoctoral seminars in musical semiotics held in Helsinki and Imatra (nos. 4–7), and is entitled *Musical Semiotics Revisited* (Acta Semiotica Fennica XV, Imatra: ISI, 2003). All these meetings – the symposia every two years and the annual seminars – have secured a permanent place on the international musicological scene, as well as in a branch of applied semiotics. At the time of this writing, the International Musical Signification Project has more than 450 members world-wide, and has become officially affiliated with the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS/AIS) as one of the latter's professional-interest groups.

Both the history and the facts attest to the success of the Project, which grew out of discussions at the French Broadcasting Company in Paris, and from a now “legendary” founders’ meeting that took place two decades ago. Since then, the Project has grown steadily, with great impetus for it provided by symposia held in Imatra, Helsinki, Edinburgh, Paris, Bologna, Aix en Provence, Imatra and Paris. Its flexible organisational structure and liberal-minded policies have guaranteed the Project’s unique nature as a point of contact for scholars from the most varied fields and backgrounds, its meetings serving as occasions to present “state-of-the art” ideas and results to an understanding, yet critically-minded, audience of specialists.

What is this all about? What unites these scholars who are so culturally, linguistically, educationally, epistemologically, and methodologically diverse? What distinguishes us from other researchers that explore the secrets and mysteries of music? Have we perhaps been *too* all-encompassing, too permissive, too ecumenical in our approaches? To the first question, it is no exaggeration to reply, that we are what all this is about. There is a continuing community that we can call *us*. And although, symptomatically and since the very beginning, no “official” unifying, common vocabulary or terminology has been used, we all share the feeling that music, for us, is something meaningful. It carries sense – signification, *meaning* – an aspect that, to us, is crucial, whether we be musicologists, or semioticians, or composers, performers and listeners.

Let us go back to our beginning. At one of our very first meetings in Imatra, we set as our objective to define a group of “Basic concepts of studies in musical signification”. The next step was to “musicalize” purely semiotic concepts, such as *icon, index, isotopy, seme, signifier, modality*, and many. Going further, we then set out to “semiotize” purely musicological concepts, such as *style, form, strategy, tension, temporality, instrumentation, beat, accent, notation* and the like. Our sincere intention was “to provide a kind of standardized international vocabulary for scholars” (Tarasti 1987: 406). Was this goal realized? Not yet, I am afraid. For early on the group’s interest began to take other directions, either toward preoccupation with pre-established background theories and methodologies, or toward attempts at innovation in emerging empirical fields of application. One of our new objectives became that of demonstrating that musical semiotics is not a kind of “esoteric secret science, the occupation of few specialists, a science detached from ‘normal’ musicological research, not to mention from the praxis of musicians” (Tarasti 1994: v).

Two wise decisions were taken during that early phase of the Project – wise as regarding its future: no one tried to take over or “kidnap” the Project and subordinate it to the ideas of one particular or special school of semiotics or theory. Second, even the term “semiotics” was avoided in the title of the group; instead, we spoke of “signification”. I do not believe that this title – *musical signification*

– has in any way become outdated or imprecise. Of course, semiotics itself is by no means “dead”, though every now and then, with either joy or alarm, certain voices inform us of its “disappearance”. No: the only difference between the situation in 2005 and 1985 is that we no longer live in the era of things “post-” (poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism...), but rather in the age of what I have called *Neosemiotics*. It is characteristic of our age no longer to start from any ready-made, axiomatic semiotic school or method, but rather from *one* key-concept or term or idea, or from one special musical problem, situation or fact, which is then elucidated by various, freely combined methods, which are borrowed as necessary from different fields.

After our congress in Bologna in November 1996, the situation of the Musical Signification Project looked like this, in the eyes of one of the conference organizers, Luca Marconi:

Although its members greatly differ in both methodology and vocabulary, they share a common strategy, which may be summarized in the following points:

- each of the participants ... places great importance within his/her research on the concept of “musical signification” (regardless of the meaning which each participant assigns to such a term);
- an attempt is made to promote as much as possible an interest in this concept within the many disciplines in which the participants are involved;
- in particular, opportunities for collective discussion are sought which examine the role played by this concept in current research. (Marconi 1998: 19)

This programmatic declaration emphasizes the polysemous nature of “signification”, leaving it open to many interpretations, to interdisciplinarity, to intertextuality, and hence to collective discussion. And indeed, the next congress, after Bologna, followed along those lines. To this, we must add how Costin Miereanu defined the Project after the Paris congress (ICMS 4) held in 1994: “... vaste entreprise inter-universitaire et internationale... qui propose une réflexion scientifique novatrice sur l’interface esthétique-sémiotique musicale” (Miereanu 1998: xx).

Fitting well with that description, every congress of the Project has drawn

a group of “the faithful”, who consistently attend and engage with each other. At the same time, many new faces appear at these gatherings, assuring that the content and ambience of each congress remains fresh and innovative, while reflecting also the distinctive academic environment of the particular congress site and country.

The theme for the ICMS 7, held for the second time in Imatra, leapt spontaneously to the minds of the organizers: *Music and the Arts*. This classical confrontation was cast in quite new lights at the Imatra meeting. Music, in some of its forms, declares itself to be autonomous and absolute, but as Yuri Lotman of the Tartu-Moscow school has said, no sign system can function alone, isolated from other texts. Correspondences and interrelationships among the arts have always formed a fertile sole from which musical meanings grow, as proven by the variety of topics at the Imatra congress, with its sessions dedicated to Ekphrasis, Spectromorphology, Interpretation, Music Semiotic Theory, Music and Painting, Pragmatism, Musical Aesthetics, Topics, Narrativity, Music and Media, Musical Discourse, Opera, Literature, Music History, Hermeneutics, Dance, and Music Psychology. This anthology gathers the presentations about those topics, now in more refined form, since the authors have had ample time to revise their texts and views.

New and relevant texts have been added to those from the congress. For much has happened between the time of the congress (June 2001) and today. New, sister-projects have emerged, including the Music and Media Group directed by Susana Gonzales, Heloisa de Araujo Duarte Valente and Erkki Pekkilä; the Prenatal Musical Signification Research Group, organized around the theme “Globalità di linguaggi” founded by Stefania Lisi and Gino Stefani; the Musical Meaning Group in Denmark, headed by Cynthia Grund; the Music and Language group at Aix en Provence; the Musikeion online discussion group of José Luiz Martinez; the Research Project on the Musical Behaviour of Animals led by Dario Martinelli; various projects, headed by Costin Miereanu, of the IDEAC at the Sorbonne; the Res Facta Nova publishing series, based on work by Polish musicologists and semioticians such as Michał Bristiger and Maciej Jabłoński; the

quite new research project on existential semiotics in music; and the list could continue. For example, at this very moment, new and important monographs continue to appear – testimonies to the vast range of current musical and semi-otic erudition (for instance, the new series on musical meaning, launched and directed by Robert S. Hatten, published by Indiana University Press).

Given all this positive activity, we can again say: the history and the facts speak for themselves. Our approach to music and meaning needs no further defense, explanation, or queries concerning any dubious *raison d'être*. The essays in this anthology speak for themselves.

I extend my sincerest thanks to my editors Paul Forsell and Rick Littlefield for their devoted work, as well as to Jean-Marie Jacono and Beat Foellmi for revising some of the texts written in French and German.

Helsinki, July 2005

Eero Tarasti

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