JEAN-JACQUES NATTIEZ

Music and Discourse

Toward a Semiology of Music

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LATED BY CAROLYN ABBATE

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Preface

THIS BOOK is based upon a hypothesis that I shall immediately state: the musical work is not merely what we used to call the "text"; it is not merely a whole composed of "structures" (I prefer, in any case, to write of "configurations"). Rather, the work is also constituted by the procedures that have engendered it (acts of composition), and the procedures to which it gives rise: acts of interpretation and perception.

These three large categories define a total musical fact (I use "total musical fact" in Mauss's sense of the "total social fact"). They can be called the neutral or immanent level, the poietic level, and the esthesic level. To say that the work—whether score or sound waves—cannot be understood without knowing either how it was composed or how it is perceived might *seem* terribly banal, but is in reality just the opposite. We should think, for example, of the traditional assumptions of various types of musical analysis. In conventional analysis, the musical work may be reduced completely to its immanent properties. This, broadly sketched, is the structuralist position—yet it is also, in what is only ostensibly a paradox, the position taken by a great number of musicologists and music theorists. For others, the work is of no interest except in its relation to an act of composition or to a set of conditions surrounding its creation. This is, obviously, a composer's point of view, but it has wider currency as well. Still others regard the work as having no reality except as perceived. This is a popular position, and is indeed the "common sense" view of the matter.

If, however, musical analysis shows *how a work of art functions*, it is impossible to reduce that work to only one of its three dimensions. The work's immanent "configurations" do not harbor the secrets of compositional processes or of perceptive behaviors. Knowledge of history or culture does not suffice to explain why the work is what it is; the work can no longer be shrunk to that which we perceive in it. The *essence* of a musical work is at once its genesis, its organization, and the way it is perceived. For this reason, musicology, music analysis, and even approaches to musical interpretation that are less specialized or "scientific," require a theory that deals with the practical, methodological, and epistemological results of this holistic vision of music. I shall call this general theory *musical semiology*.

Stated thus, musical semiology may well seem ambitious. True, each of the three points of view defined above springs from particular (and often limited) biases of the various specialists. The music historian is scarcely concerned with perception. Work done by a theorist of achronic bent, or an experimentalist inclined toward perceptive mechanisms, may seem questionable when no appeal to history is made. My deep conviction, however, is that the problems and contradictions endemic to discourse about music, and particularly to the various types of music analysis, stem from the fact that its practitioners rarely bear in mind the coexistence of the three levels. I therefore consider it crucial to encompass through a large-scale synthesis all the results of this tripartitional conception of semiology as applied to "thinking about music."

I have adopted a particular organizational strategy in this book—one that is, I think, fully justified by the complexity of the problems explored here. Chapter 1 is an introductory chapter that lays out the tripartitional model of semiology, which I have borrowed from Jean Molino (from whose benign authority I have not, I hope, gone far astray). Given the rich history of semiology as a discipline, I have not reviewed each and every semiological theory currently on the market, nor have I tried to evaluate their applicability to music. From studies in the field of general semiology, I have kept only what I considered indispensible if the reader (musician or nonmusician) is to grasp the shape of my arguments, among which are Peirce's concept of the interpretant, as well as Granger's. I compare the theory of the tripartition to theoretical work (the most familiar in the field) done by Jakobson and Eco, in order to define one unique aspect of the stance taken in this volume: that *semiology is not the science of communication.*

Part I (Chapters 2–5) is intended to demonstrate the relevance of a tripartitional conception of the musical fact by examining basic concepts, as well as classic areas of musicological study: the concept of music, that of the musical work, the status of the sound-object in electro-acoustic music, and the nature of musical symbolism. In passing, I touch upon sensitive questions such as the universals of music and the diverse orientations of musical aesthetics.

Part II (Chapters 6–8) is intended to define the semiological status of discourse about music, since—if the theory of the tripartition may be applied to all human activities and endeavors—metalanguages can serve as the object of a similar approach. This survey constitutes the

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theoretical basis of certain music-analytical problems to be taken up in future volumes.

In a concluding section (Chapter 9), I attempt to explain how musical theory and musical analyses are *symbolic constructions* (as I define the term throughout this book). I refer to the example of harmonic theory, and demonstrate how abstract theoretical concepts introduced in Parts I and II can be applied to interpreting multiple analyses of the Tristan Chord.[1]

Throughout this book I shall appeal to certain concepts critical to my conception of musical semiology; among them are the concept of *plot*, borrowed from the historian Paul Veyne, and the notion of *autonomization of parameters*, adopted from the work of musicologist Leonard Meyer.

This book constitutes the first volume of an extended study of musical semiology, and deals (as the title suggests) with a general theory of both musical discourse and discourse about music. Further volumes will evaluate different analytical models, both in Western music and ethnomusicology, and propose various concrete semiological analyses, derived from the tripartitional model set out in this book. I shall above all attempt to demonstrate how analysis of the *work* and of *style* involves the three semiological levels—poietic, neutral, and esthesic. The properly music-analytical part of the next volume will present a critical examination of important writers of the twentieth century: Schoenberg, Schenker, Réti, Forte, Meyer, Lerdahl and Jackendoff. I will conclude with reflections on the epistemological nature of musical analysis, and the affinities between musical semiology and hermeneutics.

To the readers of my previous book, *Fondements d'une sémiologie de la musique* (1975), I should point out that this is a completely rewritten work. I wanted to take account not only of my own intellectual evolution, but also of a rich variety of research that has been brought to my attention since 1975. I have occasionally adopted certain passages from my earlier book; these are indicated in the notes. As for the remainder of this book, certain sections are heretofore unpublished, while others are adapted from articles published in various places over the past ten years.

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[1] The French edition, published in 1987 by Christian Bourgois, contained a third part, a French translation of articles on melody, harmony, rhythm, and tonality that were originally written for the *Enciclopedia Einaudi*. On the suggestion of the American publisher and my translator, these sections were omitted from the present volume, since English-speaking readers (unlike French and Italian-speaking readers for whom the articles were originally conceived) have access to entries on these topics in works such as the *New Grove* or the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*. It was our collective opinion that anglophone readers would be much more familiar with the variations in, and the difficulties of, defining such parameters, and that the new concluding Chapter 9, which in some ways anticipates future volumes by demonstrating the concrete applications of concepts introduced in Volume 1, would be more appropriate for this audience.

In the process of reworking my original ideas, I have also taken into account the numerous reviews of the *Fondements*.[2] Though these reviews occasionally displayed a certain epistemological sectarianism, though they sometimes made obvious interpretive errors (which I shall address), these exhaustive discussions (conducted, for the most part, on a very high level) have allowed me understand the context of many misunderstandings. I have by no means taken offense at being misunderstood—indeed, it would be in every way contrary to the spirit of semiology as I practice it to react in such a way; as Popper wrote, "it is impossible to speak in a manner that is *never* misunderstood" (1981: 48). I would like to thank all those who, having taken the time to scrutinize my writing, inspired me to better formulation of my thoughts.

My thanks are due equally to those who, in the past fifteen years, have shared in discussions of my concerns, too numerous to be mentioned here. I would like, however, to mention those who have played major roles in my decision to undertake this project, especially Craig Ayrey, Patrick Carnegy, Rossana Dalmonte, and Jonathan Dunsby. Pierre Boulez, Irène and Célestin Deliège, Jean-Claude Gardin, Gilles-Gaston Granger, Georges Mounin, Nicolas Ruwet, and Paul Veyne have in their various ways influenced the unfolding of the book. I wish to express special thanks to Jean Molino, to whom the book is dedicated, for the numerous conversations, suggestions, and comments he has tendered during the twenty years in which I have been involved with musical semiology. Finally, however, I should not close this English edition without thanking both Carolyn Abbate, who not only played a decisive role in the book's acceptance for English-language publication, but also undertook a difficult translation with skill and finesse (and in some places greatly improved my original text), and Walter Lippincott, director of Princeton University Press, who has supported the project from the beginning. The list of acknowledgments, together with my bibliography, bears witness (I hope) to my aspirations: I perceive myself as making a synthesis, and entering into a dialogue with my colleagues. I hardly need to say that

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[2] Cf. Boilès 1975; Dunsby 1977, 1983; Godzich 1978; Hatten 1980; Imberty 1976; Laske 1977; Lidov 1978; Lortat-Jacob 1976; Malson 1976; Merkelbach 1977; Noske 1979; Osmond-Smith 1976; Schneider 1980; Scruton 1978; Stefani 1980; Subotnik 1976; Tarrab 1976.

I do not pretend to have answers for all the questions raised by a semiology of music. Yet by orienting those questions around Molino's theory, I hope at least to measure up to expectations that I have sensed, time and time again, in the numerous anonymous interlocutors that I have encountered over the years.

One evening, watching a performance of Kawan Kyulit[3] by the students at Wesleyan University, I was amused to hear the puppets perform the following dialogue:[4]

"What are you studying?"

"Ethnomusicology."

"What courses do you have to take?"

"A survey of world musics, techniques of transcription and field methods, history of ethnomusicology . . ."

"Huh! and what else?"

"They're having me learn a little information theory, a little linguistics, a little anthropology."

"That's a really interesting combination. What else?"

"Musical semiology . . ."

"Huh? What's musical semiology?"

"To tell the truth, I'm not always sure."

I hope that this book will enable that student at Wesleyan to find an answer to his question—but if that proves impossible, then I hope at least to have provided material for a new comic sketch the next time they perform.

Montréal, November 1989

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[3] Javanese shadow-puppet theater, with gamelan accompaniment.

[4] In Kawan Kyulit, the actual musical sections are articulated by spoken and improvised dialogue, often dealing with local events.

Translator's Note

THE AUTHOR has taken the occasion of the English translation to introduce a number of revisions, both large and small, into the published French text; readers who compare the two versions will therefore discover that they sometimes diverge. A preliminary version of portions of Chapter 9 appeared as "Plot and Seriation Process in Music Analysis," *Music Analysis* 4 (1985), translated by Catherine Dale. Though I consulted Dale's felicitous rendering, I have made my own original translation of the material.

A word about one particular decision: I have throughout, retained the words *musicologie* and *musicologue* (musicology, musicologist) to refer respectively (as does Nattiez) to the investigation of all aspects of music and to any individual interpreting musical facts. French is more generous than English in this respect, allowing those whom our scholarly institutions prefer to separate—music historian, critic, theorist, analyst—to coexist fruitfully within the embrace of a single concern. This is a small gesture, but it expresses my conviction (as someone whose own work has resisted institutional taxonomies) that a Balkanization of musicology into history, criticism, theory, and analysis must be avoided. This unhappy separation serves only to limit dialogue and to foster misunderstanding—and as such is foreign to the spirit of a rich and engaged musical hermeneutics.

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Introduction

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1

A Theory of Semiology

1. The Sign

ALL THEORIES of semiology, general or applied, are based upon a definition of the sign. In my preface, I stated that I would neither rehash general treatises on semiology nor provide lengthy discussions on the nature of the sign. For present purposes it seems adequate to examine two approaches to the sign suggested by modern semiology.

The most famous definition is that of Ferdinand de Saussure, in the *Cours de linguistique générale*:[1] "the linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound—a purely physical thing—but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses: the sound-image is sensory, and if I happen to call it 'material,' it is only in that sense, and by way of opposing it to the other term of the association, the *concept*, which is generally more abstract" (1922: 98; English trans. 1959: 66). "I call the combination of a concept and a sound-image a *sign*, but in current usage the term generally designates only a sound-image, a word, for example (*arbor*, etc.). One tends to forget that *arbor* is called a sign only because it carries the concept 'tree,' with the result that the idea of the sensory part implies the idea of the whole. Ambiguity would disappear if the three notions involved were designated by three names, each suggesting and opposing the others. I propose to retain the word *sign* to designate the whole, and to replace *concept* and *sound-image* respectively by *signified* and *signifier*; the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from one another and from the whole of which they are parts" (1922: 99; trans. 1959: 67).

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[1] As chance would have it, the works of the two founders of modern semiology, Saussure and Peirce, remained incomplete. The *Cours de linguistique générale* of Saussure was written by two of his students, Bally and Séchehaye, who based their text on the notebooks of students who attended his lectures over the course of several years, from 1907 to 1911. The standard edition is that of 1922; we had to wait until 1968 for the publication of the complete edition of the students' notes (thanks to the labors of R. Engler).

There has been a great deal of discussion of what is known as Saussure's "psychologism," discussions inspired in particular by his notion of the "sound-image." For areas of studies devoted to Saussurian thought per se, this question may well still be of crucial interest. On the whole, however, posterity has preserved only one facet of this debate: the idea that the sign results from the union of the signified and the signifier, the latter being "a purely physical thing." This was especially true in the wake of Hjelmslev's reinterpretation of Saussure in his *Prolegomen to a Theory of Language* (1943), where the work of "depsychologization" was accomplished through a change in basic terminology: the signified becomes the "content" and the signifier becomes the "expression."

Saussure's definition is quite remarkable in that it implies two characteristics that tend to recur in all definitions of the sign:

(a) A sign is made up of two entities. That Saussure gave them particularly evocative names is one of his great merits.

(b) The relationship between these two entities is characterized by a process of *referring* [renvois]. Often this process is given the name *semiosis*.[2] The notion of referring connects modern semiology to the tradition of scholastic definitions of the sign, such as that of Augustin: *aliquid stat pro aliquo.*

(c) By making the sign a union of the signifier and the signified, Saussure conceived of the relationship between the two "faces" of the sign as stable and bi-univocal. Beyond this, the relationship is *arbitrary*:

> The idea of "sister" is not linked by any inner relationship with the succession of sounds "s-ö-r" which serves as its signifier in French; that it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by differences among languages and by the very existence of different languages: the signified "ox" has for its signifier "b-ö-f" on one side of the border and "o-k-s" (*Ochs*) on the other. (1922: 100; trans. 1959: 67–68)

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[2] According to the term popularized by Morris (1938: 1): "The procedure according to which something functions as a sign can be called *semiosis*."

(d) The following, however, is one of Saussure's most difficult ideas, because it is the most abstract: that the sign is characterized by its *value*. It does not exist within a *system* of signs except by opposition to and difference from the other signs in the same system. "Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others" (1922: 159; trans. 1959: 114). Saussure applies this idea of *value* both to the signified "face" and the signifier "face" of the sign. As soon as he writes that "phonemes are above all else opposing, relative, and negative entities" (1922: 164; trans. 1959: 119), he sets himself up as the precursor of phonology, and, by extension, of *structuralism* itself, even though the word "structure" never appears in the *Cours de linguistique générale*. In the Saussurian edifice, the notion of *value* demands that of interdependent relations. This is why Saussure is led to separate the synchronic from the diachronic (i.e., there is a *system* of language that is explicable independently of language's history), *langue* from *parole* (this system is embodied not on the level of individuals but in a linguistic collectivity), external from internal elements of language (the system exists only as relationships between internal elements).

(e) Finally, we can see that, in Saussure's view, structure is not possible in language unless the relationship between the signifier and the signified is stable.

Can we, however, rest content with this "static" conception of the sign? An example can be drawn, for the moment, from the realm of verbal language: forcing the signifier "happiness" to correspond to *one* signified, whose description could embrace the thing that all English-speaking individuals associate with the word "happiness" in every possible situation where the word might be used, would seem a difficult task indeed. We shall see presently that this reservation about the "static" sign is especially relevant to music. I have preferred for this reason, at an early stage in my argument, to employ both a conception of the sign proposed by American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, and that proposed in 1968 by Gilles-Gaston Granger (of Aix-en-Provence, currently professor at the Collège de France), a philosopher whose special field is symbolic systems. In his excellent book *Essai d'une philosophie du style*, he undertakes an examination of Peirce's semiotic triangle in the context of a discussion of formal and natural languages. Peirce's triangle, according to Granger, offers "perhaps the most suggestive schema for the functioning of linguistic signs, and signs in general" (1968: 113). According to Granger, who follows Peirce in this respect, a sign or "representamen" is "a thing which is connected in a certain way to a second sign, its 'object,' in such a way that it brings a third sign, its 'interpretant,' into a relationship with this same 'object,' and this in such a way that it brings a fourth sign into a relationship with this same 'object,' and so on ad infinitum" (1968: 114). Granger represents this graphically as in Figure 1.1. As Guy Bouchard has pointed out (1980: 342–43), Granger essentially proposes an amalgam of section 2.92 of Peirce[3] and other passages in which "things" are designated "signs." (cf. 2.228 and 2.94, as follows)

Rummaging through the *Collected Papers* for the years 1897 to 1906, I was able to turn up no fewer than twelve different definitions of the sign and the interpretant. (Nattiez 1979–1980)[4] To follow the arguments made below, we need only examine three of these definitions in some detail:

(1) "A sign, or *representamen,* is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I shall call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*" (2.228).

(2) "Genuine mediation is the characteristic of the *Sign.* A *Sign* is anything which is related to a second thing, its *object* in respect to a quality, in such a way as to bring a third thing, its *interpretant,* into relation to the same object, and that in such a way as to bring a fourth into relation to that same object in the same form, ad infinitum" (2.92).

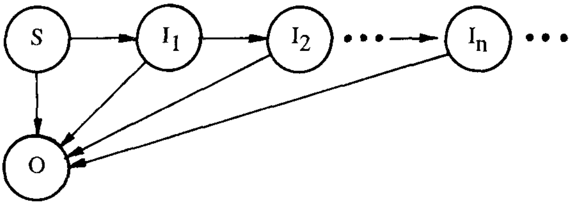

Figure 1.1

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[3] During his lifetime Peirce published only a small number of articles. His papers have since been collected into eight volumes, the *Collected Papers* of 1931–1935 and of 1958. His paragraphs are designated in the specialist literature by volume number, followed by the number of the actual paragraph. A critical chronological edition of Peirce's writings is currently being assembled.

[4] For an even more detailed study, the reader might consult Bouchard 1980: 343–54; Bouchard, with no pretense to exhaustiveness, studied twenty-one definitions of the sign in Peirce's writings, and organized them into a paradigmatic classification in three categories.

(3) "In consequence of every sign determining an interpretant, which is itself a sign, we have sign overlying sign" (2.94).

Peirce's thought is so complex, and so often contradictory, that reconstruction of *the* coherent Peircian doctrine seems at the present nearly impossible. Despite this, the various definitions of the sign and the interpretant—even in their very diversity—remain most suggestive. I shall derive one interpretation and one possible application of the "sign" from his ideas, yet—and clear understanding of this point is critical—neither the interpretation nor the application can correspond absolutely to any single, stable state of Peircian thought.[5]

The following characteristic points in Peirce's definition of the sign should, then, be kept in mind:

(a) Peirce's "sign" is clearly analogous to Saussure's "signifier." This should remind us that in current usage—as we saw from the preceding—the word "sign" designates only the "sound-image."

(b) Peirce inscribes himself into the scholastic line: for each individual, the sign refers to something other than itself.

(c) Peirce's first and greatest original idea is his notion that the thing to which the sign refers—that is, the interpretant—is also a *sign*. Why?

(d) Because (and this is another aspect of his originality) the process of referring effected by the sign is *infinite*.

(e) Though Peirce never states it explicitly, this leads us to conclude that the object of the sign is actually a *virtual* object,[6] that does not exist except within and through the infinite multiplicity of interpretants, by means of which the person *using* the sign seeks to *allude to* the object.

We might try grounding this discussion in the concrete through a small empirical experiment, returning to the example of the word "happiness." For each reader, the word will instantly "make sense." But what happens if we try to explain its content? In attempting to do this, a series of new *signs* occur to us—"bliss," "satisfaction," "contentment," "fulfillment," and so forth—*signs that vary from one reader to the next, according to the personal experiences of each.* For this reason it would be preferable, if possible, to substitute a *spatial* image in which interpretants appear to be caught in a web of multiple interactions, for the more conventional *linear* representation of an "infinite chain" of interpretants.

The thing to which the sign refers is thus contained within the *lived*

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[5] A recent study by Pierre Thibaud (1983) seems to advance as far as possible toward a reconstitution of the organization of Peirce's thought, and does so with all necessary prudence.

[6] Jean Molino; personal communication with the author.

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