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Humane Music and semantic analysis

What is music and what can it do? Wherein consists its value? These questions are repeatedly asked. But they are answered in different ways, evidently in accordance with one's epistemological position.

In my opinion, music is no mere sound play, no mere acoustic stimulus, and no mere kaleidoscope of tones, but an art with a significant anthropological reference. As a vivid utterance of the human being, it has a human and humane substratum. It is "made" by people, and often is dedicated to people. And it is above all designed for people. It basically has a psychological, spiritual and social depth dimension.¹

Many, moreover, believe that art is embedded in life and in a socio-cultural connection fulfills a variety of functions. In my view, music always has to do with human experience. It copies, not the reality of the quotidian, but the verity of human beings as such, including thus the absurd, the crazy, the mannered, the realm of dreams, the complete human cosmos, in which the imagination constitutes a highly relevant domain.

1 Constantin Floros, *Humanism, Love and Music*, transl. E. Bernhardt-Kabisch, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2012; Idem, *Entwurf einer integralen Musikwissenschaft*, „Hamburger Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft“, 1999, Vol. 16, pp. 15-22.

Composers write their works for themselves, for a client, for people with whom they are in a relationship, for the general public or for posterity. Many composers have specific intentions, send out messages, desire to effectuate something with their music. The task, then, is gently to bring these intentions to light.

The legends of Greek antiquity ascribe a magical power to music, a preternatural effect. The quintessence of the Orpheus myth is the belief that music can enchant not only the human being but all of nature, every living thing. The singing of Orpheus tames the wild animals, casts a spell on plants and trees, and overcomes the dark monsters of the underworld. His music can melt even stones.

If one scans the musicology of the last seven or eight decades, one is confronted with numerous directions, tendencies and trends. One thing, however, seems to be typical of nearly all of them: the will to abstraction, the endeavor to study the works of art in and for themselves, searching for certain higher inherent laws. In the process, the artist him- or herself is often pushed to the periphery of the view. In time, it became fashionable to speak with contempt, or at least condescension, of "biographism" and "content aesthetics."

For several decades, the so-called structural analysis was at a premium, while biographic research was not only ill-famed, but downright despised. The consequence of such a commitment to specialization inevitably resulted in a worrisome narrowing of the scholarly horizon. Everything not directly related to the structure of the work being discussed was deliberately left out of consideration or at most shunted toward other disciplines. Fortunately, scientific cognition rarely stagnates completely.

New questions demand new methodologies. In the last forty years, the view has gained ground that a work of art is no mere artifact but frequently also reflects the personality of the author. No less a one than Robert Schumann wrote to his beloved Clara Wieck in April of 1838:

Everything that happens in the world affects me, politics, literature, people – I think about everything in my way, which then wants to vent itself, find a way out through music. That is also why so many of my compositions are so hard to understand, often also have meanings, because everything that is remarkable about the time grips me and I must then express it musically.²

2 Clara and Robert Schumann, *Briefwechsel. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 1, ed. E. Weissweiler, Stroemfeld, Roter Stern, Basel–Frankfurt 1984 and 1987, p. 146.

What Schumann here says about himself applies to the greatest composers of the 19th and 20th century, starting with Ludwig van Beethoven and leading up to Richard Strauss, Arnold Schönberg and Alban Berg. Many of them let themselves be stimulated in their production by personal experiences, existential questions, religious and philosophic problems, as well as social and political ideas. The exploration of their many-faceted spiritual-intellectual world constitutes an indispensable precondition for a deeper understanding of their works and demands of necessity excursions into psychology and psychoanalysis, into the regions of theology, and into contemporary sociopolitical and cultural history.

To illustrate what has been said with some concrete examples: can one research Johann Sebastian Bach's sacred music without any acquaintance with Lutheran theology? Can works by Beethoven such as the historico-allegorical ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus*, the "Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un Eroe" from the *Piano Sonata in A-flat Major* op. 26, the magnificent *Eroica* op. 55, the *Seventh Symphony* op. 92 or *Wellington's Victory or the Battle of Victoria* op. 91 be understood without knowledge of the events of the time and Beethoven's political commitments? Is it possible to comprehend Schumann's piano music, such as the *Dauidsbüdlerltänze* op. 6, the *Carnaval* op. 9, the *Phantasiestücke* op. 12, the *Kreisleriana* op. 16 without any contextual consideration of pertinent literary works, for example, by Jean Paul or E.T.A. Hoffmann? For that matter, can one interpret the music of a lied, a cantata, an oratorio, an opera, a music drama or an action ballet without first studying and exhaustively x-raying the texts or the choreographic scenario on which they are based?

One should therefore ask: is Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* "absolute" music, or does it rather belong to the genre of "Music as Message"? Can one understand great works like Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony* or the *Symphony of a Thousand* without any knowledge of his religiosity and his weltanschauung? Are not nearly all of Alban Berg's works conceived autobiographically, and is not the concept of "Music as Autobiography" increasingly gaining in importance?

It also needs no lengthy argument to realize that such central themes as, e.g., the Orpheus myth can be treated only in interdisciplinary fashion,

that is, in coordination with general historical, philological, psychoanalytic approaches and references to the history of religion, art and music.

It is high time to admit: the focus of musicology on philological, archival, genuinely music-historical or exclusively structural questions does not suffice. It is indispensable to turn our interest onto the whole, in other words, to enlarge the research horizon to include psychological, religious and historical aspects. It is imperative to recognize the complexity of music and the creative process and to give interpretation the requisite elbow room. To simply ignore the spiritual depth dimension of important musical art works and to limit oneself to the investigation of the "tonal body": to me there is no greater aberration. It is equally disastrous that the exploration of the eminently important area of musical *expression* is literally still in its infancy.

Interdisciplinary research will be a boon to all areas of musicology. Ethnomusicology, for example, has already greatly profited by it. Its importance manifests itself not least in questions of semantics – a crucial point, in which music differs from language. In contrast to language, which has a sharpened semantics at its disposal, musical at is by nature semantically vague. Nevertheless, composers have managed at all times to endow their works with extra-musical meaning: by means of quotations, allusions to their own or others' works, musico-rhetorical figures, leitmotifs and "characteristic" motifs, leitrhythms, leitharmonies and idiophonic tonal symbols of all kinds.³

Of the Bach research one can say that it is among the hitherto most thoroughly investigated areas of our discipline. Johann Sebastian Bach's biography has been reconstructed down to the smallest detail. The basic features of his musical language lie open before us. Both his secular and his sacred works have been repeatedly discussed in detail. Martin Petzoldt recently presented voluminous analyses of the sacred cantatas from their theological as well as their musicological aspects – no doubt a milestone in the history of musical research.⁴ Yet even in this area much remains to

3 C. Floros, *Gustav Mahler*, Vol. 1-3, Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden 1977-1985; Idem, „Auch das Schöne muß sterben“: Brahms' „Nänie“ op. 82 [in:] H. Geyer, W. Osthoff (eds), *Schiller und die Musik*, Böhlau Verlag, Cologne–Weimar–Vienna 2007, pp. 395-408.

4 Martin Petzoldt, *Bach-Kommentar. Theologisch-musikwissenschaftliche Kommentierung der geistlichen Vokalwerke Johann Sebastian Bachs. 2. Die geistlichen Kantaten vom 1. Advent bis zum Trinitätsfest*, „Schriftenreihe der Internationalen Bachakademie Stuttgart“, ed. N. Bolin, Vol. 14.2, Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart, Bärenreiter, Stuttgart–Kassel 2007.

be done. A future task will be to clarify how exactly Bach translates his theological thinking into music.

In my research work, sketch analysis occupies a large space. I intensively study sketches by Beethoven, Schumann, Bruckner, Mahler, Schönberg, Berg and György Ligeti. That has been, and is, essential for two reasons: the sketches yield valuable insights into the genetic process of the composition and often also include verbal notes that illuminate the spiritual-intellectual background of the works. Of special significance for the intentions of the composers are also their letters, diaries and occasional written publications. Let there be no objection that these sources are subjectively colored and therefore irrelevant to research and masking the real facts.

An interdisciplinary opening of musicology naturally presupposes more intensive studies in several areas and a more comprehensive training of instructors and students. That will also improve the chances that our discipline, about which many do not know what it is good for and what it accomplishes, will be reaccepted into the ranks of the humanities and cultural studies.

In his book *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, Friedrich Nietzsche, who, we know, had a special relation to music, writes:

Individuals who have lagged behind in their musical development can experience the same composition *purely formalistically* where the musically advanced will understand everything *symbolically*.⁵

That wise observation could serve as a motto to any treatise about musical semantics.

The fundamental question concerning the relation of language and music is still a subject of vehement controversy. While some scholars regard speech and music as wholly different media, others speak of the “*quasi-linguistic*” quality of music.⁶ They point out that music has a grammar, logic and syntax, as well as a vocabulary, albeit one that is subject to constant change. In the Baroque period, music, as tonal language, frequently oriented itself in terms of rhetoric, theoreticians spoke of it as “*sound speech*,” and even today we use syntactic terms when, in analyzing

5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, Vol. 1 §215 [in:] *Werke*, Vol. 1, ed. K. Schlechta, p. 573.

6 Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, *Fragment über Musik und Sprache* [in:] *Idem, Quasi una fantasia*, pp. 9-16.

pre-Classical and Classical compositions, we speak of periods, *hauptsatz* and *nebensatz*.

In one crucial respect, of course, tonal language differs fundamentally from verbal language: it has no meaning except in a musical context. This point is time and again cited by philosophers as a decisive argument against the “quasi-linguistic” character of music but has to be clearly qualified, inasmuch as many musicians circumscribe the semantics of their music by diverse means.

The psychology of music has long since recognized that low notes are associated with volume and large size, high ones with slenderness and brightness.⁷ High and low, loud and soft, shrill and euphonious pertain to the realm of synaesthesia, the coupling of physically separate areas of sense perception.⁸ Parallel to that, a “conventional” sound symbolism has evolved since the 16th, which is still valid in part in the 19th century. Major and minor are generally known to represent contrary moods. Italian theoreticians link these modes to the distinction between *musica allegra* and *musica mesta*, “cheerful” and “sad” music.⁹ In addition, the sound of specific instruments is associated with extra-musical concepts. The sound of horns reminds us of the chase, that of trumpets of festivities and demonstrations of power, trombone choruses make us think of funeral scenes, while organ music evokes the ecclesiastical, the religious, the transcendent.

Theoretical inquiries of the last several decades have revolutionized the methodology of almost all the sciences of art. It became gradually clear that not only language but also music in the final analysis serves the purpose of communication.¹⁰ In a certain way, both language and music can be defined as communicative systems. The composer can thus be compared to a transmitter, who sends a message to a recipient, and the way the recipient reacts is fully informative for the sender. In this way, communication occurs between a composer and a listener as it does between an author and his reader.¹¹ These reflections about interaction

7 Albert Wellek, *Musikpsychologie und Musikästhetik*, Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft, Frankfurt am Main 1963, p. 38ff.

8 Ibidem, p. 103, 166ff.

9 C. Floros, *Humanism, Love and Music...*, op. cit., p. 37.

10 Umberto Eco, *Einführung in die Semiotik*, Fink, Munich 1972; John Lyons, *Semantik*, Vol. 1-2, Beck'sche Elementarbücher, Munich 1980.

11 *Rezeptionsästhetik. Theorie und Praxis*, ed. R. Warning, Fink, Munich 1975.

also make novel demands on analysis, on appreciation, evaluation and judgment.

The chief concern of musical inventory has always been to analyze the structure of a composition, in other words, to find out how it is put together. But it must not be forgotten that not everything in the musical work of art is structure and that stylistic criticism without content analysis is of little profit. The spirit of a work does not reveal itself only in its technical dimensions but also in its expression, its unique musical language, in its form of representation, in its alternating characters, and in its content, which in many instances means its extra-musical message. Music has an important psychological and spiritual dimension, which requires clarification as much as the structure does.

One could also put it this way: a musical work of art is in no way a "windowless monad," as Adorno¹² says, which one can elucidate only by an immanent procedure, from within. Rather, it can also be viewed and illuminated *ab extra*, and the aim of semantic analysis consists not only in bringing art-immanent secret programs to light, but in defining the "expression" of music and the "spirit" of the work of art objectively and systematically.

According to my firm conviction, no musical analysis can be successful if it is pursued only *an sich*, by itself, in isolation from the biography of the artist, detached from his personality and his spiritual-intellectual world. A profitable semantic analysis presupposes several things. To begin with, it requires a clarification of the biographic situation in which the work of art has come about. Many compositions are commissioned works, or were intended for individuals, with whom the artist had a personal relationship. Important here are the specific occasion of the work, dedications and dedicatees. Equally indispensable are the details of the work's genetic history, because they can yield additional insight into the composition besides structure and genesis. In recent years, researches of the sketches of Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schönberg and Alban Berg have thus led to sensational results.

A thorough knowledge of the intellectual interests of the author, his music-aesthetic preconditions and, above all, his intentions are further presuppositions for the semantic analysis. It should hardly need emphasizing that the psychological cosmos and the manifold spiritual

12 Th.W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1970, p. 15.

world of the author are reflected in his oeuvre – from which it would follow of necessity that his literary impulses, philosophic insights and religious experiences and/or his social engagement should be included in our considerations.

But the most important precondition of semantic analysis is the systematic exploration of the composer's musical symbolism. Charging the music with significant content in the 19th and 20th century is done by means of quotations from oneself or others, allusions to works of other composers, idiophonic (self-sounding) instruments and sound symbols, and musical character pieces, such as instrumental recitative and arioso, chorale and lied without words, march and funeral march, exequies music, pastoral, ländler and other dance characters. Composers also semanticize their music by means of numerological games, anagrams and all kinds of cryptograms. We need to think only of Alban Berg's magic fate number, the "23."¹³

If one keeps all of that in view, one will understand what Gustav Mahler meant when he told his confidante, Natalie Bauer-Lechner, as noted, in 1896:

All communication between the composer and the listener rests on the convention: that the latter will accept this or that motif or musical symbol, or whatever else one may want to call it, as the expression of this or that idea or actual spiritual content. Everybody will be especially aware of this in Wagner; but Beethoven, too, and more or less every other composer has his special, generally accepted expression for everything he wants to say. But my language people have not yet entered into. They have no inkling as to what I am saying and what I mean, and it seems senseless and incomprehensible to them.¹⁴

Reception aestheticians point out that the interpretation of works of art is subject to constant change in the course of time. That is certainly so. It is all the more important therefore to extract the intention the author, in this case the composer, had in conceiving his work. And as for the history of interpretation: it would have to be measured not least by the authorial intention.

13 C. Floros, *Alban Berg. Music as Autobiography*, Peter Lang, New York 2014.

14 Idem, *Gustav Mahler...*, op. cit.; Idem, *Gustav Mahler's Mental World*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2016; Idem, *Gustav Mahler and the Symphony of the 19th Century*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2014; Idem, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*, Amadeus Press, Portland 1993.

Notes and scores by Robert Schumann, Hector Berlioz, Richard Wagner, Franz Liszt, Richard Strauss, Gustav Mahler and Alban Berg cannot be interpreted without the incorporation of semantic questions. The “poetic” element is present in all of them. The method of semantic analysis developed by me is at the base of almost all of my books. I should cite here my Mahler trilogy, as well as my books about Beethoven’s *Eroica*, about Wolfgang Amadé Mozart, Johannes Brahms, Anton Bruckner, Alban Berg, György Ligeti, and the books *Humanism, Love and Music* (Peter Lang, 2012; German orig. 2000), *Music as Message* (Peter Lang, 2016; German orig. 1989) and *Listening and Understanding. The Language of Music and How to Interpret It* (Peter Lang, 2017; German orig. 2008).

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Muzyka humanistyczna w analizie semantycznej

Streszczenie

Według mnie, muzyka to nie jedynie zabawa dźwiękiem czy bodziec akustyczny, nie tylko kalejdoskop brzmień, lecz sztuka z ważnym odniesieniem antropologicznym. Jako intensywny wyraz działalności człowieka, posiada ludzkie i humanistyczne podłoże. Jest „tworzona” przez ludzi i często ludziom dedykowana. A przede wszystkim jest stworzona specjalnie dla ludzi. Posiada głęboki wymiar psychologiczny, duchowy i społeczny.

Badania teoretyczne ostatnich kilku dziesięcioleci zrewolucjonizowały pod względem metodologicznym prawie wszystkie nauki o sztuce. Stopniowo stało się jasne, że w ostatecznej analizie nie tylko sam język, ale i muzyka stanowi cel komunikacyjny. Na swój sposób, zarówno język, jak i muzyka mogą być zdefiniowane jako systemy komunikacyjne. Tak więc kompozytor mógłby być porównany do nadawcy, który przesyła wiadomość do odbiorcy, a to, jak ten ostatni reaguje, stanowi informację dla tego pierwszego. W ten sposób następuje komunikacja pomiędzy kompozytorem i słuchaczem, tak samo, jak pomiędzy autorem i czytelnikiem. Tego typu podejście interakcyjne tworzy nowe wyzwania dla analizy, uznania, ewaluacji i oceny.

Jestem głęboko przekonany, że żadna analiza dzieła muzycznego nie może skończyć się powodzeniem, jeśli patrzy się na konkretne dzieło w odosobnieniu, nie zważając na biografię artysty, na jego osobowość czy jego własny, duchowo-intelektualny wszechświat. Skuteczna analiza semantyczna zakłada wiele warunków. Po pierwsze, wymaga wyjaśnienia sytuacji biograficznej, w której dane dzieło sztuki zaistniało. Wiele kompozycji powstało na zamówienie lub też z myślą o konkretnych jednostkach, z którymi artystę łączyły różne relacje osobiste.

Ważne tutaj są czynniki takie jak konkretna okazja powstania, przeznaczenie i osoby, którym to dzieło jest dedykowane. Tak samo niezastąpione są szczegóły genezy konkretnego utworu, jako że mogą zapewnić dodatkowy wgląd w samą kompozycję, obok struktury i genezy. W ostatnich latach, tego typu badania dotyczące notatek Gustava Mahlera, Arnolda Schönberga, czy Albana Berga doprowadziły do wręcz sensoryjnych wniosków.

Słowa kluczowe: wymiary muzyki, hermeneutyka, semantyka

Keywords: dimensions of music, hermeneutics, semantics