Can one speak of meaning in music?

Historical Perspectives

Unlike most fundamental concepts drawn from linguistics, the term “semantics” poses severe definition problems for linguists themselves. Through their interest in the meaning of music, some researchers including musicians and amateurs claim that music, like language, is a signifying symbolic system. Thus, in the absence of other available models likely to account for meaning production beyond the limits of language, many have considered linguistic signification to be the privileged model of all meaning par excellence.

J.-J. Nattiez\(^1\) clearly states that the expression “music semantics” as such was absent prior to R. Frances' publications\(^2\). M. Imberty\(^3\) has delved deep into the question of meaning by devoting a significant part of his experimental research to psychological semantics of music. For all the works under scrutiny, he has compiled characteristic traits within Brahms' and Debussy's semantic styles from an inventory and classification of verbal responses associated to musical fragments by initiated listeners.

Long before and in an entirely different perspective, A. Daniélou\(^4\) broached the subject of semantics in relation to extra-European cultures through a comparative/descriptive approach. Among his publications, one must remember *Sémantique musicale* and *Traité de musicologie comparée*.

B. Lortat-Jacob's writings on Sardinian religious singing and S. Arom's on the musics of the Aka in Central Africa have significantly contributed to the current state of ethnomusicological research through an intersection of musicological and anthropological perspectives (cognitive aspects of orally-transmitted musics). They have also drawn attention to epistemological questions and to the uncertainties surrounding music semantics.

Definition Problems

Although located at a general level, the issues this article raises in relation to semantics indicate the extent to which they affect both popular and Western art musics. Thus the central problem of semantics will be examined through a survey of significant works about so-called Western art musics, with particular attention devoted to semiotics and explicit references to non-written, extra-European musics. At first, I shall discuss the semantic fact and the very possibility of a discipline of

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1 In a seminar held at the École Normale Supérieure de Paris (Bd. Jourdan) in 2003, J.-J. Nattiez devoted two classes to an introduction and an overview of the history of music. He discussed relativist, feminist and culturalist positions in postmodernity through an examination of different historical approaches to 20th century music including those of Adorno and Deliège. Finally, his concluding remarks revolved around issues within historical knowledge in relation to analysis, value judgement and ethnomusicology.


musical semantics. Rather than offering an *a priori* definition, I shall be dealing with issues related to the study of meaning as it pertains to music. The first question concerns the possibility of speaking of semantics in music: such a problem is quite distinct from any other problem concerning descriptions of phenomena. My aim is therefore twofold: raising questions about the object and its field of study as well as about the discipline's problems and its conceptual tools. When speaking of musical semantics, definition and methodology problems invariably arise since both aspects are inextricably bound to each other.

Back in the 1970's, linguist J. Molino⁵ offered a general definition of semantic phenomena. In an intriguing yet extremely condensed overview, he emphasized human action as symbolic production. The term “symbolic” is based on notions advanced by psychologists such as J. Piaget whose attention was more particularly focused on the brain's cognitive functioning. The notion of symbolic form fundamentally rests upon the constructing character of human beings' symbolic activity. When humans act and produce musical or verbal texts, something constructive is then produced as a result⁶. Likewise, the perception of words in a sentence or of a work of art (whether visual or auditory) is an active process involving reconstruction of perceived reality. Through listening, we process sound information and we seek to give meaning to the perceived reality through comparison in order to reach understanding as to how musical elements organize themselves in a musical sequence.

Relying upon the notion of extrinsic attributes, J. Molino assumes that, from a semiotic point of view, a connection between an object and its historical and cultural horizons may be established in all symbolic realms⁷ (whether music, language, cinema or theatre). His definition of the sign draws from C. S. Peirce's approach to semiotic relationships as the link between a sign in its materiality and infinite displacement of interpretants⁸. Rather than basing a definition of semantics on the well-known opposition between signifier and signified derived from F. de Saussure, such a definition turns out to be potentially relevant as it seeks to unfold the multiplicity of perspectives on the object and its referrals that researchers are confronted with regardless of the symbolic forms under scrutiny. It is therefore essential to shed light upon the elements associated to music in order to clarify their nature and their degree of relevance within natives' listening behavior.

For reasons justifying his own anthropological practice, B. Lortat-Jacob⁹ has expressed reservations as to the existence of a semantic theory of music. He has, nonetheless, proposed five items which ethnomusicologists are likely to agree upon:

1. The act of comprehension of an object is not necessarily thought of as carrying meaning in itself. The listener may identify non-signifying musical elements allowing him to recognize and construct representations of structures and forms.

2. The multiplicity of perspectives on the object is culture-dependent, and varies accordingly with it. The resulting polysemy forces researchers to continually play with categories and circumstances.

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⁶ The constructive character of the symbolic is a basic notion one must deal with in music, whether in musicological discourse or all human production ranging from speaking, exchanging and communicating to producing sound figures, etc.
3. Questioning semantic phenomena in music amounts to what Lortat-Jacob\textsuperscript{10} sees as the possibility of overcoming formalist attempts at deciphering structures without, at the same time, remaining confined to emotional aspects of music. It would therefore be wiser to pursue different directions prior to formulating hypotheses, and pose other questions pertaining to humans beings' relationships to objects.

4. Lessons from anthropology have made it clear that music does, in fact, convey meaning, a field of infinite meanings within which music leaves its own trace. Those who set out to do an inventory of instances of meaning in which music plays a significant role, however, would be up against, as the author argues, the risk of pursuing a never-ending path ultimately leading to a dead end.

5. Finally, B. Lortat-Jacob makes a distinction between meaning and signification. Not necessarily lying “within” the object, meaning is created through the listener's reading from the signifying attributes of music, emerging through the play of infinite interpretations (a never-ending symbolic production):

« It is neither immanent nor transcendent, but relative to the actors involved in the situation they are experiencing. By and large, meaning is what people make representations of as they listen to music, on the basis of what is inferred by those involved and is accurate enough to be reported and even narrated ».

Owing much to pragmatics (in its technical and aesthetic meaning), anthropological approaches to music have provided evidence that meaning is integrated in the use we make of music. Keeping within the confines of ethnomusicology, however, and as long as music is associated to specific circumstances, I shall attempt to clarify what music means for natives. It may be legitimate to speak of music's signification to the extent that it is shared by an entire social group as a « self-referential » system at different levels of meaning, as S. Arom has demonstrated. Marking an epistemological divergence, however, B. Lortat-Jacob makes a plea for cultural, multiple and variable meaning of semantics. It is static, as produced meaning, but it is also dynamic, as production of meaning.

Verbal signification as a model for the study of signification in music

If signification in music exists, it is essential then to specify it in relation to signification in linguistics and in verbal language\textsuperscript{12}. In order to gain access to significations associated to music, one often relies on statements that subjects make when experiments in psychology of music are carried out or, following ethnomusicological methods, on informants' descriptions in the field. Discussing the relevance of adopted methods is far beyond the scope of this paper. I simply wish to

\textsuperscript{10} Lortat-Jacob prefers the expression « the other side of the moon » as it quickly helps to avoid such distinctions between extrinsic and intrinsic attributes. Musical analysis would therefore be the light side of the moon.

\textsuperscript{11} Lortat-Jacob explains that if one can commit to memory the Stabat Mater religious chant it is thanks to discussions lasting several hours held in the evening immediately following its performance in the presence of an excellent person playing the role of the fifth man.

\textsuperscript{12} In order to study the specificity of meaning in natural languages, J. Molino draws a distinction between understanding (or, more accurately, immediate understanding) and interpretation. Understanding is a specific step of language not comparable to other symbolic systems. If, for instance, the listener immediately imagines one meaning (although not necessarily an absolutely accurate one, but a relatively narrowly circumscribed and coded one), and if he has perfect command of the language, then he will immediately grasp the meaning that is sought for (that is the reason why one says immediate understanding). Another level of information processing (the infra-symbolic one) allows the listener to question himself not so much on what the emitter has conveyed, but rather on what he meant to say, for the realm of interpretation opens itself at this level. That does not necessarily mean that one may separate comprehension from interpretation since both are immediately linked; for the sake of clarity, however, it is important to demonstrate the specificity of such a first step.
emphasize the absolute irreducibility of such a difference by drawing attention to what M. Imberty\textsuperscript{13} clearly stated in 1975:

« Nothing is more debatable than the assumption whereby musical and verbal signifiers (musical patterns and groups of adjectives, for instance) would be taken as equivalent signifiers of one single signified. When words make meaning explicit, much too accurate and literal verbal significations only end up betraying it. When trying to express the meaning of the music they have heard, subjects tend to add to its meaning conceptualized and already referred to meanings only existing in verbal language. Such meanings might lead one to believe that it is indeed possible to give a non verbal equivalent of musical form and that its meaning is therefore conceptualizable. Music only conveys meaning in the aftermath, that is to say following attempts at explanation and conceptualization. Prior to this moment, it does not carry meaning; it merely suggests, for it creates emerging forces eliciting and directing verbal associations or, if one prefers, semantic directions in the form of vague and fluctuating impressions appearing to subjects' awareness which crystallizes them through words into exact meanings ».

M. Imberty's experimental research stands out from other approaches thanks to its emphasis on the fundamental time factor – a dimension he has chosen to foreground through explicit, though complex, formulations. Such an illustration dealing with the phenomenon of semantic associations to the musical leads to the following conclusions:

1. Symbolic constructions form the basis for statements made by informants in the field and by those directly involved in psychologists' experiments. It is therefore futile to posit a correspondence between the subject's words and what s/he thinks or feels. Researchers involved in psychological experiments, however, formulate hypotheses on the basis of elements' variations in order to shift from verbal data to a mental representation (a construction) calling for interpretation.

We therefore find ourselves in a work area whose boundaries are set by a methodology drawn from semantics and applied to interpretation of listeners' responses. Profound differences exist between what the listener feels as s/he listens and the resulting process of putting words to the listening experience. Discrepancies therefore remain between psychologists' work centered on experiments through which subjects will discuss a number of musical excerpts and ethnomusicologists' work as it focuses on the commentary that follows.

This leads me to the domain I am more personally involved in. I have often faced, in the context of my own experimental research, such difficulties questioning myself on the subjects' responses during and after listening, that is to say what actually happens at the moment of listening as inscribed within the temporality of the experience and what follows. One of the main purposes of my study on the perception of the structure of improvised modes is to foreground such a temporal dimension isolating the highest possible number of indices making it possible to formulate hypotheses from observable data on the nature of the object (or an image of it) in its materiality that is not entirely dependent upon verbalizing. Particular attention is also directed towards the listener's behavior in its unfolding and in its chronology also taking into account absences and impurities.

2. Clarifying the semiotic specificity of symbolic phenomena within music, often entails an

\textsuperscript{13} Imberty, M., “ Perspectives nouvelles de la sémantique musicale expérimentale” in Musique en jeu, 1975, p. 87-109.
obligatory passage through verbal language and therefore the mediation of what M. Imberty\textsuperscript{14} has called « a translation or a deviation conveyed by spoken language ». One must, at this point, broaden the term “meaning” without relying on linguistic signification as a model for meaning in music. In other words, one must not misconstrue musical signification as a translation that verbal language might provide. By opposing language to music, it then becomes apparent that it is impossible to locate syntactic organization in music at the level of the equivalent of linguists' morphemes. Music confronts us with a play of forms and formal relations as E. Hanslick sought to emphasize in his 1854 essay \textit{Vom Musikalischen Schönen}: « music is form in motion »\textsuperscript{15}. This further justifies M. Imberty's historically significant position: in his writings on time, he chooses the term of musical « meaning »\textsuperscript{16} over « signification ». Likewise, in a chapter entitled « Sémiologie et signification musicales », J.-J. Nattiez\textsuperscript{17} relinquishes the term « signification » thus reformulating earlier statements in terms of « meaning » and enthusiastically borrowing from J. Molino the substitute of « symbolic form ». Questioning the discipline's methodological problems, Nattiez further seeks to redefine the semantic fact by raising epistemological issues as they relate to employed methods. He emphasizes that the aim of a scientific method is obviously to create its own study object and consequently offer an appropriate approach.

3. Finally, and as far as psychology is concerned, M. Imberty's « psychological semantics », like ethnomusicology, is fundamentally related to behavior: the listener's, the composer's and the performer's. It is the result of a set of actions whose characteristic is to deliberately assign meaning and to locate a construction of a symbolic form. M. Imberty's experimental research has attempted to illustrate such a statement within the realm of psychology to see how listeners construct symbolic forms in real time, more particularly when associating verbal meanings to music. Words (verbal meanings) as they are used by listeners within experimental contexts are interpreted as markers of a psychological process occurring through listening thus making it possible to locate certain traits in the listener's behavior\textsuperscript{18}. These, however, have no specific value as to the designation of musical signification.

Such acknowledgements further confirm the assumption whereby linguistic signification can hardly serve as a model to understand semantic phenomena in music: a striking difference obviously separates musical meaning from linguistic meaning.

**Semantic phenomena in music**

In the general study of human affairs and of relationships between culture and music, it is worth highlighting several signaling aspects which anthropologists have often had to face empirically. In certain contexts, such signals can be entirely arbitrary for researchers lacking command of the cultural codes in question: one may end up mistaking what is essential for what is secondary and following directions far removed from relevant ones. And yet these signals carry meaning for natives to the extent that they are motivated from the standpoint of the relationship, for instance, between musical material and dance gestures whose movements and motifs, being exactly subordinated to a code, are the object of a specific choreographic form, or the relationship to words

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{16} In his essay \textit{De l'interprétation}, Paris, Seuil (1965), Paul Ricoeur defines meaning as a construction calling for interpretation.


\textsuperscript{18} Michel Imberty emphasizes that - when working on verbal associations – one cannot do more than holding markers or indices, instead of all the elements of meaning, making it possible to formulate a certain number of hypotheses on what it is that actually occurs to subjects as they think.
used to designate such signals. J.-J. Nattiez explains that in such a circumstance as the one he was confronted with in the course of his own fieldwork, the signal was an extremely meaningful index for the dancer who was perfectly capable not only of naming the motif characterizing the ritual music but also of associating adequate choreographic and gestural behavior. As for M. Imbert, he writes that

« For man the signal itself virtually implies an evocation, sounds (...) actually are signals and orders as much as they are symbols referring to signifieds and, as such, are valorized at the same time ».

This leads us to consideration of what, within music, also turns out to be a signaling dimension carrying semantic connotations. This particular aspect must be taken into account if one is to interpret and to analyze form, especially when referring to a specific circumstance. Beyond signaling aspects, musical associations, like melodic and/or rhythmic figures, may be used in order to refer to an absent divinity and manifest its presence. Researchers have shown keen interest in this particular aspect, especially in the context of fieldwork as a means of isolating, after a great deal of systematic inquiry, (at times denotative) lexicons of musical figures referring to cultural representations and to semantic associations to divinities.

Perspectives derived from hermeneutics are, in this respect, quite significant. As an altogether different type of musicological discourse, it poses such questions as: are there any intrinsic connections between musical structures and the effects they produce? Are the meanings they might have for those producing them or those receiving them? Are such relationships dealt with through consideration of one specific listener or all listeners in general? Finally, how can such questions be dealt with by those who, like ethnomusicologists, claim to be taking responsibility for listeners' and musicians' collective awareness?

On the basis of extensive research conducted on Mexican musics, C. Boilès argues that certain melodic figures do carry meaning. After listening to recordings of specific sections of rituals and answering specific questions, his informants helped him support the claim that, among the Otomis, certain intervallic cells made up of E, C, D and C refer to the Sun God while E, F, D and E refer to the Sun God's messenger.

J.-J. Nattiez reminds us that despite the methodological difficulties C. Boilès was up against, one can still find analogous phenomena in many a musical culture. He cites work by M. Desroches (1980) on Tamul ceremonies, descendants of immigrants in Martinique, who have successfully demonstrated, through experiences in the field, ways of using rhythmic figures associated to sufficiently coded meanings.

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19 Specific signals are particularly used in East Asia in certain operas or films to accompany the rising of an event (through dance, music, characters, and so forth): it is a stylistic and cultural coding accompanying situations or important characters.

20 Ibid.

21 Groups of hunters imitating animal sounds provide us with the most direct representation of the source common to both myth and music. Depending on regions, imitation carries religious meaning and it is often used for the evocation of animal spirits.


23 In a seminar held at the École Normale Supérieure de Paris, Jean-Jacques Nattiez criticized the methodology used by Charles Boilès and the epistemological problems it raises. Some researchers even went as far as suspecting him of having lied about the data he had come up with. J. J. Nattiez reminded us of the historical context within which Charles Boilès produced his results, taking into account of the fact that, throughout the Sixties, ethnomusicology was still going through a formalistic phase.
Once the paradigmatic analysis of the rhythms in question was performed, she noted different variations on a motif characterized by constant elements within the paradigm. This means that M. Desroches has sought, within the unit, an even smaller and semantically most pertinent element. She has then recorded different musical excerpts she had, in some cases, taken constants away from. Finally, she had her chief informant, the priest of the ceremony, listen to recordings made with him and in this particular instance no longer obtained the expected semantic associations.

Pursuing this discussion about the inventory of meanings, one ought to mention symbolism of musical instruments or certain musical configurations performed on a specific instrument also carrying meaning. In his *La musique et la transe*, G. Rouget has drawn a list of illustrations and social practices in which musical instruments are strictly associated to a symbolic dimension, and often related to more or less complex yet accurate codifications and external references such as the ethos of tonalities, modes, pitches, rhythms, and so forth.

By way of conclusion to this exploration of semantic phenomena in music, one may emphasize the following points:

1. Some ethnomusicological analyses are flawed by a much-too-often practiced reductionism in terms of explanations as well as at the level of the musical material studied, whether scales, pitches, rhythm, motifs, etc.

2. By virtue of natural analogy or by convention, humans can associate any musical phenomenon to personal experience. Such a general definition intersects J. Molino's well-known claim\(^\text{24}\) that the semantic fact must be dealt with through a « relation between an object and a horizon ». The experienced horizon may be linked to any element of musical material in relation to nutritional, religious, economic and affective needs.

3. For more than ten years now, many conferences have addressed the issue of meaning in music, and I shall not pursue here the study of details regarding various definitions. Suffice it to say that it is worth remembering that researchers have posed this problem at a general level without having specified different semantic levels or references calling for further discussion. For it would be misleading to take signals (formal ones) as triggers for music and extrinsic attributes and their symbolic representations for culture.

4. It ought to be clear by now that complete empirical demonstration of the specificity of musical meaning is still lacking, and that as we deal with semantic aspects of music under ethnomusicological scrutiny, we must also admit that musical semantics is still far from having reached its goals. If musical semantics as a whole is to be questioned, one ought to attempt, at first, to sketch out a geography of situations and of case studies corresponding to different semantics. In the context of dance, military and trance musics, it is true that meanings and affects do come across with extraordinary violence. Contextualized musics are in fact associated to functions and rituals whose keys to analysis and comprehension, as well as the codes and meanings resulting from them, which natives are the only ones to know. Such associations are for the most part (and totally, perhaps) the result of a lengthy, technical and cultural learning process: in the context of trance musics, G. Rouget calls it « conditioned reflexes ».

5. As they seek to circumscribe societal specificity and human traces, ethnomusicologists are often faced with cultural conventions. If one considers the problem of semantics (sémantisme) to have any importance in ethnomusicology, one must effectively account for the « situation », a concept

borrowed from the domain of linguistics. It is a matter of defining the type of context (whether religious, ritual, profane, or theatrical, etc.) in which linguistic utterance, like the musical one, is presented. Ethnographic observation teaches us that music undergoes changes or, shifts modalities in accordance with cultural circumstances and the functions it fulfills. Unlike most purely musicological analyses, ethnomusicologists always seek to set up the very context making up a substantial part of the object studied. Thus they are led to work on an intermediate level between the musical and the social where fruitful connections, observable at the level of synchrony, are created. Finally, as an ever present component inextricably bound in the study of the musical phenomenon in ethnomusicology, semantics depends on characteristics emerging out of the context of musical performance, out of the listener's behavior and on socio-cultural environment and history. For a large number of researchers, and especially for those whose orientation is anthropological, the word semiotics designates, after all, the study of semantic associations for they generally agree that semantics is a means of establishing the connection between music and culture.

In an article published in *Musique en jeu*, J. Blacking wrote that « *Semiotics casts doubts on the validity of any analysis that would merely analyze forms in themselves* »26. Furthermore, J.-J. Nattiez27 states that if one of the principal aims of ethnomusicology is to relate between music to culture, semantics is most likely going to be a path worth pursuing.

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25 It is doubtful that today we would perceive music according to prior context-specific codings. One must not then, especially in ethnomusicology, avoid the historical dimension of our difficulties in our approach to the analysis of musical phenomena.


27 Ibid.