Globalizing musical identities: remarks on the semiotics of music

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The aim
Musical Topic
Universals of music
Between nature and culture

Keywords
epistemology of music research, semiotics of music, musical topic, music analysis, music theory

Abstract
The theory of musical topics, as was proposed by Leonard Ratner in his book Classical Music (1980) and has been ever since elaborated by different scholars of semiotics as well as hermeneutics of music (for instance, by Raymond Monelle, Robert S. Hatten and Lawrence Kramer), is founded on historical-theoretical as well as on wider issues on perception and cognition of the musical structures.

Although music semioticians and hermeneuticians are concentrating, at this point, rather on the 18th and 19th centuries and other musical styles and epochs seem to be less attractive for their observations, semiotical concepts can be seen as universal analytical models, as it is the case in this paper. The main focus of this contribution is confined to the question of potential usefulness of the semiotic approaches for musicological analysis, since it helps, as Robert S. Hatten points out for the ”theory of gestures” (one of the facets of the theory of topics), to “bridge the gap in the unnecessary opposition ‘musical structure or expression’”. The article deals with the process — and categories — of defining bridges, of “bridging the gap” between the formal analysis and analysis of the context(s) of a musical text, from which different “contents” and “expressions” can be grasped.

The aim
A rather trivial idea stimulated this essay. The aim is to trace out the more or less obvious methodological links between two complementary stances in discussing music (to which I will return later on): music as a “pure” physical phenomenon and music as a cultural practice. To keep the discussion as close as possible to this thorny course, I shall concentrate on the notion of musical topics as introduced in musicology by Leonard Ratner in his book Classical Music (1980) and elaborated further by different scholars of semiotics as well as hermeneutics of music (especially by Raymond Monelle, Robert S. Hatten).

Thus the theoretical background of this paper pertains to the popular post-modern issue of discussing the mutually complementary poles of formal and contextual analysis. Its more specific aspect originates in a belief that indicating basic relations between them from an epistemological point of view may repay the risk of oversimplification involved in the following elemental discussion of
otherwise refined and variegated vocabularies spread across different fields of contemporary music research on this topic (especially in music semiotics, hermeneutics of music, music analysis in general, and to some extent also in music psychology).

**Musical Topic**

It hardly befits, I believe, to describe the notion of a musical topic after several exhaustive treatises and articles from the field of semiotics of music dealing with it since Leonard Ratner’s formulation almost three decades ago. His critics — mainly his conceptual (by no means also methodological) followers — found his definitions of topics too lax, lacking systematic elaboration. They are offering well thought-out definitions of a topic theory, with much more emphasis on the epistemological rigour than can be found in Ratner’s work.

However, the differences between R. Monelle’s historicizing, R. Hatten’s cognitivistic and J. Kramer’s culturological conceptualization of a musical topic, to mention only few among the most prominent ones, developed in their respective writings from the last decade and a half, have more in common than it seems at first sight. To leave the conceptual differences for the moment aside, summarizing his view on musical semiotics while marking out “four semiotic approaches to musical meaning”, Robert Hatten (Hatten 2005) elegantly encompassed the epistemological range of a musical topic. Writing about four levels of interpreting musical meaning, Hatten defines the following semantic fields: 1) markedness as an elemental phenomenon revealing a “meaningful syntax” in music; 2) topics as “larger style types with stable correlations and flexible interpretative ranges”; 3) troping as a process of combining two (or more) topics forming a second-order topic or an “inherently musical metaphor”; 4) musical gesture as an interdisciplinary concept of a “comprehensive theory” that would allow one “to capture the more synthetic character of music”. (Hatten 2005: 14-15)

After reading his arguments, one could naively raise a question similar to the following one: are these four approaches to musical meaning meant as steps on a ladder leaned against the idea of the “emergent” yet “definable meaning” of musical structures, or should they be understood as individual analytical concepts? Although Hatten writes about interaction between gesture, topic, and trope (Hatten 2005: 23) and their complementarity, it is far from being a question of whether they belong to different theoretical frames: they do. The notions of musical topic, troping and gesture are gathered from different vocabularies, resembling the anthropological opposition between nature and culture, between:
- body and mind (as, for instance, in Lidov 2005: 145-164)
- form and expression (as in the 19th-century historiographical aesthetics)
- absolutist's (formalist's) and referentialist's (expressionist's) approach to explaining music (Meyer 1956)
- aesthetical and epistemological understanding of music [ästhetisches / erkennendes Verstehen] (Eggebrecht 1995)
- musical and musicological listening (Cook 1992: 152ff)
- cognitive and connotative understanding (Hübner 1994: 26-38)
- even as “ethic” and “emic” issues, where “the ethic point of view is that of the researcher who is outside of the culture; [while] the emic point of view corresponds to the cognitive categories […] of the local inhabitants” (Nattiez 2004: 13 [after Kenneth Pike]). All the mentioned oppositions, however, are but the opposite poles of "our continuing wavering between two modes of listening" (Bujić 1997: 22) or to "two levels of musical understanding": of listening to music as to a physical structure on the one hand and, on the other, of listening to "telling details" and "assigning value" to them (Bujić 1997: 19).

If the epistemological differences between the above mentioned concepts are natural due to their different epistemological background, the relations between them are not as natural it might seem at first glance. For instance, the joy overwhelming Susan McClary (McClary 2001) while reviewing The Sense of Music (2000) by Raymond Monelle seems somewhat puzzling as far as the epistemological criteria of Monelle’s work (probably the best study of topics in music before Hatten’s last book) are concerned. Namely, not only Monelle’s, but especially Hatten’s differentiation of issues taken into account in defining musical topics are far from a simple tagging of names to structural units of the musical flow. Or, to use McClary’s wording: “Not only does Monelle find formalist semiotics and the topics mania at least as frustrating as I do, but he has set out to transform those projects into something that moves far beyond the usual limitations.” What is puzzling in McClary’s comment is not her appraisal of the insightful and thought-provoking results of Monelle’s book, but rather the epistemological demands he, among others, poses to music research with such “moves from usual limitations” of interpreting meaning in music.

Much better than by summarizing differentiated accounts of musical topic, I believe, its epistemological fragility could be indicated by pointing up the lack of detailed comparison in the writings of the so far mentioned scholars about the relation of topic theory to its historical peers: the Baroque theory of affections and its re-introduction in Hermann Kretzschmar’s concept of musical hermeneutics. Defining the scope of what McClary hints at by emphasizing Monelle’s “movement from usual limitations” in interpreting musical meaning should take into account, after all, similar questions about the goals and methods upon which inevitably the differences and similarities can be defined between the following: the Baroque Affektenlehre as a generative aesthetics and theory of composition as well as perception; Kretzschmar’s hermeneutics as a pragmatic re-interpretation of the Baroque Affektenlehre functioning as a propaedeutic guidance in music appreciation; and the semiotic topic theory as a concept well deserving the epithet of scientific method.

If seen from an epistemological perspective, one of the common presumptions of music theory — a clearly defined focus on object(s) — seems problematic in defining the scope of a musical topic (including the notion of the gestures and tropes). Similarly as Carl Dahlhaus has argued for the notion of 18th
and 19th-century music theory, also for the musical topics it could be said: “Der Begriff [der Musiktheorie] schwankt zwischen nüchterner oder auch bornierter Empirie und ausschweifender Spekulation, zwischen extremer Verengung und universalem Anspruch.” (Dahlhaus 1984: 1) But even if there is hardly any doubt whether “meaningful traces” in music, such as topics, should be understood as “Einheit von semantischen, pragmatischen, aber auch syntaktischen Aspekten” (Faltin 1985: 44; cf. also, for instance, Miereanu 1999), the epistemological goal of the topic theory seems to be rather veiled. The topic theory tries to capture the specific tokens as well as universal types in defining different strata of meaning to be found musical structures: it is oriented toward musical “facts” as well as toward contextual cognitive “variables” without clearly specifying the methodological differences emerging out of this ambitiously wide-ranging set of analytical questions spread across the dichotomy between nature and culture regarding music.

This wideness of issues is an elemental demand of the topic theory: an epistemological stitch indicating its compound nature. It is already evident if one juxtaposes the concepts of topics and gesture: if the topic raises primarily stylistic and historically embedded theoretical issues, the concept of gesture as consisting of “expressive genres” such as “pastoral” or “tragic” (cf. Hatten 2004a: 11 and especially 67-71 ff) and “gestural types” such as “grief” or “elation” (Hatten 2005: 15) is elevated from the realm of the cultural and attached (by no means fully moved) to the realm of the natural, psychological, biological, and physiological.

At this point, of course, a much broader set of arguments than available for this occasion is needed to offer a reasonable view about the consequences of a similar joining of categories (far from being left unnoticed by the scholars, cf. Hatten 2004a: 75 ff). Nonetheless, a questioning comment might suffice: what are the epistemological consequences belonging on the one hand to the world of historically embedded phenomena and, on the other hand, to a world of experiential universals and, as Tarasti claims, “emancipated signs”? What gains and losses are to be expected from joining the topics, which are primarily defined according to their historical and cultural embeddedness (thus pertaining to musicological studies in the broadest sense of the word), and gestures, which urge for research in the field of cognitive science somehow “naturally” in one of the most intriguing analytical concepts in musicology?

Universals of music
To address this question, the following, deliberately hasty claim could be offered: to define the scope of the topic theory, one should define the points of traversing — the common features as well as differences — between the formalistic and hermeneutic categories — between the concepts, for instance, of "auditory stream" (Albert Bregman) or "auditory object" (James Wright), "segment" (mainly in set theory analysis), "formal" or "structural" unit (classical theory of musical forms), "topic", "gesture", "salient", or "marked structure/entity/feature", “trope”
(semiotics of music), "term" (D. Cook), "figure" (universal notion used in different contexts from baroque theory of affection onward) etc.

The wonderful work done by Robert S. Hatten (Hatten 2004) and Eero Tarasti, among others, has brought about epistemological alertness to similar claims. One could only think of Tarasti’s idea of two epistemic groups of semiotic interpretations to find various semantic levels — he distinguishes between a "philosophical 'style' rather than a systematic classification” and a systematic classification founded on belief “that all signs exist only on the basis of an order which is there before the scholar starts his/her work”¹.

It is this distinction between epistemologically systematic versus more contingent description that alerts one to compare different categorical systems. For instance, it seem to me that not only musicology, but interdisciplinary music research would benefit from a comparison between the concept of gesture with the theoretical notion of Formgehalt (“formal content”) proposed by Albrecht von Massow (Massow 1998) and, above all, with the concept of universals in music, as it has been (apart from the ethnomusicological and sociological field) recently nourished primarily by cognitive psychology and, to some extent, also in music theory. To offer briefly a rationale of this suggestion, one might recall that the responses to Massow’s Greimasian neologism, Formgehalt (Floros 1999, Jiranek 1999, H. de la Motte 1999, Schwab-Felisch 1999) give an idea of how difficult it is to resolve the age-old antinomy between form (structure) and content (expression, “meaning”) in music by equalizing the two whilst being unable to accept the dichotomy without a bundle of scruples, whereas the concept of universals reveals a similarly telling controversial status among scholars. To indicate this, I shall mention only the work done by four scholars (although many more valuable studies referring to universals are at hand²). If Bruno Nettl cautiously proposes a concentric view of universals centred in the musical structures and extending over to the cultural issues (Nettl 1977 and 2001), Vladimir Karbusicky finds persuasive arguments to demonstrate the universal principles of musical form along with their correlating anthropological foundations (Karbusicky 1990, 1991, 1999). Further, Leonard B. Meyer — clearly defining

¹ Tarasti 1997: 188-189. »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. [...] 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", expressive only in terms of a quasi-corporeal experience."

“syntactic” (“perceptually discrete”) and “statistical” (“relational”) “cognitive universals” of the musical flow — has offered persuasive arguments to think about the concept of universals as of valuable theory in one of the most insightful essays on universals and music where, at the same time, he asserts: »There are none. There are only the acoustical universals of the physical world and the bio-psychological universals of the human world.« (Meyer 1998: 6). The fourth scholar I would like to mention is Jean-Jacques Nattiez (Nattiez 2004). He has inspiringly illustrated the importance of Jean Molino’s “universals of strategy” and “universals of substance” — as complementary categories to those of Meyer.

As different as these concepts of universals and music are, they all share a common epistemological stance. The notion of a musical universal — as Nattiez emphasizes in his account, to a certain degree acceptable for the notion of musical universals in general — implies a plea “in favour of a well thought-out reconciliation of the universal and the relative, of the innate and the acquired, of nature and culture” (Nattiez 2004: 19). And this is exactly what the concept of gesture in music aims at: to grasp the “self-emancipating sign” in music as well those kinds of meanings that can be derived from it.

**Between nature and culture**

One may well wonder what this discussion could contribute to the subject of a symposium, such as this one, entitled *Musical Culture & Memory*.

The answer has two parts: the first one pertains to a perspective which topic theory has (re)introduced to music analysis and music theory in general, the second one, for the time being, is an epistemological call to attention.

On the basic level, the concept of topic theory, a musical gesture being the more elaborated part of it, seems to be a theoretical counterpart of the endeavours put forth by the new (critical, cultural) musicology. By relying on the lawyer-like skill of finding different facts and combining them into a persuasive picture, topic theory emphasizes the cognitive psychologists’ perspective of universals: “It is the principle of category formation that is claimed to be universal.” (Rosch et al. 2004: 468). The issue of “category formation” — so vital for the development of music theory in general as well as of musical topic theory into the realm of gestures — is concentrated on the segments of juxtaposing, joining and transforming particularities into a “universe of universals”, to borrow Leonard B. Meyer’s phrase. In this ethically vulnerable and epistemologically susceptible process of interpretation, any philosophical or pragmatic issue can be introduced as relevant to music.

It is this universalizing segment of the topic theory that raises not only ethical questions (which semioticians and hermeneuticians rarely forget to emphasize), but also a set of pragmatic questions concerning individual musical cultures. When universalizing a set of categories specific to the musical topic theory, one has to cope with a somewhat more complex yet identical concept of music research as is to be found in variants of the common division of music research into musicology / world music — ethnomusicology / music theory — analysis / music history. Although claiming to be a remedy for “balkanization” of
the music research into separate fields, a set of approaches, and aspects, involved in the topic theory is stretching the research competencies between the social disciplines on the one hand and natural sciences on the other. In other words, if the musical topic theory tries to emphasize the concept of culture by differentiating culturological, historical, contextual etc. aspects of musical phenomena, with its particularization and cross-domain references into physical, psychological, cognitive etc. variables, it universalizes them. Consequently, it enables one to turn attention also toward an opposite set of non-material and pre-conceived levels of human activities, on which, after all, a rather huge portion of any musical culture is founded. In this respect, the musical topic theory is an omnipotent, epistemologically wide-ranging analytical stance; methodologically, however, it is a rather weakly elaborated analytical tool, at the moment.
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