

# Musical Semiotics as a Tool for the Social Study of Music<sup>1</sup>

Óscar Hernández Salgar / Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombia

Translated by Brenda M. Romero / University of Colorado, Boulder, United States

Manuscript Editor: Richard K. Wolf / Harvard University

## Abstract

Recent studies on musical signification have been characterized by an apparently insurmountable gap between disciplines that focus on the musical text as sound (music theory, musicology), those that focus on the hearing subject (cognitive sciences, psychology of music), and those that focus on social discourses about music (ethnomusicology, anthropology, sociology). This article argues that the most recent theoretical advances in music semiotics provide means to overcome this gap. After a brief examination of some key concepts in music semiotics, the author identifies three approaches to this problem: the semiotic-hermeneutic approach, the cognitive-embodied approach, and the social-political approach. This classification allows him to introduce a brief methodological proposal for the study of musical signification from different academic perspectives.

Keywords: Music Semiotics, Musical Signification, Musicology, Musical topic, Music and Noopolitics, Musical Cognition, Music and Meaning

KeyWords Plus: Music – semiotics, Musicology – Social aspects, Musical perception, Signs and symbols

Citation: Hernández Salgar, Óscar. *Musical Semiotics as a Tool for the Social Study of Music*. Translated by Brenda M. Romero. *Ethnomusicology Translations*, no. 2. Bloomington, IN: Society for Ethnomusicology, 2016.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14434/emt.v0i2.22335>

Originally published in Spanish in *Cuadernos de Música, Artes Visuales, y Artes Escénicas* 7, no. 1 (January 2011):39-77.

**Óscar Hernández Salgar** holds a master's degree in cultural studies and a doctorate in human sciences. In addition to working as a musician and cultural administrator, he is Assistant Professor and ex-Director of the Music Department of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombia. He has published various texts on musical postcoloniality and the relationship between music and cultural studies. [Oscar.hernandez@javeriana.edu.co](mailto:Oscar.hernandez@javeriana.edu.co)

Ethnomusicologist **Brenda M. Romero** is a native Spanish speaker, born in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Her research has concerned music and culture contact and music and spirituality in

Matachines music and dance traditions of Spain, Ecuador, Mexico, Colombia, and Peru. As a Fulbright Colombia Visiting Professor in Musicology at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia, she was professor of record for the author, Oscar Hernández Salgar, who was a doctoral student in humanities and social sciences at the time. She was intrigued by how the author, removed from the geopolitical “center” of semiotic discourse, represents this discourse, and how music scholars in Colombia draw on concepts coming from Europe and the U.S.

### **Translator’s Introduction – Brenda M. Romero**

Because the United States has exerted a great deal of political and economic influence over Colombia over the past century, elite private universities like the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá have primarily followed U.S. and European curricular models. Ethnomusicologist Carolina Santamaría (PhD in ethnomusicology from University of Pittsburgh) is the standard-bearer for the developing program at the Javeriana and was one of the first teachers of Dr. Hernández Salgar—who is himself now a member of the teaching faculty. Prior to my residence as a visiting professor in spring 2011, the Universidad Javeriana offered no formal graduate courses on musicology let alone on musical semiotics. In any case, unlike in the U.S. and Europe, research on music is not separated into discrete disciplines in Latin America. Musicology and ethnomusicology as discrete disciplines have a relatively short history in Colombian universities. Their interdisciplinary aims, methodologies, and scope overlap with those of other social and human sciences.

As music scholars in the early twentieth century began an unprecedented break with the intellectual, positivist past, semiotics has emerged with increasing potential for any analysis considered “contemporary.” Yet, many colleagues have commented on the jargon-like and cryptic nature of much of the (English) literature on music semiotics. Rendering into English the complexities of these highly theoretical discussions, which have themselves been translated from English and other European languages *into* Spanish in this work, has been a particularly challenging task.

Dr. Hernández Salgar’s work aims to introduce this field of inquiry for those in Colombia and Latin America without a formal background in musical semiotics but who are interested in its potential for the interdisciplinary study of music. This translation expands access to a broad-ranging international readership, far beyond Latin America, the U.S., and Europe.

## Musical Semiotics as a Tool for the Social Study of Music

Scholars like Frith and Laing have on several occasions asked explicitly for help from musicians and musicologists. Their calls have not had much response because most cultural theorists and sociologists do not feel comfortable in the world of pentatonic majors, E minor sevenths, anticipated downbeats, digital delay and quantizing, while musicians are socially encouraged to stay in the ghettos of anti-verbal “art” or “kick-ass” for the sake of their own muso credibility. (Tagg 1999:2)

Music has always had a function within the social groups that produce it. As well, in the illusion of the autonomy of art, authors like Adorno affirm that the function of music relies on its lack of function; for it is precisely this absence that guards against totalitarianism (Adorno 1980). Human groups have always used music for religious, social, and political ends. For a time, music as a superstructural phenomenon was seen as a passive reflection of political and economic matters (Wade 2002; Pelinski 2000). Nonetheless, in recent years, it has become more and more evident that music actively contributes to the creation of our social experiences and identities (Frith 1996; Vila 2002; Tagg 1999). Music is socially relevant because of what it permits. People may not only dance and entertain themselves, but, through music, may also become inspired, assume diverse attitudes, manage their emotions, and communicate with a collective.

For these reasons, music also plays a role in the power relations of any human group: it can reinforce totalitarian imaginaries or help to articulate resistances. It can be used by governments to reinforce allegiance to symbols, and also as capital to facilitate expansion through the manipulation of desires. It can also be used to reveal and contest abuses of power and serves as strong glue for social movements. Music is politically relevant.

The music industry, for its part, generates employment and produces incalculable riches on a global scale as it moves thousands of millions of dollars annually. Consumers encounter music constantly on television, through portable devices, in concerts, and in the context of dance and other activities (Tagg 1999). Each of these reproductions is related through a value chain to which adhere armies of performers, composers, producers, sound engineers, distributors, instrument makers, and so on. Today, music consumption puts into movement economic mechanisms of global reach as never before in human history. Music is economically relevant.

But nothing of this would be important if it were not for the fact that music signifies. Music tells different things to different people. Nonetheless, although we constantly use music for ends not limited to the musical (to calm ourselves, to move faster, to inspire ourselves, to unite us, and so on), it is a given that we still know very little about how music signifies. The power of musical sounds in society and music’s capacity to affect human life are frequently taken for granted by ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and economists. But not all researchers of these disciplines have the tools to analyze how these significations circulate in (musical) sound and, because of this, their reflections primarily point out the discourses that are used to give meaning to music. From this perspective, musical sound, despite its relevance, continues to resemble an unexplored continent. In the words of Ramón Pelinski:

[Simon] Frith observes that the interpellative function of music does not originate from immanent meanings, but from the meanings that *the listeners themselves assign* to the music. As in the case of homology, if meanings were inherent in the musical material, the listener would not be able to relate to them; therefore, musical meanings are to be understood as social constructions; this

would explain why they are often contradictory (which also justifies the little interest that sociologists, anthropologists, and scholars of popular culture have for sound structures). (Pelinski 2000:167, italics in the original)

In this fragment we see how some social science theorists have posed a false dichotomy in the process of encountering sound. Since there is no necessary correspondence between sound and social structures—as proposed by theories of structural homology in vogue in the 1970s—the conclusion that Frith and others extract is that there can be no type of correspondence at all. They argue, therefore, that the study of meanings must center around discourse and not sound. This approach rightly points out that every individual “negotiates” musical meaning in a different manner, but it does not tell us why not just any music can be used to construct just any type of meaning.<sup>2</sup> However, music theorists and musicologists are the ones who manage the cryptic language of notation and music theory and are therefore supposed to possess the best tools to access meanings that circulate in sound. Musicology has been obsessed for a long time with the idea that music can refer to something outside of itself only with great difficulty. This way of thinking, although based on solid arguments, has often led to the erroneous idea that music cannot signify—“signification” here assumed to be reference to an extramusical reality. The idea of absolute music developed during the nineteenth century strengthened this opposition to the idea of musical signification and weakened attempts to study musical meaning. In the words of Lawrence Zbikowski:

Instead of probing the cultural or historical context for musical utterances, or the complex networks of social interaction that give rise to musical behavior, music theory continues to focus on details of musical discourse with an obsessiveness that is both maddening and quixotic to cultural and social theorists. (Zbikowski 2002:ix-x)

As such, for a long time there has existed a void between music scholars and social scientists.<sup>3</sup> The first are located in a privileged space that confers on the scholar the right to speak in a language (music and music theory) that few others may understand. The latter would appear to have had limited access to concrete musical materials. In spite of this state of affairs, during the second half of the twentieth century a vast field of studies operating under the rubric of musical semiotics began to develop and to grow stronger. Later I will clarify how this field has developed, what currents have nurtured it, and what its impact has been. For now suffice it to point out two reasons that musical semiotics has not yet been able to fill the gap between humanistic music research and the social sciences.

First, for those who are not already trained to read and understand it, musical notation may seem esoteric; such persons may find the notion of a general semiotics similarly remote. For many, the word “semiotics” refers to useless discussions by scowling academics who can understand only one other. In this sense, musical semiotics is a doubly cryptic activity. Its practitioners can be seen as a group of initiates who, by an accident of fate, have acquired understandings of Western notation, harmony, counterpoint, music history, and in addition, semiology. They know the writings of Saussure, Peirce, and Hjeltmslev; and with regard to Umberto Eco, they refer more to *Kant and the Platypus* than to *The Name of the Rose*. It is no wonder that members of such an exclusive club might have difficulties in communicating with scholars in other fields. Although music semiologists drink of many fountains—history, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and so on—their conclusions and theoretical advances permeate the activities of the average musicologist or music analyst only with difficulty. Even

less so do they register an impact on the social sciences, which, for its part, continues to speak of the great importance of music in society without knowing how one could study that importance in terms of actual musical sound.

Second, musical semiotics functions more as an end in itself than as a tool for understanding music and its relationships with the world. This is a likely outcome for a field that has cast a wide net and barely begun to distill more-or-less common ideas and concepts. But in many cases there is still a disconnect between the innovations of semiotics and possible applications to concrete musical cases.

Consequently, one of the biggest challenges for musical semiotics today is to develop theoretical models that might facilitate the study of musical meaning by researchers from multiple disciplines. To do this it is necessary to examine in detail the recent contributions in the field of musical semiotics, identify various currents that constitute the field, extract the theoretical apparatus most relevant to each, search for connections among distinct approaches to musical meaning, and propose theoretical models and tools usable in a variety of musical research types. The present text cannot address the complexity of music semiotics in its totality, but does attempt to make a contribution toward that end. In so doing I will characterize the strains of scholarship that have approached questions of musical meaning, attempt to outline possible relationships among the different foci of each strain, and finally, provide methodological considerations that transcend the perspectives of their respective approaches.

## **Some Background on Musical Semiotics**

The very act of speaking about music—of the emotions it brings to life and the functions it can fulfill in a social group—implicates reflections on the meanings of music. Nevertheless, the issue of how music signifies only appeared as an explicit and frequently recurring topic, along with notions of imitation, expression, and affect, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to Raymond Monelle, the emphasis on musical onomatopoeia prevalent in 17<sup>th</sup>-century madrigals led to discussions of imitation versus expression.<sup>4</sup> One of the major concerns appeared to be the dichotomy between reference to a concrete object—evident in imitation—and the possibility of transmitting soulful emotions to affect the listener (Monelle 1992:1-4). From the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the idea began to emerge that, for seeking imitation, the composer “neglects both air and harmony, on which alone true musical expression can be founded” (Avison 1753:58, cited in Monelle 1992:3). Some French authors, like Charles Batteux, attempted to reconcile these two approximations, seeing music as an imitation of emotions and human passions. Others, like Rousseau, defended the idea that music and speech had a common origin, but thought that spoken language focused on logical argument while rhythmic and melodic aspects of expression remained in music (Monelle 1992:3). In this sense, for Rousseau music was principally an imitation of passionate speech. By contrast, authors such as Daniel Webb (1769) proposed that music imitated the “nerves” and the “spirits” that resided in the body:

There is just reason to presume that the passions, according to their several natures, do produce certain proper and distinctive motions in the most refined and subtle parts of the human body . . . I shall suppose that it is in the nature of music to excite similar vibrations to communicate similar movements to the nerves and spirits. For, if music owes its being to motion, and if passion cannot well be conceived to exist without it, we have a right to conclude that the agreement of music

with passion can have no other origin than a coincidence of movements. (Webb, cited in Monelle 1992:4)

Monelle also explained how expression—and not imitation—became the privileged perspective in discussions of musical meaning. This vision is clearly stated by C.P.E. Bach in his famous *An Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (1753), in which he claims that “since a musician cannot move unless he is moved, he must be able to project himself into all the affects which he wants to arouse in the listeners; he makes them understand his passions and moves them thereby best to sympathy” (Bach, cited in Monelle 1992:4). Johann Gottfried Herder expounded a similar vision, condemning composers for concentrating on “painting objects” instead of expressing emotions (Monelle 1992:5).

During the nineteenth century, the influence of philosophers like Schopenhauer, Hegel, and Kant emphasized this vision in favor of abstract emotion and opposed any form of imitative consideration. For the authors at the beginning of the century, according to Monelle, emotion is the living proof of Hegelian *Innerlichkeit* (inner consciousness) and, in its purest form, is not connected to any object or content. In his *Aesthetics* Hegel writes:

What the layman (*Laie*) likes in music is the comprehensible expression of emotions and ideas, something substantial, its contents, for which reason he prefers accompaniment-music (*Begleitmusik*); the connoisseur (*Kenner*), on the other hand, who has access to the inner musical relation of tones and instruments, likes instrumental music for its artistic use of harmonies and of melodic intricacy as well as for its changing forms; he can be quite fulfilled by the music on its own. (Hegel, cited in Tagg and Clarida 2003:15)

Leaving aside the pejorative connotations of this fragment, the idea of *Innerlichkeit* goes a little further and implies that instrumental music connects directly with inner consciousness and therefore that its meaning is preverbal (Monelle 1992:6). The reverberations of this position gave rise to a boom in speculative literature on music during the nineteenth century, increasingly favoring the belief that music signifies nothing more than the music itself: “if it expresses anything, it conveys musical ideas only” (Hanslick, cited in Monelle 1992:9).

All of this negativity in accepting the possibility of musical meaning is directly related to the triumph of the idea of **absolute music** as a 19<sup>th</sup>-century aesthetic paradigm. According to this notion, music, having liberated itself from the yoke of aristocracy, religion, and subordination to text, had achieved a status that could not be reduced to origins in anything other than music itself. The evolution of this notion quickly led to the further idea that every work could be considered a perfect and self-contained totality. This view was so pervasive that, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, listening while allowing one’s mind to form non-musical associations came to be seen as improper (Dahlhaus 1999; Tagg and Clarida 2003). In addition, the conviction that music was separate from social life favored a strong discrimination against musics that were not artistic, not urban, and not European. Characteristically, in Western music institutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, music was a god: the conservatory formed its priests and the concert hall was its temple. Nevertheless, as Philip Tagg has shown, the idea of absolute music does not cease to be a powerful historical illusion, as music can neither emerge from nothingness nor can it hold meaning by itself:

If music called absolute ever had any social connotations, if it has ever been written or performed in given historical contexts by certain musicians, if it has ever been heard in particular social

contexts or used in particular ways by a particular audience, if it has ever been related to any drama, words or dance, then it cannot logically be absolute. Absolute music can therefore only exist as an illogical concept—an aberration—as indeed it does, not only still haunting the corridors of conventional seats of musical learning but also affecting the attitude of many musicians and scholars in the field of popular music. (Tagg and Clarida 2003:14)

In spite of the historical and social strength of the idea of absolute music, musical meaning emerged once again among the concerns of musicology after the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to the advances of linguistic semiotics following the work of Ferdinand de Saussure.<sup>5</sup> Some musicologists began to ask if it were possible to find in music some structure of signification comparable to that which linguists had described for verbal language. Other proposals diverged from linguistics and sought to integrate aspects of psychology into the discussion. Over a short span of time three texts emerged that would serve as key references for the study of musical meaning.

The first of these was Leonard B. Meyer's *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (1956), which used psychological theories of emotion and Gestalt theory to argue that music gives rise to a single basic affect (not to differentiated emotions). Affect here is generated by the music's ability to defer the listener's expectations (Meyer 2001). Umberto Eco, in his text *Opera aperta*, offers two critiques Meyer's theory of expectations. First, he shows that Meyer's postulates only apply to tonal music of the Western classical canon (Eco 1979:178). In effect, Meyer assumes the existence of a listener who, experienced in the particular style of the work, is capable of predicting musical behavior. Using information gained from earlier listening experiences, this listener can perceive contrasts in possible variations on these familiar sounds as they unfold. But this subject is taken as given: Meyer never goes into depth as to the cultural and historical implications of said experiences. Instead, Meyer identifies as dangerous—as “noise”—the potential disparity between a style and the listener's habitual responses. Although he admits that each culture can create its own syntax, which would allow for different sets of expectations, Meyer's entire argument revolves around urban European art music. In this way, according to Eco, Meyer “eliminates the possibility, within a musical language, of a transformation of the ways of assuming the sensibility to deal with completely new worlds” (1979:180), that is, he reduces the idea of style to a static condition.<sup>6</sup>

The second text was Deryck Cooke's *The Language of Music* (1959), which tried to construct a kind of dictionary of musical terms. Cooke analyzed small-scale examples of musical language (combinations of three or four notes) and attempted to establish the emotional meaning of these “words” as separate from their individual contexts (Cooke 2001:113). The main part of the book is indeed devoted to isolating these groups of scale degrees in major and minor tonalities and analyzing the uses of these “words” in an extremely varied Western repertoire.

The main problem with Cooke is that he does not seem to be convinced that these “words” could be established as such by convention; that is, that they could function as arbitrary signs comparable to those found in verbal language (Monelle 1992:11). Rather he asks himself whether these might be motivated signs.<sup>7</sup> One of the text's greatest contributions was to stimulate controversy, inspiring other authors to tackle discussions of musical semiotics. Cooke's book has been at the center of critique for the past half century, and has primarily served to exemplify the path not to be taken in musical semiotic inquiry. Because of the theoretical defects in Cooke's proposal, the extensive analytical work in Cooke's book has been left insufficiently recognized. But such extensive analytical work might still be a good source of examples showing the commonality of some melodic and harmonic patterns in Western classical music.

Another important work from the same period is “On the Moods of a Music-Logic,” by musicologist Charles Seeger (1960). In this text, Seeger does not really take on the problem of musical meaning. He expresses fear that advances in communication theory would lead scholars to view music as a form of language and that music would be increasingly regulated by the “dictatorship of the linguistic” (1960:235). His preoccupation derives from what he calls the “linguocentric predicament,” the impossibility of speaking about music in a non-musical language—the verbal. Music has its own logic: “The relationship of the (intrinsic) music-rationale known by the musician to any of the (extrinsic) speech-rationales of music or to the whole collection of them constitutes one of the fundamental problems of musicology” (1960:225).

In order to overcome this gap, Seeger thinks it necessary to describe the specific logic that regulates music. His proposal revolves around the four basic functions of pitch, loudness, tempo, and proportion, and their degrees of variation with regard to direction—tension and relaxation. These degrees of tension can be designated in terms of signs (+ / - / =) and grouped together in note fragments that Seeger calls *moods*. According to the author, whenever there are more than three musical units (i.e., three notes), there can be variation with continuity, and, therefore, one can begin to speak of a minimum unit of musical sense, that is, a *museme*.<sup>8</sup>

These three authors, Meyer, Cooke, and Seeger, set the terms of the debate that would surround musical meaning, showing that musical semiotics could not be limited to Saussurian semiology, with its derivation from the study of verbal language. For the most part, it took a long time for further advances in the study of musical meaning. One early contribution was ethnomusicologist Charles Boilés’s “Tepehua Thought-Song: A Case of Semantic Signaling” (1967), which approached musical semantics via a transformational grammar of Mexican Tepehua music. In the 1970s, studies on acoustical properties and perceptions of sound began to appear; at the same time, the sciences of cognition and musical perception attempted to improve their understanding of how listeners construct meaning from what they hear. Among the more relevant and influential texts along these lines are those of Diana Deutsch (1998), John Sloboda (2003), Lawrence Zbikowski (2002), and Lakoff and Johnson (1991). Little by little, these contributions would allow for new discussions. Following the 1970s, questions of musical meaning became increasingly common in musicological inquiries.

## From Structuralism to Hermeneutics

In 1975 Jean-Jacques Nattiez published his book *Fondements d’une semiologie de la musique*. The ideas he proposed here were revised and published again in 1987 in the book *Musicologie générale et semiologie*, translated as *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music* (1990). In these texts, Nattiez used Jean Molino’s tripartition theory to describe the process of communicating any kind of music (and any artistic work) in terms of: 1) poesis—all that contributes to a work’s production; 2) the neutral or immanent level, the material traces of poesis (for example, the score); and 3) aesthesis, the listeners’ active reception (1990:10-16). The tripartition model seeks “to reconcile the formal and hermeneutic description, the analysis of a neutral level, and a material trace, with the web of interpretants” (28), but the very ambition of this project made it vulnerable to Kofi Agawu’s accusation that Nattiez is trying to rethink all of musicology in terms of the tripartition (Agawu 1992:317). Nattiez’s model is structuralist in that it uses the same notion of sign as one encounters in the writings of Saussure or Hjelmslev;



however, Nattiez also integrates Ricoeurian hermeneutics and Peirce’s “interpretant.” The result is a confusing and at times contradictory theoretical framework.

By virtue of his model Nattiez is able to argue that music is much more than text or structure; ironically, however, accessing the poietic or aesthetic levels is practically impossible. This leads those wishing to apply this model to actual music to place a disproportionate emphasis on the “neutral level.” Nattiez’s theory has, in effect, spurred formalistic analyses that do not in the end say anything about musical meaning. Nattiez’s model has nevertheless had a considerable impact, to the extent that it has stimulated debate and contributed to the academic institutionalization of musical semiotics.

Facing difficulties in finding and describing musical structures that were similar to linguistic structures, researchers increasingly turned toward another great semiotics tradition: that of the North American Charles Sanders Peirce. The most important difference between Saussure and Peirce is that Peirce is not a linguist but rather a philosopher and therefore his theories do not aim to describe the structures of signification, but rather to locate signification within a larger phenomenological project. For Peirce, meaning emerges from the relationship between three elements: the *representamen* (the equivalent to Saussure’s signifier), the *object*, and the *interpretant*. A representamen (S) refers to its object (O), but the relationship between these two can only be understood by virtue of a third sign, the interpretant (Int), which consists of something resembling Saussure’s *signified*. The interpretant can itself function as a sign referring to its own object, in which case it will require another interpretant; the process of establishing an infinite chain of such interpretants is *semiosis*.<sup>9</sup>

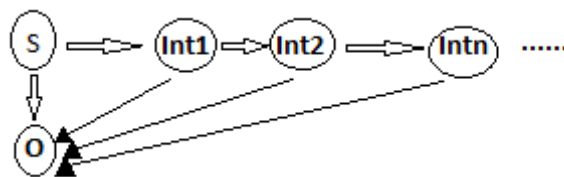


Figure 1. Chain of interpretants

The complexity and power of Peirce’s theoretical frame, especially for the analysis of non-verbal signs, has made it attractive to music semioticians. However its very complexity has given rise to highly dissimilar musical usages. Some authors, for instance, have focused on the third trichotomy [the relation between the sign and the interpretant—Ed.] to propose models of musical meaning (Turino 1999; Tagg 1999); others have used Peirce’s distinction between *type* and *token* to categorize a musical event within a genre or topic (Hatten 2004b; Monelle 2000; López Cano 2004); some have sought to establish music as a purely iconic phenomenon (Kruse 2007); and others have tried to use all of Peircian theory (Martinez 2001; 1998). There does not appear to be any general agreement on the best way to use Peircian semiotics in the study of music, but most find it more promising than Saussure’s structural linguistics theory; this explains Peirce’s increasing influence since the 1970s.

The 1990s saw an explosion of intellectual production around musical semiotics, largely owing to the activity of the Project of Musical Signification (PMS), led by the Finnish musicologist Eero Tarasti. This group first held a conference in Imatra, Finland, in 1986 and

have since met biennially. Many of the relevant texts from the past ten years [since around 2002] have been those of regular attendees at this group's gatherings. Some of the most visible have been David Lidov, Robert Hatten, Raymond Monelle, Gino Stefani, Kofi Agawu, and Rubén López Cano.

One product of the PMS is Eero Tarasti's *A Theory of Musical Semiotics*, which uses A.J. Greimas's narratology to study the relationships among figures within a musical work. Tarasti assumes that the analysis of meaning must take account of the change and development of such musical figures; that is, it concerns the process of music unfolding in time (Tarasti 1994). The author identifies two relevant levels: communication structures that lie on the surface of musical perception, and the signification structures that produce true aesthetic moments in music (26; see also Bakhtin 1989).<sup>10</sup> For the latter, Tarasti uses Greimas's concept of *isotopy*, originally developed to study the organization of signification structures over the duration of a musical work. However Tarasti's apparent lack of confidence in the possibility of theorizing a purely musical semantics renders the concept of isotopy nearly the same as the concept of musical form and leaves the question of content unaddressed.

Tarasti's work reveals the limits of linguistic perspectives on the study of musical meaning. Unlike verbal language, music does not appear to be constructed of arbitrary signs.

Any concept or proposition can be phonetically conveyed in many ways, since the meaning to be transmitted is not bound to the concrete phonemes or graphemes. This situation is due to the arbitrary relation between the signifier and signified of a verbal sign. In music however, this relation is not arbitrary: expression and content are inseparably connected with each other. The slightest change on the level of expression produces a change of content as well . . . .  
Consequently, the relation between signifier and signified in music should be viewed as iconic. (1994:11)

In effect, motivated signs, not arbitrary ones, function to generate musical meaning. This could help explain the lack of clear relations linking Tarasti's isotopies to what Bakhtin (1989) understands as the *aesthetic object*. For Tarasti, musical meaning is not arbitrary in principle and, if it comes to have conventional meaning, it does so at the cost of its aesthetic value in the context of a specific work: "music that exploits only exteroceptivity and neglects inner structural implications does not create a lasting effect, and remains program music in the pejorative sense of the term" (Tarasti 1994:58).

In sum, two powerful currents of thought, structural linguistics and intellectual positions favoring absolute music, lead Tarasti to be suspicious of analyses of musical meaning that rely on references to the extramusical.

It is possible, however, that the issue at stake does not concern the differences between music and language, but resides rather in Tarasti's and Nattiez's very definition of the sign, a definition that is structuralist in the tradition of Saussure and Hjelmslev. According to this definition, the signifier operates by virtue of "its position within the system of the language, the sum of its syntagmatic and paradigmatic features" (Monelle 1992:34). For this reason, Monelle asks: "Can music . . . be analysed as an abstract structure of binary oppositions?" (1992:38). One could further ask: Does music have relevant and irrelevant traits? Is it possible to speak of a distinction between phonemics and phonetics in music? What are the possibilities of a musical semantics?

In most cases, the answers to these questions have not been very satisfactory—not because of music's inability to acquire conventional meanings akin to the arbitrary signs of verbal language, and not because musical traits relevant to such analyses cannot be found in some specialized

contexts. Rather, it derives from the impossibility of finding and describing a structure underlying musics of different styles that can be recognized in different contexts—a property of some structures in verbal languages. In other words, the problem appears to be in the persistence of structuralist approaches in the study of musical semiotics.

This problem is related to the differing approaches to the very concept of the sign. Already in 1976, Umberto Eco, in his *A Theory of Semiotics*, strongly criticized the idea that a typology of signs could consist of a set of fixed relationships:

The notion of sign is untenable when confused with those of significant elementary units and fixed correlations; there are on the contrary “signs” that result from the correlation of an imprecise expressive texture and convey a vast and unanalyzable portion of content; and there are expressive devices that convey different content according to different contexts, thus demonstrating . . . that sign-functions are the frequently transitory result of processual and circumstantially based stipulations. . . . What we have succeeded in isolating up to now have been modes of producing sign-functions, not types of signs. There is a radical fallacy in the project of drawing up a typology of signs.<sup>11</sup>

In this manner, the search for more-or-less stable structures and fixed notions of the sign have been increasingly identified as obstacles for serious musical semiotic inquiry. Some researchers have nevertheless continued to pursue the possibility of theorizing a musical semantics. For this reason, theories after the 1990s have: 1) rejected the pursuit of a general musical semiotics in favor of studying specific repertoires and styles; 2) problematized the idea of a musical sign or evaded defining it; 3) tended toward non-linguistic semiotic currents such as that of C.S. Peirce; 4) progressively incorporated knowledge from psychology and the cognitive sciences; and 5) approached the problem of the signified more from the perspective of hermeneutics than from that of semantics.<sup>12</sup>

## The Concepts of Topic and Gesture

In the same year as the publication of Tarasti’s *A Theory of Musical Semiotics*, another book appeared that was to shape this new approach: *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*, by the U.S. musicologist Robert S. Hatten (2004b). In this book, Hatten uses Roman Jakobson’s markedness theory as elaborated by Michael Shapiro to theorize correlations between musical content and cultural constructions of expressivity. According to Hatten, in binary oppositions in music, as in language, one term of the pair is marked with a specific attribute. An example of this would be the opposition between major and minor tonalities. Minor tonality is the marked term in Western music. This opposition correlates in well-defined contexts with culturally constructed binary oppositions. In the classical style, the opposition between minor and major correlates with the opposition between tragic and not tragic. These correlations are a “literal mapping of meaning (literal for a given style) coordinated by the analogous markedness values of the two pairs of oppositions” (2004a:38). On the basis of these elements Hatten constructs a proposal that distances itself from the Saussurian definition of sign and renounces the search for stable structures; rather he orients himself toward studying the production of musical signs within a specific style.

Along with this, Hatten uses Peirce’s distinction between *type* and *token* to explain the configuration and growth of a style:

Determining such correlations could become a flawed enterprise, if one attempted to create a vocabulary of expressive types that had relatively fixed and overly precise meanings (as in Deryck Cooke 1959). On the other hand, one can find general (type) correlations that are well established for certain sonorities—correlations that may apply even when the sonority is encountered in a minimally defined context. (Hatten 2004b:49)

The stable correlations Hatten describes give rise to the “topics” and expressive genres that constitute a style. The stability of a style depends on the possibility of interpreting occurrences (tokens) in terms of recognizable types. However in some musical contexts, such as that surrounding the Picardy Third, the relationship between marked and unmarked terms is reversed.<sup>13</sup> Such transformations contribute to the growth of a style—the possibility for which Meyer’s theory of expectations does not allow.

The vision of music as subject to historical contingencies and stylistic variability and the vision of musical meaning as dynamic inspired many publications on musical semiotics that focused on particular styles and eras and included large analytical components. The most influential among these integrated the concept of *musical topic*. Although the idea of topic has its roots in rhetoric, Leonard Ratner developed a contemporary notion in *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (1980) whereby a topic is a series of recurring figures in Classical Viennese music that correlate with counterparts in other arts:

From its contacts with worship, poetry, drama, entertainment, dance, ceremony, the military, the hunt, and the life of the lower classes, music in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century developed a thesaurus of *characteristic figures*, which formed a rich legacy for classic composers. Some of these figures were associated with various feelings and affections; others had a picturesque flavor. They are designated here as topics—subjects for musical discourse. (Ratner 1980:9, italics in the original)

Some of the topics Ratner described are the pastoral, Sturm und Drang, those of the military or the hunt, the galant style, and the French Overture style. These general themes, which can be identified in musical scores, evidence a clear relationship between music and its cultural and social environment that does not necessarily involve one-to-one relationships between meanings and sounds, in the manner of verbal language. In other words, the idea of topic obscures the promise of being able to describe the architectonic forms of music, making possible the analysis of content in the manner of Bakhtin.<sup>14</sup>

A long decade had to pass before musical semiotics would take serious interest in this concept; but in the 1990s topics became something of a holy grail for music semioticians. In particular, Robert Hatten, Raymond Monelle, and Kofi Agawu applied the notion interestingly, and today many musicologists utilize it as well. Nevertheless, notions of topic unfold differently in the hands of various authors. For Monelle, for example,

a musical semantic unit is conceived to be the sememe, which uniquely explicates a given syntagma; it cannot be a token of a type since no such type exists. Thus, the content of a musical expression can only be known from the expression itself, which it perfectly motivates; and for this reason, it is senseless to speak of musical content, since at every point it coincides with musical expression. (2000:16)

In other words, for Monelle—as equally for Tarasti—music enters within what Eco calls the ratio *difficilis*, that is, a type of meaning in which particular events (tokens) cannot be related with

a conventional code or type (1977:320). For Monelle, however, the topic exists because it is the result of historical and cultural process that gradually converts some motivated musical signs into stylistic conventions, generating slippage of the ratio *difficilis* to the ratio *facilis*, that is, the one in which specific experiences (tokens) principally signify through their relationship with established codes (types). The example that Monelle most utilizes is of the *pianto*, a motive consisting of a descending minor second that has been used to represent the lament since at least the sixteenth century:

At first it always accompanied the textual idea of weeping—words like “pianto” or “lagrime”—but it soon began to signify merely grief, pain, regret, loss—in other words, the indexicality of its immediate object. During the eighteenth century the related idea of the *sigh* replaced that of weeping. (2000:17, italics in the original)

As can be seen, for Monelle the topic is the result of a process of conventionalization of musical signs that are originally motivated, but gradually become symbols, in the sense of Peirce (Monelle 2000:19). For this author, then, there are two kinds of topics: those that develop from an iconic relationship—like the one of *pianto*—and those that conventionalize themselves from an index, like dances that reproduce styles and repertory of established locations (e.g., French Overture).

Beyond the concept of topic itself, this emphasis on the process of conventionalization introduces the idea that musical understanding involves the listener’s familiarization with particular established musical materials over time, whether or not these have been previously correlated with some extramusical object. In other words, we are talking about historical and social processes that hold *familiarity* as a key term.

A way of understanding this familiarization comes from Umberto Eco, following Norbert Wiener and cybernetics. Eco considers the convention as augmenting the order in a message produced from the redundancies that specify the information. An example is found in the English language, in which 50% of words are unnecessary: redundancies are introduced to prevent misunderstanding the message (Eco 1979:145). However, Eco himself insists that the particularity of poetic language is in that it challenges the redundancies, producing messages that introduce elements of disorder. In other words, in order for originality and changes to have emotional effects (disorder, entropy), it is necessary for them to act within a stylistic frame recognized as such because it obeys some laws of redundancy. And that redundancy, in the case of Classicism, is easily observed in all of those resources that are repeated from one work to another and from one composer to another: cadential formulae, melodic gestures, orchestral textures, tonal progressions, and so on. This same redundancy is what permits innovations introduced by such composers as Beethoven, Mozart, and Haydn to be experienced as significant events, to the point that the Classical style evolves into something increasingly closer to Romanticism. In this sense, familiarization is the process through which listeners in a culture go about identifying and assimilating the redundant elements in music until they become predictable and necessary to the composition of a style.

Another way of understanding familiarity is through Ludwig Wittgenstein’s proposal in *Philosophical Investigations* (1988). For Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word is in the use we make of it; what we understand from a language is not a formal unity, but rather “a family of structures more or less interrelated” (1988:121). This formulation—apparently simple—gives a *coup de grâce* to any pretention of outlining a semiotics based on structural correspondences. It is not essential that there should be “equal” elements of style shared between different works and

composers. What matters for the unity of style is that familial similarities exist that will reproduce themselves in their use.

Summarizing, redundancy and use of common material produce familiarity. Reiterated listening of similar musical materials facilitates its comprehension. But, in addition, these familiar and reiterated elements can be used systematically in correlation with extramusical objects that are present in culture via poetry, paintings, social discourses, and institutions.<sup>15</sup>

As such, the notion of musical topic permits condensing a great number of historical and social processes around musical figures that are analyzable in the score. It is because of this that musicologists and semioticians have found it so attractive. Topics have been used primarily in studies of classical Viennese music (Monelle 2000; Hatten 2004b; Hatten 2004a) and, in a couple of cases, of Romantic repertoire (Monelle 2006; Agawu 2009). The main problem of topic theory is that it has not been shown to work for diverse repertoires for “each topic needs a full cultural study” (Monelle 2000:33). In effect,

. . . not all signifying items are topics. The central questions of the topic theorist are: Has this musical sign passed from literal imitation (iconism) or stylistic reference (indexicality) into signification by association (the indexicality of the object)? And, second, is there a level of conventionality in the sign? If the answers are positive, then a new topic has been revealed, whatever the period of the music studied. (Monelle 2000:80)

The difficulty for the study of musics outside the European classical tradition is not necessarily a problem of identifying possible topics, but of the researchers, whose responsibility it is to reconstruct each topic historically and socially.

In addition to the concept of topic, in recent years, studies that use the concept of gesture have gained strength, especially since Robert Hatten’s theoretical advances. For this author, gesture is “*any energetic shaping through time that may be interpreted as significant*” (2006:1, italics in the original) and can link intermodally with a configuration of energy that is similar in another system of representation. For example, a descending melody—descending in a “virtual” space—can connect intermodally with a descending movement in a “real” space, or with a “descending” line on a two-dimensional plane. The notion of gesture enhances one’s understanding of such meaningful musical unities as motives, subjects, and musical gestures, or parts thereof. Gestures, in the embodied-mind theories of Mark Johnson (2007) and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1991; 1999) for instance, are metaphorical of the body experiencing space. Such ideas about embodied meaning have substantially influenced Candace Brower (2000), Fred Lerdahl (2002), Steve Larson (1997-98), and others who approach tonality as a space in which musical forces are akin to such physical forces as gravity, magnetism, and inertia. As such, the notion of gesture emphasizes the corporeal experience of music as a key element in the construction of meaning.

However, the concepts of topic and gesture also present a difficulty: that of the listening subject. Topic theory constitutes a useful tool for a hermeneutic approximation of musical meaning and gesture-analysis permits establishing correlations between experiences of music and space. Nevertheless, neither of the two provides clues for studying in what way a particular subject in a specific culture constructs itself as such through listening.

## **The Problem of the Subject: Stylistic Competence and the Listening Body**

The most common concept to approach hearing as a dimension is stylistic competence. For Robert Hatten, competence is “the internalized (possibly tacit) cognitive ability of a listener to understand and apply stylistic principles, constraints, types, correlations, and strategies of interpretation to the understanding of musical works in that style” (2004b:288). On the other hand, in the words of Gino Stefani, competence is “to know, to know how to do and how to communicate”—that which permits a listener “to produce meaning through and/or around the music” (cited in López Cano 2002:5). These definitions suggest that meaning does not lie exclusively in a musical text, but requires listeners with their particular listening experiences. In the words of Eco:

Expression is a pure lot of conventional terms that require, in order to be understood, a collaboration on my part and demand precisely that I converge on every term a sum of past experiences that allow me to understand the experience on the spot. (1979:113)

In this sense, the role of the listener cannot be reduced to the possession or lack of a stylistic competence. Otherwise only a competent listener could be capable of making sense in/with the music to which she or he listens. At what point would an untrained listener begin to be considered competent? Is it even possible to detail the competencies without which the listener would not be able to construct meaning? What happens with those in the 21<sup>st</sup> century who listen to fusions of Beethoven’s music with hip-hop rhythms? An idea of competence as something one can come to possess would imply that the production of meaning requires a connection between the hearing experience of the listener, including his/her training and expectations, and the topic as a location where culturally created themes materialize.

Nevertheless, neither is it acceptable to say—as some sociologists affirm—“the interpellative function of music does not proceed from the immanent meanings of musical syntax, but of the meanings that listeners themselves assign to a music” (Pelinski 2000:167). This would imply that there is a necessary **non-connection** between musical materials and the possible meanings that each subject could attribute to them. The very existence of musical topics militates against any argument of absolute non-connection. It also fails to account for the experiences of people who are excited by some sounds but not by others.

Between these two opposite perspectives exists the possibility of formulating a relationship of unnecessary connection; that is, a contingent relationship that does not place the weight exclusively on the musical text or on the particularity of each listener, but that is created in the encounter between them. Stuart Hall, drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau, calls this kind of relationship “articulation”:

An articulation is thus the form of connection that *can* make a unity out of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage that is not necessary, determined, absolute, and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what conditions *can* a connection be forged or made? So the so-called “unity” of a discourse is really an articulation of different, distinct elements, which can be articulated in different ways because they have no necessary “belongingness.” The unity that matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected. (interviewed in Grossberg 1996:53)

Hall uses this concept in his famous article “Who Needs ‘Identity’?,” in which he suggests that individuals are interpellated by discourse and that this interpellation can result at an ephemeral

“suturing point” that constitutes what we understand as identity (Hall 2003). In this sense, musical meaning can also be understood as the result of an articulation between musical text, its accumulated historical uses, and its cultural conventionalization, on one hand, and the listening subject, his/her listening experience, and level of familiarity with the style, on the other. Meanings emerge in the active experience of listening to (or interpreting) music in a particular historical and cultural moment.<sup>16</sup> Because of this, only with difficulty can the study of musical meaning be limited to the study of the text (score) or to the topic as a cultural construction. It becomes necessary to understand what occurs concretely in the moment in which music and subject encounter each other.

This point has helped some researchers turn from a hermeneutic approach to a cognitivist focus:

... if we do not develop an understanding of how cognitive processes shape the basic materials of thought, we risk accepting these materials as things given by nature, just as culture and history—and music, for that matter—were once assumed to be given by nature. (Zbikowski 2002:x)

Indeed, the importance of thinking about the role of the subject in the emergence of musical meaning has led to serious consideration of cognition and the body as vital elements for the apprehension of semiotic phenomena. This turn is also related to the theories of embodied mind of Mark Johnson and George Lakoff (Lakoff and Johnson 1991; 1999; Johnson 2007).

In his book *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (2007), Johnson reiterates his strong criticisms of the division between mind and body inherited from Western philosophical tradition and proposes a philosophy of meaning based on the idea that any cultural and social construction is anchored, in the end, in corporeal experience. According to Johnson, if our tendency is to think that sense and meaning are outside the body it is because in our sensory perception there is a kind of “corporeal disappearance”: we cannot smell our own olfactory organs, nor see our eyes when they see, nor feel our amygdala when we experience fear. The senses are oriented toward the outside of the body, and, nevertheless, these organs are at the center of all we experience and feel (Johnson 2007:6). In this sense, Johnson suggests an embodied theory of meaning according to which meaning emerges from “below to above,” from our neural connections, our hormones, and our muscles to concepts and propositions. In this way, the body, our body, defines possible meanings.<sup>17</sup>

In referring to musical meaning, Johnson looks to the work of philosopher Susanne Langer to support his argument that music has meaning to the extent that it enacts the listener’s experience:

The feeling is presented—enacted—in the felt experience of the listener. To hear the music is just to be moved and to feel in the precise way that is defined by the patterns of the musical motion. Those feelings are meaningful in the same way that any pattern of emotional flow is meaningful to us at a pre-reflective level of awareness. Langer is saying that when we are actively listening to music, we imaginatively enter into its “motion,” experiencing all of the ways it moves, swells, hops, rushes, floats, trips along, drags, soars, and falls. This *musical* soaring, floating, or falling is experienced by us as *our felt flow* of experience. We feel it in our vital, tactile-kinesthetic bodies. When the music builds up tension (for example, as it moves pitchwise from the lower through the middle to a high range), *we* experience that tension *in ourselves*. (Johnson 2007:239, italics in the original)

For Johnson, the relationship between physical movement—the displacement of a mass through space and time—and musical “movement” is metaphorical: “our conceptualization and



description of music uses metaphors whose source domains are drawn from sensorimotor experience” (2007:243). In effect, the majority of musical remarks, indications of artistic directors and references to sound that we listen to in our musical culture, are taken from our bodily experience of space: it is said that music is *rising*, that the pulse is *behind* or *ahead*, or that there are densities and accelerations. However, the way in which Johnson uses the concept of metaphor does not specify the concrete mechanism that connects our musical experience with our spatial experience.

Turning again to Peirce, it could be said that what we understand by movement in music is the result of an iconic relationship between the flux of the sounding materials and our bodily experience of space, as it is possible to establish similarities between these two.<sup>18</sup> Why do we feel an ascending musical line as an ascent? Our voice tells us that the highest sounds are produced by head resonances. In effect, any person can produce a glissando with the voice, from the lowest register to the highest, and immediately be able to feel how the bodily sensation of the sound production moves toward the top, from the glottis to the head. But, in addition, it is commonly said that ascending melodic lines produce musical tension. This could be related to the additional muscular tension required to produce high sounds with the voice, but also with the tension that any ascending (bodily) movement requires, due to gravity. In this case, the iconic relationship is maintained: there is a resemblance between tensing the muscles of the arms to lift weights and tensing the muscles of the vocal apparatus to produce an increasingly higher sound. The key elements of the relationship are those that establish a correlation between ascent and tension. There is, then, an iconic relationship between our experience of musical “ascent” and our experience of physical ascent. In the same way, it should be possible to find iconic relationships between musical elements and spatial sensations, such as full/empty, big/small, stable/unstable, acceleration/deacceleration. Many of these relationships, however, are sheltered beneath a more general concept, that of musical *movement*.

In Johnson’s analysis of the song “Something” by the Beatles, musical movement is taken for granted. In describing the initial phrase, “Something in the way she moves,” he says: “even without the lyrics, we would still speak of the melody *moving* from C to B, or of the rhythm *moving* ahead. There is immanent meaning here” (2007:245, italics in the original). Nevertheless, as he himself realizes, if one looks carefully, there is nothing to say that the “C” is moving toward the “B.” We can only say this if we perceive the melody as beyond notes considered in isolation, and if we assume that it is that unity that is showing some type of displacement in time. In this case, we would have an iconic relationship between our perception of the sound and our experience of physical movement. The resemblance between both experiences is based on the change of location of one element through time. And although in the case of the melody it is not easy to determine in what manner the spatial location changes, our familiarity with visual representations of music (such as the score) contributes to the association of a change in height or of harmonic tension with a change of location. This process is similar to what occurs when we perceive as a single take what in reality is hundreds and hundreds of photographs presented in sequence at a velocity of sixteen frames per second. In film, then, there is no moving image in a physical sense, but rather an impression created by the succession of images in an iconic relation to our physical experience of movement.

In this way, our musical experience preserves an iconic relationship with our bodily experience of space-time. But music not only causes physiological responses that awaken “real” spatial experiences, it can also cause the listener to experience an “extension” of space. In the words of Rubén López Cano:

The spatial-corporeal conceptualization of music permits us to explore hidden and unusual kinetic corners. With and in music we move virtually within a space that humans have created according to our imaginations. In this way music can be understood as an open mind: through it we enter virtual spaces where our extremities do not arrive in the time permitted. Thanks to the mind, we have access to a kinetic-corporeal learning to which we would have no access through our real bodies in the real physical world. Music increases considerably our kinetic knowledge and experience, giving us the opportunity to apply our motor capacities to situations that transcend physical space and construct a bridge between real and imagined space. (López Cano 2005)

Many researchers have applied Johnson's idea of embodied mind to the study of music. Among them is the musicologist Candace Brower, who developed an entire explanation of tonal harmony derived from Johnson's image-scheme, and applied it to an analysis of Schubert (Brower 2000).

Analyses of Brower and Johnson both emphasize common human experiences but do not much consider the differences that can occur among diverse cultures. This leaves up in the air the erroneous idea that "embodied" meanings could be understood as more "natural" and less "cultural," with all of the implications this distinction can hold.<sup>19</sup>

It is not too much, then, to insist that the bodily experience of space is also a cultural construction. Nevertheless, it is not the same to perceive an ascending melody "as if it were" an ascent in space and perceive a modulation to the subdominant as a *distancing* from the center.<sup>20</sup> The first example appears to be more motivated, more distilled, and more internalized in our culture, to the point that it is very difficult to describe an ascending melody without using a word that already constitutes a spatial reference. The perception of modulation as distancing from the tonic is, on the other hand, a more complex cultural construction requiring conventionalized musical behavior; its motivation is not so clear. In effect, what we hear moving away in a modulation toward the subdominant is not the *gestalt* of a melody, not even of a progression understood as a gesture. The moving away we hear is that of tension distanced in degrees from a point of repose; but, to perceive this increase of tension, we must be familiar with this way of representing the tonal system. In this sense, the use of the word *metaphor* by Johnson and Brower to cover these examples of ascent and distancing appears insufficient. Although an ascending melody has an iconic relationship with a physical ascent, the modulation to the subdominant can only signify moving away by virtue of convention. That is, its relationship tends rather to be symbolical.<sup>21</sup>

In summary, the theories of musical meaning based on embodied mind offer powerful tools to understand the ways in which musical experience is rooted in bodily experience. The meanings we construct in and with music appear to be motivated in the relationships that each culture builds between music and perceptions of space-time. In other words, this set of theories restores the place of the listener by focusing on the body as the place in which musical meaning emerges. However, the drawback of emphasizing the corporeal as opposed to the concept of topic is that it underplays meaning as a contingent articulation that emerges from processes of conventionalization under particular historical conditions in specific cultures.

## Reconciling Body, Topic, and Competence

One of the researchers who has most actively worked on a cognitive approach to the study of musical semiotics is Rubén López Cano. In his eagerness to reconcile the theoretical advances of topic, competence, and embodied meaning, this author has proposed a cognitive-enactive semiotics of music, turning to the approaches of enactive cognition developed by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch. From this perspective, cognition is understood as “effective action. A history of structural-corporeal connection between the perceiver and the perceived that enacts or makes a world emerge” (López Cano 2002:26).<sup>22</sup> The most important trait of enaction is its grounding in embodied action. The body participates in the *enactive emergence* of many forms of musical meaning.<sup>23</sup> But what produces different types of “structural connections” in the listening and interpretation of music? For López Cano, part of the answer lies in the concept of *affordances*, from Gibson’s ecological theory of visual perception. The *affordances* are the “invitations to use” that are present in music itself (as in any object of perception) and allow one to anticipate bodily responses: “They are like the benefits that an object offers its user and that this user is capable of recognizing at the same moment of perception” (López Cano 2004). The *affordances* are the product of cultural constructions. For this, not all of us react in the same way while listening to the same sounds. In front of a marimba group playing a *curralao*, for instance, a *Guapireño* [man from Guapi-Cauca, Colombia] will get up to dance, while a Bogotano [man from Bogotá-Cundinamarca, Colombia] probably will remain seated listening attentively. As much one as the other must have detected distinct *affordances* pertinent to his perceptions.

The fact that these differences in response are based on listeners’ prior experiences returns us to the problem of competence. López Cano does not see competence as a mechanical accumulation that gradually leads the listener to better “understand” the music, but rather as a history of the encounters between music and subject that register in perceptive action and allow the listener to know what to do with the music in a given moment. In this sense, he reconsiders the concepts of *frame* and *script*, developed by artificial intelligence to explain how these encounters are stored in the form of abstractions that can be “used” later (López Cano 2004).

The frames are cognitive schemas that serve to hierarchize information in the manner of a “situation map,” giving an idea of what to expect in a specific context. For example, when we attend a concert, we expect to see some basic elements: a stage, chairs, programs. In this way, too, we have general expectations of what will happen: someone will perform music on the stage and, consequently, we will get excited and applaud. But the information of the frame, even though hierarchized, does not establish a temporal sequence.

The scripts, on the other hand, are cognitive schemas that serve to organize the information in a succession of events. The concert situation has a script that could be summed up like this: 1) we buy the tickets, 2) we are handed a program, 3) we enter the hall, 4) the first piece begins, 5) the first piece ends and we applaud, 6) the steps are repeated depending on the number of pieces, and 7) we leave the hall.

In addition to frames and scripts, López Cano turns to Umberto Eco’s concept of *cognitive type*, “a battery of organized information” or “an articulation of informations that collaborate in the exploration of the cultural scene,” very similar to Peirce’s idea of *type* (López Cano 2004). Frames and scripts as well as other schema enter into this definition. The cognitive types are somewhat private, that is, something that every individual constructs based on his/her experiences. To the extent to which they are shared within a culture, cognitive types can also

become public. In other words, the musical topics of the Classical period can be understood as cognitive types which have become shared by the collective after a process of conventionalization.

At the same time, the cognitive types are also the result of processes of *categorization*. This last concept is of major importance for the cognitive sciences because categorization is what permits us to abstract individual experiences in order to subsume them under general concepts. Categorization helps us both to construct cognitive types and to communicate and make them public. Although the classical theories of categorization are based on the common possession of some “necessary and sufficient traits,” the empirical study of natural categories has shown that categorization we bring into play in our daily cognition is based on what Wittgenstein termed family resemblances (López Cano 2004). For example, if we label a song as belonging to a specific musical genre, it is not because it shares all the same traits with other songs of the genre. The relationship among said songs depends on a distribution of similarities, as well as on how particular musical materials are used.

López Cano’s proposal of a cognitive-enactive semiotics is a brave advance aiming at reconciling different concepts developed in music semiotics. His work makes it possible to connect individual bodily experience with the processes of cultural conventionalization involved in topics, schemas, and cognitive types. In this sense, López Cano creates a kind of bridge between theories of embodied mind and theories of topics that have been developing in the *mainstream* of musical semiotics. There is, however, an entire area of musical meaning that López Cano does not tackle in depth, which is of vital importance for the study of this subject in the social sciences.

### **Connotations, Myths, and Power**

The expression and accomplishment of the worlds and the subjectivities included in them, the creation and the fulfillment of the sensible (desires, beliefs, intelligences) precede the economic construction. The economic war that is played on a planetary level is in this way and in various senses an aesthetic war. (Lazzarato 2006:101)

This area, which has apparently been neglected in most studies of musical meaning, corresponds to the massive sense that is produced in the union of sound with other cultural products. This requires an attentive gaze, since it is at this level that the main *political* potential for music resides. In the words of Philip Tagg:

Words and numbers may be the symbolic systems privileged in public education, but it is the audiovisual media rather than the written word that carry the most pervasive and persuasive messages influencing which political candidates are elected and which governments are toppled, not to mention which commodities are sold, lifestyles led, fashions followed, myths maintained, and ideologies embraced. For most of its programming time, television, still the most pervasive of audiovisual media, favours *non-verbal* aspects of sight and sound. . . . Unfortunately, discussion of *music’s* structures and meanings is so often absent from such studies that it is necessary to petition for the construction of a solid empirical and theoretical foundation on which a semiotic *musicology* of the mass media can be built. (Tagg and Clarida 2003:7, italics in the original).

For Tagg, the importance of music in society lies not only in aesthetic considerations, but also in the socially accepted meanings that music helps to construct along with other languages of political relevance in our culture. For this reason, Tagg argues for using Peircian semiotics in the

study of musical meaning. However, in his eagerness for accessibility, Tagg uses some concepts in a schematic manner; for this reason some researchers do not regard Tagg as semiotically rigorous.<sup>24</sup>

Tagg uses Seeger's term *museme* to refer to a musical structure that takes on a meaning more or less constant through its reiteration in specific contexts. In 2004, Tagg presented a scholarly talk, titled "What Is a Museme Good For: Antidepressants and the Musical Management of Anguish," in which he traced two sonorities that have been constructed in the West during the last three centuries as representative of anguish: half-diminished chords and minor chords with an added major ninth. According to Tagg, the absence of this type of sonority in much music of the mass media today (in the soundtracks of such films as *American Beauty* and *The Life of David Gale*) can be correlated with the increase in the sale of antidepressants. This is due, he suggests, to the fact that our culture has found it increasingly difficult to manage anxiety (Tagg 2004). With projects like this one, Tagg makes an interesting call for descriptions of the ways in which power flows through concrete musical sounds. But, in order to continue in this direction, it is necessary to open a parenthesis to make some reflections on the relationship between music and power.

Theodor Adorno has been, for decades, one of the most important writers on the subject of music and power. In addition to discussing the relationship between the culture industry and the totalitarianisms that he together with Horkheimer denounces in *Philosophische Fragmente* (2007), Adorno discusses the power of music in terms of its capacity to activate certain modes of consciousness. Such consciousness allows one the possibility of accessing the differences between reason and materiality (DeNora 2003:10). In this way, the formal properties of music can extol or suppress certain critical faculties, perceptive and expressive (ibid.). The problem lies in that this last consideration, added to an almost reverential belief in the ideal of an autonomous and superior music, led Adorno to demonize and scorn any form of functional music, especially jazz, that he saw as an instrument of alienation. The main difficulty of the sociology of music Adorno proposed is in the persistent idea of power as the opposition of totalities: subject/object, reason/materiality, high culture/low culture, and good music/bad music. For reasons such as these, the sociology of music put his theory aside, and only in the last decade has he begun to be recovered and "updated" by researchers like Tia DeNora (2003).

In contrast, for Michel Foucault, power must be understood in terms of a microphysics that implies resistances of *molecular* nature. According to one of Foucault's later definitions, power is "a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others, but on their actions" (cited in Lazzarato 2006:231), that is, on the environment, the medium, the field that makes possible the action. This definition is a consequence of the idea of *governmental technologies* that Foucault had used to explain the technologies of corporal discipline and population control. Nevertheless, neither the disciplinary techniques nor the biopolitics permit seeing clearly in what way relationships of power can be understood to flow in musical sound.

In this regard, it is helpful to turn to Maurizio Lazzarato's concept of *noo-politics*. The term comes from the Greek *noos* or *noûs*, that for Aristotle designates intellect, the highest aspect of the soul. Lazzarato understands it as an element that contributes to anatomo-politics and biopolitics and consists in the modulation of memory, attention, affects, and desires through the creation of worlds of meaning. These meanings circulate through audiovisual media, *marketing*, and other mechanisms of expression. As such, noo-politics corresponds to an important aspect of subjectivation through the constitution of *publics* and no longer through bodily discipline or the control of population (Lazzarato 2006:93ff.).

This concept is useful in understanding the political role of music via a notion of power that is not rooted in a set of binary oppositions. The task is to examine what kinds of interests are involved when music serves the role of creating worlds of meaning. Further, the neo-political role of sound can be traced in the processes of creation of identities through music, something that has been profoundly studied in recent years. As for Hall identity is an articulation—a point of contingent suture—between discourse and the individual. The creation of worlds through music can be understood in the very emergence of meaning, that is, as the result of different articulations between culturally constructed sound (topics, gestures) and a subject with some particular dispositions after a previous listening experience (competence). These articulations can only take effect in the cognitive act, which is where meaning emerges (in enactive form).

In the text *Mythologies* of Roland Barthes, one finds what could be understood as a specific mechanism of articulation between music and social discourses (2002). Here, the French semiologist explores such publications as *Paris Match* and *Elle* and provides examples of how power circulates through text and images. The most famous example is the image of a black soldier saluting the French flag:

I am in the barbershop, they offer me an exemplar of *Paris Match*. On the cover, a young black man dressed in a French uniform salutes the flag with eyes raised, fixed without a doubt on the pleats of the tri-colored flag. Such is the sense of the image. Nevertheless, ingenious or not, I correctly perceive what it signifies for me: that France is a great imperial force, that all its sons without distinctions of color, serve faithfully under its flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of a supposed colonialism than the zeal of this black man in serving his supposed oppressors. (Barthes 2002:207)

As is evident, beyond the relationship between signifier and signified (a black man in a military salute), Barthes is interested in the next level of meaning that is produced starting from the complete image of the cover as a new signifier, whose signified is French imperialism. Following, I reproduce the graphic (Figure 2) that Barthes uses to explain how these two levels are related (2002:206):

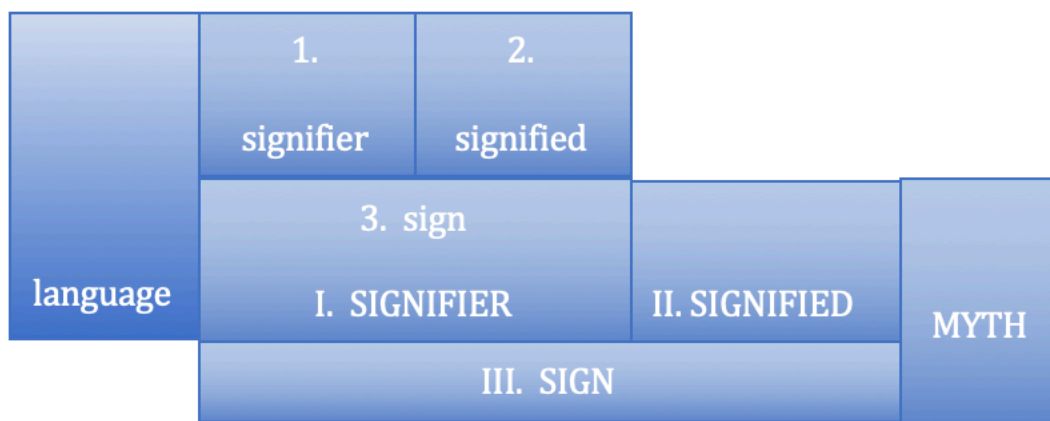


Figure 2. Structure of the myth

In this way, the sign produced by the relationship between a signifier and the signified is converted into the signifier of a second semiological system that Barthes calls the *mythic system*. This scheme is very similar to the one normally used to define connotation as a second level that requires a previous denotation. Nevertheless, the particularity of Barthes's myth consists in that this second semiological level obliterates and deforms the meaning of the first level. In order to clarify this process, Barthes uses the term *sense* for the sign of the first level and *form* for the nature that sense acquires when it converts into a signifier of the second level.

The signifier of the myth presents itself ambiguously: it is at once meaning and form, full on the one hand, empty on the other. As sense, the signifier immediately postulates a reading, it is captured with the eyes, it has sensory reality (opposed to the linguistic signifier that is of a purely psychic nature), it has richness . . . . By becoming form, the sense moves away from its contingency, it empties, it is impoverished, history evaporates, nothing is left but the written word. . . . The sense contained a system of values: a history, a geography, a moral, a literature. The form has distanced all of that richness: its impoverishment requires that a signification replace it. . . . One must place between parentheses the biography of the black man if the image is to be liberated and prepared to receive its meaning. (2002:208-09)

In other words, the myth deforms the initial sense of the image to produce the idea of French imperialism. But, in addition, the myth could not function if its meaning were unmotivated:

Mythical meaning never is completely arbitrary, but always partially motivated, containing a fatal dose of analogy. . . . In order for French imperialism to impregnate the black man that salutes, an identity between the black man's salute and the salute of a French soldier is necessary. Motivation is needed for the very duplicity of myth, the myth plays with the analogy of sense and form: there is no myth without motivated form. (Barthes 2002:219)

In this manner, myths can be understood as a specific form of creation of worlds that constitutes *noo-politics* in Lazzarato's sense. Barthes gives us, in addition, a means of tracking how power—present in the myth—is semiotically anchored in motivated signs, and simultaneously implies a deformation of sense.

An example of how this mechanism could function in the case of music can be found in the idea of musical *nationalism*: an individual or a group of individuals produce music on a daily basis within their immediate environment. It can be music for dancing, to celebrate rituals, or for any other social function (for example, a *bambuco*: "La guaneña"). If this music is produced within geographical limits more or less defined and in intimate correspondence with the particular human group that inhabits this space, it is then possible to speak of a motivated relationship with the socially constructed territory. Music becomes an *index* of the native land (for example, the Cauca) and every individual lives this relationship in the body and in movements that connect him/her with the group. The individual is capable of finding *affordances* in sound, that tell him/her how to use the music (to dance, to listen, to adore). This permits the individual to construct some communicable cognitive types that little-by-little become part of the cultural repertory of his/her society. At the same time, these types can reach a certain level of convention that permits them to be incorporated later in new musical texts. Conventionalizations allow, for example, music to allude to territory or to a culture based in an imagined territory (another *bambuco*: "El sotareño"). But conventionalized musical gestures can also be transformed, as in the cadence 7-5-4-3 in minor tonalities when correlated repeatedly with sad and melancholy lyrics (another *bambuco*: "Van cantando por la sierra").<sup>25</sup> If this occurs, a topic

will have been created that can be traced in different musics (for this example, one could speak of the topic of Andean melancholy). Here, the first level of the myth has already been created. Nevertheless, a new myth is also produced when this relationship with a territory or with the idea of melancholy is used to construct the idea of a *national music*: the sense of the function of the music, its danceable character, its evocation of particular feelings, tied or not to a cultural conception of a territory, are deformed and alienated so that music (the *bambuco*) form part of a new world of sense, “nationality” that is, at the same time, a neo-political construction (that, in this case, was placed at the service of the Hispano-Catholic mestizo nation manifested in the Colombian Constitution of 1886).<sup>26</sup>

### Three Approaches and a Proposal

In the preceding pages, I have attempted to describe some of the more visible approaches to the study of musical meaning, with the intention of proposing some ordering that will link them in order to use the main contributions of each. These approaches are dissimilar, diverse, and appear to tackle very different levels of meaning. Nevertheless, at the risk of sounding reductionist, I believe that it is possible to group them into three large approaches: strictly semiotic or hermeneutic; cognitive or embodied; and social and political.

The semiotic-hermeneutic includes all of the approaches that primarily emphasize the analysis of the musical text and its signifying relationships. This focus constitutes the main currents of musical semiotics as articulated by such authors as Leonard Meyer, Raymond Monelle, Robert Hatten, Kofi Agawu, Jean-Jacques Nattiez, David Lidov, and others. These proposals all give precedence to musical meaning that can be traced directly in the score. Although none of them is ignorant of the importance of music as a social and cultural phenomena, their analyses do not tackle the problem that would be implied in considering every particular listener as a relevant element in the construction of meaning. The theoretical contributions of these approaches are vital, however, for any semiotic study of music. The concepts of topic and competence, as well as more recent advances surrounding the idea of musical gesture, supply tools necessary to describe sound events and their organization in a *musical text*.

The cognitive-embodied approach, drawing from musical cognition, theories of embodied mind, and music psychology, is exemplified by such authors as Diana Deutsch, Mark Johnson, John Sloboda, Lawrence Zbikowski, and more recently, Rubén López Cano. These approaches emphasize the listening subject, his or her cognitive mechanisms and dimensions of the physical body. These perspectives do not ignore music’s social construction or descriptions of sound events in the musical text. However, their main concern is the position of the subject towards the music: how s/he perceives sound; how s/he categorizes the perceived information; how s/he pieces together schemas and cognitive types and, finally, how s/he constructs competence that will allow him/her to construct meaning in the very act of musical cognition. Psychological and cognitive approaches are also tools essential for showing that competence and topic are constructions that do not reside exclusively in the text. They signal the importance of the *subject* in creating musical meaning.

Finally, the *social-political* approach, centering on ways in which society and power circulate through musical sound, is exemplified in the work of Theodor Adorno, Philip Tagg, Simon Frith, and a majority of the ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians who tackle



the problem of music as a relevant element in the construction of individual and collective identities. From the social perspective, there is not much relevance in the description of musical materials or of the relationship of particular individuals with music. The main contribution of this approach is maintaining attention to the role of music in relation to *power*—a vital perspective if we wish to improve our understanding of the enormous capacity of music to influence our societies, our politics, and our economies.

These three large groups, although they do not exhaust the possibilities of musical signification, appear to be representative of the main concerns of researchers in the past thirty years. Now, one of the problems of this field is the absence of dialogue among scholars who adopt these different approaches. In order to expand our understanding of “musical meaning” it would be helpful to move toward a conjunction of the three approaches. Musical meaning is not found only in a score or in the listener. Neither can it be reduced to cultural discourses that surround music. Musical meaning is the product of culture and society, but is rooted and profoundly anchored in sounding materials and in the bodies of the people who listen. Because of this, I have tried to emphasize concepts like familiarity, motivated signs, convention, *affordances* and competence, that can help to connect the knowing subject with the musical text. In the same way, I have underscored the notions of articulation, neo-politics, and myth as key elements to connect subject and sound with his/her social environment.

It would be useful, then, to devise a methodology using these three approaches as minimal levels of investigation. The intent of this article is not to propose such a methodology, but to suggest at least a list of questions that might help orient studies that examine musical signification. The following list is a preliminary sketch, drawing on some minimum criteria: 1) to seek to integrate the problematics, definitions, and concepts of the different approaches explored in this text; 2) to provide simplified guidelines for the application of said concepts by researchers in different areas; and 3) to emphasize the political character of music in its participation as a key element in discourses that give form to social life (see Figure 3).

		Questions	Methodological resources
<b>cognitive corporeal</b>	<b>1. Context of contact</b>	<b>What are the specific circumstances of bodily contact with music (space, time, ritual, social, etc.)?</b>	<b>Ethnography, iconography, oral and written sources</b>
	<b>2. Body</b>	<b>What are the bodily responses to the music?</b>	<b>Ethnography, iconography, oral and written sources</b>
	<b>3. Categorization</b>	<b>How are the elements present in the sound categorized (the listeners’ categorization by genre, format, emotions, and so on)?</b>	<b>Questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, written sources</b>
	<b>4. Competence</b>	<b>What is the musical and listening history of listeners and performers?</b>	<b>Life history, interviews, focal groups, written sources</b>

<b>semiotical-hermeneutical</b>	<b>5. Material</b>	<b>What are the elements present in the musical sound that serve as a basis for the categorization (gestures, melodies, timbres, harmonic progressions, rhythmic patterns, and so on)?</b>	<b>Musical analysis, interviews, questionnaires</b>
	<b>6. Motivation</b>	<b>In this history of sound are there iconic relationships or indexes with some extramusical reality? Are there motivated signs?</b>	<b>Musical analysis, historical revision, archeology</b>
	<b>7. Convention</b>	<b>Is there a degree of conventionalization of these relationships? Is it possible to speak of the presence of topics in the musical text? Are there communicable cognitive types? What support exists for the social circulation of these cognitive types (mediums of communication, guilds, institutions, and so on)?</b>	<b>Musical analysis of an extensive repertory, analysis of the discourses of the sound event</b>
<b>socio-political</b>	<b>8. Myth</b>	<b>Do these categorizations form part of the most complete social meanings? Result in the existence of myths? Is it possible to detect instances in which the initial “sense” disappears as a result of a new meaning?</b>	<b>Analysis of non-musical communication that accompanies the sound event: cultural politics and mediums of communication</b>
	<b>9. Noo-politics</b>	<b>What support is there for the social circulation of these myths (mediums of communication, institutions, and so on)? What worlds of meaning are created in the myth? How do they articulate the subjects of these worlds of meaning?</b>	<b>Analysis of non-musical communication that accompanies the sound event: cultural politics and mediums of communication</b>
	<b>10. Power</b>	<b>What power relationships are being articulated through musical sound?</b>	<b>Analysis of the compiled information on the three levels. Geneology.</b>

Figure 3. Methodological considerations for the study of musical meaning

As can be seen in Figure 3, the project consists of beginning the investigation of musical signification from the cognitive act, understood as embodied action, in order then to examine

how this experience becomes public through processes of categorization and conventionalization. The description of these processes opens the possibility of connecting the embodiment of music with power, through concepts like topic, cognitive types, myth, and noo-politics.

This kind of approach can be used both in studies with a wide reach and in short reflections (as in articles of musical criticism). In the same manner, it can be used in historical, musicological, social, or music theory studies, since it implies asking questions on the history of the sound, its materiality, its analysis, its cultural uses and dimensions. Following, I show how this list of questions can be applied through a hypothetical example: *music for ironing*.<sup>27</sup>

**1) Context of contact:** Although many people listen to romantic ballads in different contexts, the denomination *music for ironing* is frequently related to a condition of broken-heartedness and with the consumption of alcohol among the Bogotano [from Bogotá] upper and middle classes. For this example, we can imagine a university student that listens to the song “I Do Not Ask for the Moon,” “*Yo no te pido la luna*” (as sung by Daniella Romo), in the company of various friends and after many drinks.

**2) Body.** The student listens to the music with eyes closed, shoulders drawn, and head up. She sings at the top of her volume and probably reproduces some choreography she tried out when she was in school. The movement consists of mimicking an exaggerated emotion.

**3) Categorization.** If one were to ask this group to describe music, they might use terms like “old” and “romantic.” They could associate it with a kind of old-fashioned and very emotional “romantic love.”

**4) Competence.** It is possible to suppose that the student in question listened to these ballads at home when she was a child. Probably, she knew “*Yo no te pido la luna*” as a soundtrack of some soap opera and this allowed her to associate it with an explicit romantic emotionality.

**5) Material.** Musically, the drum set emphasizes 2- and 4-beat time, synthesized chords, tonal progressions with sequential harmonies and the relative minor (IV – V – iii – vi – IV – V – I). At the end, it modulates up a tone through a sequence of chords. It uses electronic timbres. The bass repeats notes. The voice is high and nasal and the lyrics speak of eternal love. The listener can recognize some of these elements as *affordances* for the gesture of closing the eyes (like the strings scale for the entrance of the chorus).

**6) Motivation.** This song or other similar ones might have been heard by our student as a soundtrack from some soap opera heard at midday, seen in the company of her mother or of the domestic employee. The sounding materials (progressions, timbres, rhythmic-melodic design) can articulate themselves in an indexical relationship, with the (feminine) emotionality of the domestic ambience of the 1980s.

**7) Conventionalization.** During adolescence, our student learned to reject this kind of music, based on the shared preferences of friends, radio announcers, and other sources. Probably, she heard this song again, and others like it, as a student on a public bus, which reinforced its associations with the lower classes. This rejection probably also has to do with the contrast of

this very romantic music with the modal harmonies and the absence of leading tones in the Anglo-Saxon rock-pop of the 1990s, the music our student most enjoys hearing.<sup>28</sup>

**8) Myth.** In the mid-1990s, the radio announcer Alejandro Villalobos coined the term *ironing music* and converted it into a marketing label. After that, the specific experience of our student's listening is subsumed in the category "ironing," causing the particular history of these listenings to distort its origins toward a new meaning (if partially motivated): *service employees listen to romantic ballads from past decades and, as such, their airing in upper-class radio stations is cause for laughter.*

**9) Noo-politics.** The particularity of the act of listening (the broken-heartedness and the alcohol) introduces a new world of sense: the "exaggerated emotionality" associated with this music is cause to laugh when observed among the lower classes but it is a valuable recourse for managing strong emotions in the upper classes (for our student, the emotional woman of the lower classes seems to have something that is not common in upper classes: flexibility and fluency in expressing her emotions).

**10) Power.** This music articulates a problematic relationship between the lower classes—that are perceived as emotionally exaggerated—and upper classes that have a high level of emotional repression. Music thus functions as an emotional escape valve that needs to be controlled, as it constitutes as a form of class distinction that ensures the reproduction of power relationships.

Although this hypothetical example is a bit rough due to the lack of space, it can serve as an approach to some of the minimal questions for any study inquiring into musical signification. This modest advance obeys a firm conviction that the musical signifier: 1) is corporeal, anchored in practice, and dependent on context; 2) is not a fixed correlation, but the product of contingent articulations; 3) is circularly constructed between the individual and the collective; therefore, 4) it is historical and malleable: it becomes distilled and changes on the basis of bodily practices and cognitive encounters with sound.

For these reasons, there is little sense in studying the cognitive dimension or the musical text without understanding how music transmits power relationships with real effects for some people. As well, there is no sense in talking about the role of music in society without understanding how concrete sounds and their histories articulate with a particular listener situated in a specific historic and cultural situation.

In this sense, the present proposal seeks to close the gap separating traditional disciplines of music research from social and cultural studies of music. The pending task is to show the viability of this enterprise through studies on musical signification in concrete cases.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Forms part of the author's doctoral thesis: "The Myths of National Music: Power and Emotions in Colombian Popular Musics 1930-1960," Doctorate in Social Sciences and the Humanities, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, 2014. Originally published in *Cuadernos de Música, Artes Visuales, y Artes Escénicas (Journals of Music, Visual Arts, and Theater)* 7, no. 1 (January 2011):39-77 (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana). [http://cuadernosmusicayartes.javeriana.edu.co/images/stories/revistas/RevistaV7N1/cmavae\\_volumen\\_7\\_numero\\_1\\_03\\_hernandez\\_oscar.pdf](http://cuadernosmusicayartes.javeriana.edu.co/images/stories/revistas/RevistaV7N1/cmavae_volumen_7_numero_1_03_hernandez_oscar.pdf) (accessed 21 June 2016).

<sup>2</sup> If the problem were limited to the discourses, one could find plausible that a lullaby could be described as violent, dark, and aggressive music or that a song by Megadeath could be perceived as an appropriate sonority for spiritual recollection. These examples demonstrate in a simple manner that meanings circulate in sound.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Monelle expounds a similar argument when he affirms that theorists “have imagined that the exclusion of semantics guaranteed precision and verifiability; since musical semantics was traditionally governed by expression theory, which was notoriously vague, it had to be extirpated. Music was considered to be abstract and nonrepresentational, without signification of any kind” (2000:9).

<sup>4</sup> In Claudio Monteverdi’s eight madrigal books and in other works of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, it is common to find musical resources that seek to paint action with sounds. During this period, musical codes develop to imitate phenomena like the flight of birds or the heat of fire. At the same time, there was a systematic search for music to correspond reliably with spatial sensations of the narration. Many of these resources form part of what is called *musical rhetoric*. In this text I do not refer specifically to this field, but those interested can easily find information on the internet. A relevant text in this regard is *Música y retórica en el Barroco*, by Rubén López Cano (2000).

<sup>5</sup> Saussure is considered the father of semiology. In his *Course in General Linguistics* (1998 [1916]), he proposed the bases for the study of structural linguistics that became hegemonic in the study of meaning during the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of Saussure’s most relevant contributions are: 1) the conception of the sign as the relationship between a signifier and signified, 2) the idea that the structure of the linguistic system is fully based on differences, and 3) the idea that these structural differences are organized in pairs of binary oppositions.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to Eco’s critiques, it is important to point out that Meyer’s proposal permanently moves around the relationship of stimulus-response. That is, he considers the body a passive entity that reacts to external stimuli. This is a problematic point from the perspective of the most recent contributions of the cognitive sciences and theories of embodied mind and a key point of departure for contemporary discussions of musical semiotics.

<sup>7</sup> Motivated signs are those that are not arbitrary but are directly related to their objects, that is, they are not the products of convention. To this type of signs belong diagrams, schema, metaphors, symptoms, signals and, in general, the signs that Peirce would call *icons and indexes*.

<sup>8</sup> In spite of its solid theory, this text by Seeger has been better known for the idea of a “linguocentric predicament” and for the use of the term *museme* than for the analytical utility of its musical logic. The reason for this is, although Seeger’s *moods* serve to describe in graphic form the augmenting or falling of tension, this does not permit much more to be said about what is already present in a musical hearing. It seems that, in the end, Seeger himself ends up being a victim of the linguocentric predicament.

<sup>9</sup> All of Peirce’s typology of signs is governed by three basic ideas or dimensions of experience: *firstness*, which is the area of pure possibility; *secondness*, that corresponds to the plane of the real, what follows; and *thirdness*, which is the area of purpose, intention, understanding, and will. These basic ideas result in Peirce’s famous trichotomies, classifications of signs according to this order. As such, according to the nature of the *representamen*, a sign can be a *qualisign* (that is, a pure quality), a *sinsign* (a real object), or a *legisign*, a type or conventional class, of which every given occurrence would be a sinsign. The second trichotomy is that which is organized around the function of the object: a *rheme* is a sign that refers to a possible object; a *dicent sign* represents a real object; and an *argument* refers to a legal argument, as in the case of a logical syllogism. Finally, the most famous trichotomy is the one that classifies signs according to their relationships to the object: An *icon* signifies by virtue of some type of similarity to the object, as with images, diagrams, or metaphors. An *index* is a sign with a causal relationship or co-occurrence with the object. Icons as well as indices are considered motivated signs because they have a direct and concrete relationship with the object. The third type of sign is the *symbol* and signifies by virtue of a process of conventionalization. The best examples of a symbol are the words we use in any language (Monelle 1992:193-198).

<sup>10</sup> This distinction appears to be very close to what Mikhail Bakhtin distinguishes between architectonic forms and constituting forms. Architectonic forms would be the “forms of spiritual and corporeal value of the aesthetic person, natural forms such as his/her environment, forms of outcomes in his/her vital personal, social, and historical aspects, etc.” For Bakhtin, these are the “forms of aesthetic experience in their peculiarity” and are common to all forms of art. Architectonic forms are fulfilled in constituting forms. In the words of Bakhtin, “the architectonic form determines the choice of the constituting form” (1989:26). A similar posture is encountered in Jan Mukarovsky of the Prague School, for whom “the work-thing functions only as an external symbol (like the ‘signifier’ in Saussure’s terminology), to which corresponds, in the collective conscience, a ‘signified’ (sometimes called an ‘aesthetic object’)” (1977:56).

<sup>11</sup> The quoted passage is from the original English edition (Eco 1976:216-17). Salgar Hernández’s original article quoted the Spanish translation published the following year (Eco 1977:317).—Ed.

<sup>12</sup> This difference between semantics and hermeneutics can be understood starting from Paul Ricoeur, who distinguishes *signs*, as elements that refer to other signs, from *discourse* that refers to the world. The signifying

difference is, then, a semiotic fact while the reference is a semantic fact. In other words: “Semiotics is an abstraction from semantics, which relates the internal constitution of the sign to the transcendent aims of reference” (Ricoeur, cited in Monelle 2000:12). Music has internal relationships between signs; that is, it has semiotic relationships. But to understand music as discourse with transcendent references implies falling once again into the linguistic trap. In this sense, a new distinction explained by Ricoeur becomes relevant: literary texts, for being fictional, do not refer to the real world but rather construct an “alternative world of the senses.” The approach of these types of texts does not belong to semantic territory, but rather to hermeneutics. Consequently, music would have no reason to refer to the real world. Music refers to its own world of sense, as much as any literary text (Monelle 2000:12). This distinction opened the door for music semioticians to drop the weight of extramusical reference to concrete objects and to begin to work on frames of interpretation surrounding the musical text.

<sup>13</sup> The Picardy Third is a very common gesture in Baroque music and consists of using a major chord as the final sonority in a minor tonality following a cadential gesture. This procedure seeks to give a greater stability to the final sonority, since a major chord is closer to the natural harmonic series, which is the (Western) paradigm of stability of harmonic structures. In using this recourse, the marked term in the opposition major-minor would be the major chord, for appearing in the context of a minor tonality.

<sup>14</sup> Going a little further, this content could be understood as corresponding to a worldview (*Weltanschauung*) that forms part of the noetic base of an era, and does not necessarily correspond to actual reality but can integrate elements of past eras (Mukarovsky 1977).

<sup>15</sup> In this case arises what Bakhtin (1989) calls “cultural unity” or what Mukarovsky (1977) calls the era, or “epoch.”

<sup>16</sup> Stuart Hall’s idea of interpellation is taken directly from the one developed by Louis Althusser in his book on the ideological apparatus of the State. According to Althusser,

. . . ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits all of them), or “transforms” the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!”

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn around. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was “really” addressed to him, and that “it was *really him* who was hailed” (and not someone else). Experience shows that the practical telecommunications of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed. And yet it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by “guilt feelings,” despite the large numbers who “have something on their consciences.” (1970:68-69)

<sup>17</sup> Note the similarity between Johnson’s philosophy of embodied meaning and Daniel Webb’s in 1769 on the role of the “nerves” and the “spirits” in the perception of musical movement.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to keep in mind that such similarities are not necessarily based on their being shared discrete elements, but rather that they be founded on the type of family resemblances of which Wittgenstein speaks.

<sup>19</sup> Clearly neither of the two affirms that bodily experience will lead to universal meanings, but, at least in the case of Brower, her description of tonality prevents just any commentary on the historical, local, and complex processes from which tonal tensions and the idea of harmonic progression originated.

<sup>20</sup> In tonal music, modulation is the harmonic process by which the tonal center or the tonic changes. The subdominant is the fourth degree of the scale counting from the tonic, which is the main note. The modulation to the subdominant consists of the process by which the fourth degree converts into a new tonic.

<sup>21</sup> In an informal, very simple experiment, I asked a person who is not a musician to tell me what kind of spatial movement he could assign to an ascending melody and to a modulation. In the case of the ascending melody, he had no doubt in assigning an ascending movement. After the modulation example, however, he said rather that he perceived the sound getting closer, but not because he would be following a flux of tension, but because the volume went up in the moment of the modulation: “the closer, the louder.” In this case, it could be said that, in effect, there is an iconic relationship between the increase and decrease in the intensity and the approaching or distancing of the object. But it is not clear that this would occur in the same way in the perception of tonal tension in people without musical training.

<sup>22</sup> Notice the resemblance between the idea of structural-corporeal connection of enactive cognition and Stuart Hall’s notion of *articulation*. From this perspective, the cognitive exercise could be understood as a type of articulation, that is, of contingent relationship between the perceiver and the perceived. The relationship is contingent because its result is subject to the particular history of the individual and to the cultural ambience in which this contact takes place.

<sup>23</sup> López Cano delineates at least 11 ways in which the body participates in musical processes: 1) productive motor activity of a musical sound, that is, the movements we make to produce the sound; 2) motor activity that accompanies the production of a musical sound or the movements that do not intervene directly in the sound; 3) self-perceptions; 4) the actions, postures, or pathologies with and in music; 5) neurology, physiology, sensory mobility, and superior cognitive levels of hearing; 6) motor activity manifested in musical perception (as in dance); 7) sound activity hidden in musical perception; 8) the metaphorical projection of embodied cognitive schemas (like those proposed by Johnson); 9) musical emotions (or physiological responses associated with emotions); 10) the embodied semiotization of music; and 11) embodiment discourses on music (López Cano 2005).

<sup>24</sup> Raymond Monelle, for example, comes to say explicitly that Tagg's vision of meaning is as naive as Deryck Cooke's (1992:13).

<sup>25</sup> "They Go Singing through the Mountains."

<sup>26</sup> The 7-5-4-3 cadence in minor tonalities with syncopated ending on a weak beat is a very common gesture in diverse Colombian musical genres, especially those that demonstrate some relationship with the southwest of the country: *bambucos* from the Cauca, *currulaos*, *pasillos*, and Ecuadorian waltzes, although it also appears in various musical pieces from the Atlantic Coast. In many urban *bambucos* before 1930, this gesture appears strongly correlated with the idea of melancholy. The research on how this topic has been constructed—together with others present in popular Colombian musics—and how it has played a political role in the process of constructing the nation, is part of my doctoral dissertation (see also Hernández 2013).

<sup>27</sup> "Ironing music" or "music for ironing" is a commercial designation known in Colombia that includes the Spanish ballads of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and that has marked and marketed itself since the mid-1990s as the music of the lower classes in general, and domestic employees in particular, deriving especially from radio stations that cater to upper- and middle-class youth.

<sup>28</sup> The leading tone is the seventh degree of the diatonic scale when it is a semitone below the tonic. It is characterized by an ascending melodic tension that largely constitutes the tension of dominant chords.

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