Towards a Sign Typology of Music

Philip Tagg

THIS TEXT FROM 1991 HAS BEEN REPLACED BY A BETTER AND RADICALLY EXPANDED VERSION IN CHAPTER 13 OF 'MUSIC'S MEANINGS' (2013)
http://tagg/mmmsp/NonMusoInfo.htm.

Aim and background

Why?

The ultimate aim of this paper is to suggest the necessity of re-evaluating the role and practices of music analysis along the lines of pragmatic semiotics and of intersubjective perception or phenomenology. The reasons for such re-evaluation are quite simple, at least in the field of popular music, whose practitioners have rarely pretended that their music is somehow devoid of affect, effect, signification, etc. Moreover, popular music has not until recently been the object of much systematic musical analysis. One reason for this apparent lack of interest is the epistemological impotence stemming from traditional musicology's concentration on intramusical processes and its neglect of structures relatable to music's role in society as a symbolic system. This is in turn connected to traditional musicology's fixation on notation, a means of storage even less adequate for popular than for European classical music.[1]

All this means that the popular music analyst is faced with the task not only of finding out, almost from scratch, what musical structures are relevant to the aesthetics of all those everyday musics ranging from dodecaphonic film underscore to Muzak and from Kylie Minogue to thrash metal, but also with that of defining those structures and how they work.

Now, although music's physical-acoustic elements may provide the raw materials with which musical structures are created, the latter are, in clear contradistinction to their raw materials, social constructs. The question of how musical structures are created is consequently one of etymology rather than of physics and therefore cultural and semantic rather than bio-acoustic. Thus, we should expect musical structures to be culturally specific and, if we accept that music is some sort of symbolic system, then musical structures ought also to be carriers of symbolic values, discretisable as such by their culturally perceived meaning and definable by the consistent intersubjectivity of their social and cultural usage.

To put the matter simply, it should really only be possible to speak of musical structures if they (a) have symbolic value or (b) if they are conceived as practical building blocks in the construction of music. In fact, the long and short of all this quasi-philosophical waffling is that music analysts should not only be something of a musician-arranger-composer but also some thing of a semiotician, for how else shall we ever be able to meaningfully define the

musical structures on which we base our analysis. All this may (or may not) be very well by way of general reasoning as to why musical structures need to be considered theoretically from a semiotic angle. However, it tells us nothing about the practical needs of such semiotic re-orientation in music analysis.

One reason is that semiotic music analysis has been explicitly asked for by sociologists and cultural theorists of popular music (Frith 1983, 1984; Laing 1969, Middleton 1990). It should be clear that such experts can no more be expected to answer questions about musical structures than we, as music analysts, can be expected to reveal the mysteries of social formations. However, since the relations between musical structures and social formations — in films, stage musicals, disco dances, brass band parades, etc., etc. — are so manifest in our culture and yet so unsystematised in scholarly thought, connections between musical structures and social actions would seem to be an area of paramount importance, remaining hitherto something of a black box in the larger field of cultural studies. And it is here that we, as music analysts, are supposed to be the experts, because it is we who pretend to be those most capable of defining and of analysing musical structures. All I want to do in this paper is to try and suggest ways of improving our skills in order to help decode whatever we might find in that 'black box'.

Now, if, as suggested earlier, it is impossible to speak of musical structures without defining them according to their pragmatic value as symbolic perception or as elements of practical musical construction, then a musical sign typology might not be out of place.

What?

At this juncture it is important to underline that the simplified sign typology shown as figure 1 is not the result of some wishful theoretical thinking or of some chronic desire to aggravate the confusion already caused by the shadow of academe's already impressive Tower of Babel. On the contrary, the typology is an attempt to give some highly common and everyday semantic practices and mechanisms adequate names, simply so that we can save time and energy when talking about connections between music and other parts of human activity. So, how and why was this sign typology created?

It is very largely the result of an extensive empirical investigation in which several hundred people (mostly 'non-musicians') were asked to write short film scenarios to ten different, previously unheard title tunes, played without accompanying visuals. The verbal-visual associations provided by respondents showed an astounding degree of intersubjective consistency and present invaluable empirical evidence of the musical-cultural competence of the 'unmusical' populace. The evaluation of test results is near completion and has been a complex analytical process. The long and short of it is that we (Bob Clarida and I)[2] tried to establish links between our respondents' verbal-visual associations on the one hand and, on the other, musical elements in the pieces that elicited those associations. In this way we were able, using the techniques of interobjective comparison and hypothetical substitution (described at length elsewhere)[1] to isolate discrete musical structures that corresponded to the verbal-visual associations provided by our respondents. These correspondences fell into the four main categories presented in table 1. These require some explanation.

Table 1. Sign typology overview

Anaphone	*sonic anaphone*	perceived similarity to paramusical sound
	kinetic anaphone	perceived similarity to paramusical movement
	tactile anaphone	perceived similarity to paramusical sense of touch
Genre synecdoche		*pars pro toto* reference to 'foreign' musical style, thence to complete cultural context of that style
Episodic marker		short, one-way process highlighting the order or relative importance of musical events
Style indicator		unvaried aspects of musical structuration for the style in question

Anaphones

Anaphone is a neologism analogous to 'analogy'. However, instead of meaning 'imitation of existing models... in the formation of words', anaphone means the use the use of existing models in the formation of (musical) sounds. Anaphones fall into three main categories.

Sonic anaphones

A sonic anaphone can be thought of as the quasi-programmatic, 'onomatopoeic' stylisation of 'non-musical' sound, e.g. Schubert's babbling brooks, Baroque opera thunder, William Byrd's bells or Jimi Hendrix's B52. As Rösing (1977) points out, sonograms of Schubert's brooks or of Beethoven's *Pastorale Symphony* thunder bear little objective acoustic relationship to sonograms of the 'real' things those musical stylisations are supposed to represent. But, continues Rösing, this is hardly the point, since the structural homologies between 'real' and 'musical' brooks or between 'real' and 'musical' thunder stem partly from cultural convention, partly from the state of development in sound technology. This dual mechanism explains why Vangelis's sampled rain sounds far more like rain than Beethoven's and why I couldn't hear the jackal in Masai music supposed to include sonic-anaphonic allusion to the cry of that animal.

But anaphones are not only sonic; they can also act as structural homologies of movement and touch. These sign types are simply called (b) kinetic and (c) tactile anaphones.

Kinetic anaphones

Kinetic anaphones have to do with the relationship of the human body to time and space. Such movement can be literally visualised as that of a human or humans riding, driving, flying, walking, running, strolling, etc. through, round, across, over, to and fro, up and down, in relation to a particular environment or from one environment to another. Gallops, marches, promenades, walking basses, struts, cakewalks etc. all contain culturally stylised kinetic anaphones for certain types of human bodily movements. However, kinetic anaphones can also be visualised as the movement of animals (e.g. flights of bumble bees, swarms of locusts, stampedes of cattle) or objects (e.g. rocket launches, truck driving, trains moving, B52s bombing, spinning wheels) or as the subjectivised movement of objectively stationary objects or beings, e.g. the sort of movement the human hand makes when outlining rolling hills (pastoral undulation), gentle waves on the sea, quadratic skyscrapers, jagged rocks, etc. Even stillness can be expressed by kinetic anaphone through the very lack of explicit metronomic time in rela-

tion to the regular beats of the heart, the regular periodicity of breathing, etc. (e.g. open landscapes like the start of Borodin's *On the Steppes of Central Asia*, the end of Mussorgsky's *Night on a Bare Mountain*, 'On the Open Prairie' from Copland's ballet suite *Billy the Kid*).

Of course, since the perception of any sound requires the positioning or movement of a body or bodies in relation to another or others, many sonic anaphones are also kinetic (e.g. a 'motor bike' fuzzed guitar panned from one side to another, 'horse hoof' clip-clops in 2/4 or 6/8 gallop metre). Similarly, some kinetic or sonic anaphones can also be tactile.

Tactile anaphones

The most familiar example of tactile anaphones is that produced by slowly moving, romantic string underscores — 'string pads', as the sound is called on synthesizers, because it pads holes and spaces in the sonic texture. Such string wallpaper, performed of course by several stringed instruments, rarely solo, can be characterised by its lack of audible attack and decay and by the relative consistency of its envelope — a parameter listing of synthesizer string presets reveals this in digital detail —, all frequently enhanced by extra reverb in recording. All this can produce the effect of homogeneous, thick, rich, viscous sonic texture and, by haptic synaesthesia, sensations of luxury, comfort and smoothness. This observation can be substantiated by noting nomenclature and in-house descriptions of mood music featuring thick ('rich', 'lush') string scoring of phenomenologically non-dissonant sonorities (tactile-kinetic connotations underlined):[3]

- *Lullaby Of The City* — home, soft and velvety, gently flowing, quiet, intimate and <u>restful</u>
- *Penthouse Affair* — fashions, sweetly melodic, slightly nostalgic but sophisticated, <u>'dressed in silk and satin'</u>
- *Amethysts for Esmeralda* — <u>rich</u> and dreamy;
- *Girl In Blue* — <u>lush, smooth</u> melody;
- *Valse Anastasie* — romantic, <u>lush</u>;
- *Sequence for Sentimentalists* — <u>rich</u>, romantic theme.

Viscous string pads have indeed acted and still act as sonic emulsifiers in many a voluptuous Hollywood love scene and no further documentation should be necessary to prove the point.[4]

Finally, figure 2 (p.6) exemplifies an anaphone that is at the same time sonic, kinetic and tactile: the sonic anaphone is that of either a knife being sharpened or a repeated scream, the kinetic anaphone that of repeated, deliberate, regular movement (Norman Bates's multiple stabbing of Marion in the shower) while the tactile aspect is sharp, unpleasant and piercing, the glissando acciacature connotable with the initial resistance offered by the skin as the knife point plunges into the body).

Genre synecdoche

Part for whole

The second main category of musical signs is the *genre synecdoche*. In verbal language, a synecdoche denotes a figure of speech in which a part substitutes the whole, as in the expression 'all hands on deck', implying, at least from the captain's view, that the sailors' brawn is worth more than their brain. A musical synecdoche would therefore be a set of musical structures inside a given musical style that refer to another (different, 'foreign', 'alien') musical style by citing one or two elements supposed to be typical of that 'other' style when heard in the context of the style into which those 'foreign' elements are imported. By citing part of the other style, the citation then alludes not only to that other style in its entirety but also potentially refers to the complete genre of which that other musical style is a subset — and here I am using 'genre' and 'style' in the precise senses defined by Franco Fabbri (1982).

Herrmann's shower murder music from *Psycho*, played in a concert or radio context to popular music listeners who did not recognise the piece, might well be perceivable as a genre synecdoche: since it bears greater structural resemblance to Penderecki than to Abba or Brian Adams, it might say 'modern atonal music' (style reference) and thereby 'difficult, serious problems, intellectual *Angst*' rather than (anaphonically) 'murder by multiple stabbing' in a popular horror movie. However, a less ambiguous genre synecdoche is provided by all those bass pedal points with simple tunes in compound time from Baroque works. This museme stack, anomalous in the harmonic and rhythmic perpetuum mobile of the Baroque, was obviously deemed an adequate connotor of central European country music of the time (style reference) and thereby of the presumedly idyllic pastorality as shepherds in the field keeping watch over their flocks (genre synecdoche). The 'pastoral symphonies' in Händel's *Messiah* or J.S. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* bear witness to this sort of musical sign type. The genre synecdoche has, in other words, like the anaphone, a paramusical field of connotation. However, unlike the anaphone, the genre synecdoche connotes that field, not by direct synaesthetic or structural homology, but by the intermediary of another musical style. The example of Baroque 'pastoral' music shows how the 'home style' (perpetuum mobile, changing harmony, circle-of-fifths progressions, etc.) inserts elements from a 'foreign style' (drones and simple one-key tunes, etc.) as a reference to phenomena presumed by the 'home style's' audience to be associated with that 'foreign style'. Since the intermediate 'foreign' style is only one part of a larger set of cultural constructs (way of life, attitudes, perceived environment, clothing, behaviour, etc.) viewed by the 'home style's' audience, the 'foreign style' acts as synecdoche for that larger set. As stated earlier, genre synecdoches contain two stages of reference: from certain elements in a 'foreign' musical style to the totality of that style and from that style to the rest of the culture to which that 'foreign' style belongs.

Ex. 1. Bernard Herrmann: 'The Shower' from Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960)

Episodic marker

Short one-way processes

The third type of musical sign is the *episodic marker*. Episodic markers,[5] like all the sign types presented so far, had to be constructed as a typological concept because of intrinsic differences is musical semiosis observed in conjunction with empirical data from a reception test carried out on several hundred respondents in the early eighties. There is no time to account for that work here, save to say that some pieces of stereotypic but unknown music used as test battery for eliciting film or TV scenarios gave rise to far more episodic associations than others. In other words, some pieces elicited lots of associations like 'has just', 'after that', 'after a long time', 'about to happen', 'leading to', etc., while other pieces gave rise to no such episodic connotations. Common musical-structural denominators of these apparently more episodic pieces were short, unidirectional processes along at least one parameter of musical expression, such as short, quick upbeat, up-bow, initial, rising run-ins (αναβασις) to new musical material (e.g. the violin run-up in Rota's theme for *Romeo and Juliet*). Such episodic markers, be they propulsive repetitions like six-quaver upbeat to the chorus of Abba's *Fernando* or the centrifugal melodic swirls at the start of Johann Strauss's *Fledermaus* waltz (*Il pipistrello*), or accelerandi or ritardandi or crescendi or diminuendi,

all serve one purpose. As long as they do not continue forever and as long as they are not immediately annulled by a musical process in the opposite direction along the same parameter(s) of musical expression, all such episodic markers act as *anacruses*, pointing the musical narrative in the direction of something new, be it a new theme or a new section, or even the final chord or note, which is, at least in an intra-opus sense, always new, because it can logically only happen once.

Style indicator

Compositional norms

The fourth and final type of musical sign is the *style indicator*. A style indicator is any musical structure or set of musical structures that are either constant for or regarded as typical of the 'home' musical style by persons in a culture sporting at least two different musical styles. We are in other words talking about the *compositional norms* of any given style. Thus, music using only a very few chords (rarely inverted) but sporting plenty of vocal and instrumental inflection (of particular types) might be regarded as style indicators of blues rather than of Viennese classicism, whereas plenty of different chords, frequently inverted, and very little vocal or instrumental inflection might be regarded as indicating Viennese classicism rather than blues. Style indicators can, it should be added, be used by 'foreign' musical styles as genre synecdoches. For example, although the steel guitar sound of Country and Western music acts frequently as a indicator of the 'country' genre, it started its life inside that style as a style reference to the Hawaiian guitar, i.e. as genre synecdoche for something exotic. Such incorporation of 'foreign' elements into a 'home' style is of course part and parcel of musical acculturation, but it useful to note this distinction, since the same musical element might connote something quite different to different (groups of) people at different points in time and place.

So what?

Indeed, the reservation expressed in the last sentence of the previous paragraph applies to all the sign types mentioned so far. However, this obvious point of cultural relativity and dialectics in understanding the construction of meaning in music is beyond the scope of this paper. The main aim here has been simply to suggest the different ways in which musical structures can be related to their perceived 'meanings', i.e. to their connotations, uses and paramusical contexts. I feel that not only traditional (Schenkerian or otherwise) studies but also analysis posing as 'semiotic' might be well advised to discuss the elements they feel constitute the works they hold under the microscope as if those elements had some symbolic value. I have merely sketched here how such types of connotative signification might be systematised.

Appendices

Endnotes

1. The general theoretical and methodological background to this study is covered in Tagg (1987).
2. A mammoth work by Tagg and Clarida and entitled *Ten Little Title Tunes* is due to appear soon. It contains an extensive theoretical introduction, plenty of respondent statistics and many examples and discussions of the musical sign types sketched here.
3. *Lullaby Of The City* and *Penthouse Affair* are from *Background Music for Home Movies* (Folkways). *Amethysts for Esmeralda*, *Girl In Blue*, *Valse Anastasie* and *Sequence for Sentimentalists* are from *Boosey & Hawkes Recorded Music*, SBH 2984.
4. However, here are some examples for the sceptical reader (composer and date of film in brackets): (1) Driscoll and Anne kissing on the boat in *King Kong* (M. Steiner 1932); (2) Olivia de Havilland's and Errol Flynn's romance in *Captain Blood* (Korngold 1935); (3) Robin and Maid Marion planning their future together in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Korngold 1938); (4) John Wayne proposing to Miss Dallas in *Stagecoach* (Hageman 1939); (5) Paul 'Shall-We-Have-A-Cigarette-On-It?' Henreid and Bette Davis rustling around on the sofa in *Now Voyager* (Steiner 1942); (6) Barbara Stanwyck as the luscious but lethal Mrs Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* (Rózsa 1944); (7) Lovely Laura in *For the Very Young* (Raksin 1944); (8) Lara's Theme from *Dr Zhivago* (Jarre, 1965); (9) *Romeo and Juliet* (Tchaikovsky 1869), (Rota 1968). (10) Ada's theme for that romantically hedonist embodiment of upper-class feminine chaos in *1900* (Morricone, 1976); (11) The luscious *pas de deux* from Khatchaturian's ballet *Spartacus* used for the swell of the sea and emotions in a British soap of the seventies entitled *The Onedin Line* (1974, 1976).
5. cf. the boundary marker of linguistics (Sinclair and Coulthard. *Towards an Analysis of Discourse*. Oxford, 1975). Thanks to Dr. Kay Richardson, University of Liverpool, for this observation.

Bibliography

FABBRI Franco (1982) 'A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications' *Popular Music Perspectives*, 1 (ed D Horn and P Tagg):52-81. Göteborg and Exeter: IASPM.

FRITH Simon (1983) *British Popular Music Research*. Exeter: IASPM U.K. Working Paper, 1.

— (1984) 'Mood Music. An Inquiry into Narrative Film Music' *Screen*, 25/3 (May-June 1984):78-87.

LAING Dave (1969) *The Sound of Our Time*. London: Sheed and Ward.

MIDDLETON Richard (1990) *Studying Popular Music*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

RÖSING Helmut (1977) *Musikalische Stlisierung akustischer Vorbilder in der Tonmalerei*. München: Katzbichler.

TAGG Philip (1987) 'Musicology and the Semiotics of Popular Music' *Semiotica*, 66-1/3:279-298