

WILLIAM P. DOUGHERTY

Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa, USA

## *What is a musical sign?: A guess at the riddle*

*Who'll tell me my secret,  
The ages have kept?—  
I awaited the seer*

*While they slumbered and slept.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Sphinx* (Emerson 1904, 20)

*A sign is something by knowing which  
we know something more.*

—Charles Sanders Peirce (*PW* 31-32)

**ABSTRACT:** Issues surrounding the nature of the musical sign loom large in the development of a viable musical semeiotic that goes beyond ad hoc or impressionistic appropriations of terminology. This article articulates an understanding of the sign with specific relevance to the analysis of musical topics by rigorously applying Peirce's semeiotic theory to illuminate the nature of sign functioning in music.

**KEYWORDS:** semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce, Ludwig van Beethoven, music analysis, musical topics

Around 1890, the American philosopher and polymath Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) sketched an outline for a book to be titled, "A Guess at the Riddle," with a Vignette of the Sphynx [sic] below the Title".<sup>1</sup> This never-completed

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles S. Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vols. 1-6 ed. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss, vols. 7-8 ed. A. W. Burks (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1931-35; 1958), I:354-416 (hereafter abbreviated CP followed by volume and paragraph numbers). This selection can also be found in Charles S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Vols. 1-2, various editors at the Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992 and 1998), 1:245-79 (hereafter abbreviated EP followed by volume and page numbers); Charles S. Peirce, *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, 6 vols. to date (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982-), 6:166-210 (hereafter abbreviated W followed by volume and page numbers); and Charles S. Peirce, *Peirce on signs: Writings on semiotic*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 186-202. Peirce's writings are available in several collections. To facilitate further investigation, I cross-reference as many of the citations as possible to these other sources. In addition those cited above, see Charles S. Peirce, *Philosophi-*

book was envisioned by Peirce as the definitive account of his triad of metaphysical categories in terms of its relevance to fundamental issues in logic, metaphysics (with an eye toward a theory of cognition), psychology, physiology, biology (in specific, by way of explaining the true nature of the Darwinian hypothesis), physics, sociology, and theology, and he predicted (with characteristic immodesty) that, should the treatise ever be written, it would be “one of the births of time.” That this birth never occurred is lamentable, especially since it would have accelerated an informed appreciation of Peirce’s comprehensive enterprise. Fortunately, Peirce’s prolific pen provided us with an almost overwhelming body of other material. (It is estimated that a complete compilation of his writings would take over one hundred volumes.) In these writings, Peirce detailed the systematic consequences of his categorical theory, and nowhere is this more pervasive or more persuasive than in his conception of the doctrine of signs or semeiotic.<sup>2</sup> In view of a somewhat standard trend in the writings on the subject, I will distinguish among terms as follows: (1) “semiology” designates Saussurean-based approaches that take a dyadic model of the sign as their starting point; (2) “semeiotic” refers to an explicitly Peircean understanding of the doctrine of signs; and (3) the more familiar *semiotics* (noun) or “semiotic” (adjective) is used when the distinction is not critical. Note, however, that while semiotics generally subsumes semiology, it is not necessarily coextensive with semeiotic. It should become clear that this article strives to craft a musical semeiotic as opposed to either a musical semiology or a musical semiotics.

---

*cal writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955) and Charles S. Peirce and Victoria A. M. L. S.-W. L. Welby-Gregory, *Semiotic and signification: The correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*, ed. Charles S. Hardwick and James Cook (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977) (hereafter abbreviated PW).

<sup>2</sup> There are nettlesome complications surrounding how the doctrine of signs should best be designated that go beyond mere sectarian quibbles. The standard explanation is that, although the terms are essentially synonymous, continental European sign theorists prefer *semiology* while American theorists use *semiotics*. To name the science that he predicted, Ferdinand de Saussure chose *sémiologie*: “A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from the Greek *semeion* ‘sign’). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance” (Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger, trans. Wade Baskin [LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1986, 1983], 16). Peirce, following John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2 vols., ed. Alexander C. Fraser (New York: Dover Publications, 1959), 461-2, alternated between *semeiotic* and *semiotic*, usually opting for the former (for a discussion of the etymological rationale underlying Peirce’s choices, see Max H. Fisch, “Peirce’s General Theory of Signs,” in *Sight, Sound, and Sense*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok, *Advances in Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 31–70). To the best of my knowledge, Peirce never used the term “semiotics,” which is a more recent formation apparently modeled on optics, linguistics, physics, and so on (but compare logic and rhetoric).

Save for a few notable exceptions (e.g., the icon/index/symbol trichotomy), Peirce's ideas have been avoided by a majority of musical semioticians, and they have yet to find a comfortable home in inquiries detailing how music might be profitably analyzed as a system of signs.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, from its inception musical semiotics has been largely dominated by the semiology cursorily sketched in the writings of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Although there are some points of tangency between Peirce's semeiotic and Saussure's semiology, the pivotal differences in scope, complexity, depth, and, most importantly, the ontology of the sign make syncretic amalgamations of the two traditions difficult to sustain convincingly. Whereas Saussure envisioned a semiology that takes what he perceived to be the structure of the linguistic sign as its starting point, arguing in one place that "linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology",<sup>4</sup> Peirce's general theory of signs was conceived and constructed to subsume everything capable of being a sign, in other words, everything that can be interpreted by a feeling, action, or thought.<sup>5</sup> The broadness of his conception, the sweeping nature of which

<sup>3</sup> An examination of applications of Peirce's ideas to music lies beyond the purview of this study (but see Raymond Monelle, *Linguistics and Semiotics In Music*, Contemporary music studies 5 [Chur, Switzerland, Philadelphia: Harwood Academic, 1992] for an excellent survey). Consequently, I will simply list here a few authors (not otherwise mentioned in this study) who, to varying extents, have applied Peircean concepts to music: Wilson Coker, *Music and Meaning: A Theoretical Introduction to Musical Aesthetics* (New York: Free Press, 1972); David L. Mosley, *Gesture, sign, and song: An interdisciplinary approach to Schumann's Liederkreis opus 39*, New connections 3 (New York: P. Lang, 1990); John Stopford, "Structuralism, Semiotics, and Musicology," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 24, no. 2 (1984), doi:10.1093/bjaesthetics/24.2.129.; Eero Tarasti, "Some Peircean and Greimasian Semiotic Concepts as Applied to Music," in *The Semiotic Web 1988*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok, Donna J. Umiker-Sebeok and Evan P. Young, Approaches to semiotics 85 (Berlin, New York, Amsterdam: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989), 445–59; Eero Tarasti, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics*, Advances in semiotics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), especially 54–8; Arjan van Baest and Hans van Driel, *The Semiotics of C.S. Peirce Applied to Music: A Matter of Belief* (Tilburg: Tilburg University Press, 1995) and Juha Ojala, *Space in Musical Semiosis: An Abductive Theory of the Musical Composition Process*, Acta semiotica fennica 33 (Imatra: International Semiotics Institute at Imatra; Semiotic Society of Finland; Dept. of Musicology, University of Helsinki, 2009). I have examined the art song in terms of Peirce's semeiotic in William P. Dougherty, "The Play of Interpretants: A Peircean Approach to Beethoven's Lieder," in *The Peirce Seminar Papers: An Annual of Semiotic Analysis*, ed. Michael Shapiro (Oxford: Berg, 1993), 67–95; William P. Dougherty, "Mixture, Song, Semeiotic," in *Music and Signs: Semiotic and Cognitive Studies in Music*, ed. Ioannis Zannos (Bratislava: ASCO Art and Science, 1999), 368–78. For an application of most of Peirce's sign typologies to music see Raymond Monelle, "Music and the Peircean Trichotomies," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 22, no. 1 (1991), 99–108.

<sup>4</sup> Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 68.

<sup>5</sup> Peirce envisioned a semeiotic that was not limited to human responses, but that also included animal responses (e.g., deer sniffing the air for danger). Although his emphasis on mental interpretants is paramount, Peirce occasionally spoke of the "habits" of plants (such as a flower turning to the sun) and nonliving objects (such as water in a riverbed) as examples of semeiosis (CP 5:492 and 5:538). The formidable expository obstacles that loomed before his over-arching

can be adduced from his claim that “all this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs”,<sup>6</sup> coupled with its painstaking philosophical grounding make Peirce’s semeiotic a treasure trove of valuable insights. Even though Peirce had little to say about music as a semeiotic phenomenon, this article will show how the theoretical acuity and explanatory power of his system can be fruitfully applied to the analysis of musical signification. In specific, it will ground the notion of the musical *topic* in an explicitly Peircean framework to illustrate how his general theory of signs clarifies the ways in which the expressive significance of a musical sign is a vital component of music’s semeiotic structure. In the process, it will demonstrate that one of the rewards of embracing Peirce’s theories as axiomatic is the way in which they indicate the kinds of reorientation that are necessary in a theory of musical semiotics and in the goals of semiotic analysis. Finally, this essay, with its deliberate and direct focus on fundamental semeiotic concepts and terminology, will help clarify some of the basic issues and concerns of musical semioticians so that music theorists may better evaluate the terminology and methodologies that are increasingly becoming a part of their domain.

The starting point for any theory of musical semiotics has to be the ontology of the musical sign. Although the earliest musical semioticians (e.g., the taxonomic-empiricists such as Nicolas Ruwet and Jean-Jacques Nattiez) at first by-passed the problems posed by the musical sign, more recent studies have addressed these issues

---

view were reluctantly acknowledged by Peirce in one of his letters: “I define a Sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former. My insertion of “upon a person” is a sop to Cerberus, because I despair of making my own broader conception understood” (PW 80-81). Recommended examinations of Peirce’s semeiotic enterprise are Michael Shapiro, *The Sense of Grammar: Language as Semeiotic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), David Savan, *An Introduction to C.S. Peirce’s Full System of Semeiotic* (Toronto: Toronto Semiotic Circle, 1988), James Jakób Liszka, *A General Introduction to the Semeiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), Thomas Short, “Semeiosis and Intentionality,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, no. 17 (1981) and Thomas Short, *Peirce’s Theory of Signs* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> CP 5:448n. Regarding the disciplinary thresholds of semeiotic, Umberto Eco contends that the study of signs is “co-extensive with the whole range of cultural phenomena, however pretentious that approach may at first seem” (Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 1st ed., Midland Book 217 [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976], 6). Deely summarizes this all-encompassing outlook as follows: “The semiotic point of view is the perspective that results from the sustained attempt to live reflectively with and follow out the consequences of one simple realization: the whole of our experience, from its most primitive origins in sensation to its most refined achievements of understanding, is a network or web of sign relations. This point of view cannot be reduced to an ideology without losing what is proper to it for the reason that its boundaries are those of the understanding itself in its activity of interpreting dependently upon the cognate interpretations of perception and sensation” (John N. Deely, *Basics of Semiotics, Advances in Semiotics* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990], 13). On the other side of the disciplinary coin, if these panoramic programmatic claims for the breadth of semeiotic are to be taken seriously, then music obviously becomes an essential testing ground for semeiotic analysis.

more directly. Unfortunately, the development of a cogent conception of the musical sign has proved extremely difficult, and the result is that in most music-semiotic circles, the musical sign emerges as a rather free-floating and amorphous entity that is shaped to fit the specific analytic situation at hand.<sup>7</sup> For instance, V. Kofi Agawu argues that “to insist on a single and stable definition of [the] musical sign is . . . to falsify the semiotic enterprise even before it has begun”.<sup>8</sup> An unfortunate outcome of Agawu’s reluctance to commit to a single definition of the musical sign is that his appeals to apparently stable sign categories become suspect: for instance, his identification of topical signs,<sup>9</sup> structural signs,<sup>10</sup> false signs,<sup>11</sup> referential signs,<sup>12</sup> pure signs,<sup>13</sup> middle or transitional signs,<sup>14</sup> closural or ending signs,<sup>15</sup> conventional and formal signs,<sup>16</sup> compound signs,<sup>17</sup> generic signs,<sup>18</sup> surface signs,<sup>19</sup> and ontological signs<sup>20</sup> as sign types. To be fair to his path-breaking work, Agawu’s informative analyses typically clarify the heuristic value of his classifications. In addition, Agawu is correct in asserting that any theory of musical semiotics must incorporate some degree of methodological flexibility to accommodate the fluid teleology of music as a semeiotic system, otherwise there is no means to account for growth and change in specific types of sign usages. Nevertheless, specific compositional cues have to be grounded in an appropriately ramified conception of semeiosis. For example, although Mahler’s use of the pastoral topic is different than Beethoven’s, whose use differs from Scarlatti’s, it is their commonality in sign structure that allows us to hear them as tokens of the same topical type. As such, an inventory of sign typologies that is not anchored in “a single and stable” definition of the sign, instead of “falsifying” the semiotic enterprise, only circumvents fundamental issues surrounding the ontological status of a musical sign.

<sup>7</sup> There are casual appropriations of the term *sign* that have engendered much of analytic significance, e.g., Janet M. Levy, “Texture as a Sign in Classic and Early Romantic Music,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 35 (3): 482-531 and Vera Micznik, “Gesture as Sign: A Semiotic Interpretation of Berg’s Op. 6, No. 1,” *In Theory Only* 9, no. 4 (1986): 19-35. Nevertheless, a formalized semiotics of music will ultimately be judged on its ability to define its most fundamental entity.

<sup>8</sup> V. Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 16.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

The later work of Nattiez, for many years the widely recognized doyen of musical semiology,<sup>21</sup> attempts to fold Peirce's conception of the sign into a largely structuralist model of musical analysis. In his *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, Nattiez asserts that the essential task of musical semiology "is to identify interpretants according to the three poles of the tripartition, and to establish their relationship to one another".<sup>22</sup> As such, he considers his entire book to be "both a defense and an illustration of the Peircian concept of the sign".<sup>23</sup> But in what appears to be an about-face, Nattiez retreats from the explanatory power and methodological implications of Peirce's triadic conception of the sign by reporting that while "rummaging through the *Collected Papers*" he "was able to turn up no fewer than twelve different definitions of the sign and the interpretant".<sup>24</sup> As a result, he feels that because "Peirce's thought is so complex, and so often contradictory, reconstruction of *the* coherent Peircian doctrine seems at the present nearly impossible".<sup>25</sup> Nattiez's solution is to declare that because "neither the interpretation nor the application can correspond absolutely to any single, stable state of Peircian thought",<sup>26</sup> "one has the option of choosing from among [Peirce's] definitions one that seems to correspond most closely to the reality of things".<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For some music theorists during the eighties and early nineties (e.g., Nicholas Cook, *A Guide to Musical Analysis* [New York: George Braziller, 1987], and Jonathan Dunsby and Arnold Whittall, *Music analysis: In Theory and Practice* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1988]), Nattiez's theories and their congeners were often described as the only approach to musical semiotics.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Jacques Nattiez, *Music and discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. C. Abbate (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 29.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 8 n. 8. Nattiez's appropriation of Peirce has been challenged in Robert S. Hatten, 'Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music Kofi Agawu Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music Jean-Jacques Nattiez Carolyn Abbate,' *Music Theory Spectrum* 14, no. 1 (1992), doi:10.2307/746084 and in William P. Dougherty, 'The Play of Interpretants: A Peircean Approach to Beethoven's *Lieder*,' in *The Peirce Seminar Papers: An Annual of Semiotic Analysis*, ed. Michael Shapiro (Oxford: Berg, 1993), 67–95. Regarding the textual exegesis that troubles Nattiez, it is relevant to note that Peirce developed his semeiotic over a span of nearly fifty years, during which time he repeatedly returned to fundamental issues in order to try to clarify his thinking on the subject. As is the case with any writer whose ideas evolve over time, a reconstruction of a single coherent doctrine poses many difficulties, but it should be undertaken without an ad hoc appeal to whatever "seems to correspond most closely" to one's own view of the reality of things. Be that as it may, it is ultimately Nattiez's emphasis on the analysis of the neutral level that cannot be accommodated in a Peircean semeiotic. Although *Music and Discourse* offers important clarifications regarding this controversial level of analysis and its relationship to his (now expanded) tripartition that go beyond the formulations in his *Fondements d'une sémiologie de la musique* (Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Fondements d'une sémiologie de la Musique* [Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1975]), and although we are promised further explication in future volumes (a project that does not appear to be on Nattiez's docket any longer), the goal of

The damaging, but predictable, outcome of these equivocations over fundamental definitions is that appeals to semiotic theory have become, for many music theorists, an impenetrable terminological fog, the explanatory power of which is neither particularly parsimonious nor especially relevant to musical analysis—this despite the productive interdisciplinary exchanges that have shaped, and continue to shape, the music-theoretic landscape. Indeed, the commonly leveled charge is that music semioticians encrust their attempts to detail the nature of musical signification with an obscure and largely uninformative metalanguage. If music theory is to include a semiotic perspective as a potent weapon in its analytic arsenal, then musical semioticians must establish well-defined points of contact between the two disciplines that go beyond ad hoc and impressionistic appropriations of semiotic concepts and terminology into music analysis. To direct the vitality of such points of contact into a discussion that illustrates the theoretical and methodological potential of a (Peircean) semeiotic approach to musical analysis, I will analyze a single musical topic: the fantasia, one of those catalogued by Leonard Ratner.<sup>28</sup>

The notion of topics, or subjects for musical discourse, has been incorporated into a semiotic theory of musical analysis by, among others, Agawu, who contends that “topics are musical signs. They consist of a signifier (a certain disposition of musical dimensions) and a signified (a conventional stylistic unit, often but not always referential in quality). Signifiers are identified as a relational unit within the dimensions of melody, harmony, meter, rhythm, and so on, while the signified is designated by conventional labels drawn mostly from eighteenth-century historiography (*Sturm und Drang*, fanfare, learned style, sensibility, and so on).”<sup>29</sup> On this dyadic formulation, which owes its ontological allegiance to Saussure’s construal of the sign as the indissoluble union of a signifier and a signified, a topic qua musical sign embodies a signifier that is articulated by the complex interaction

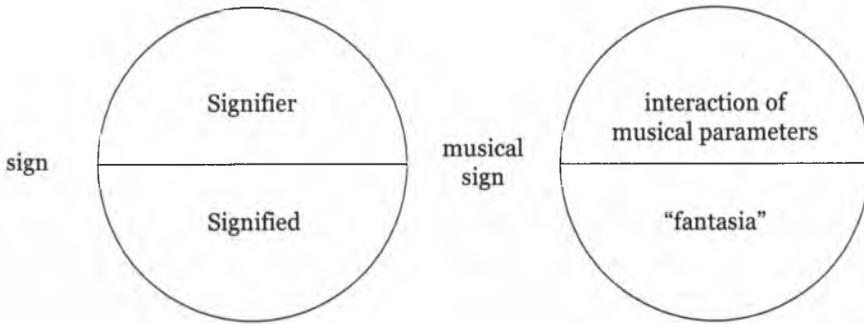
---

analysis of the neutral level is still one of delimiting and classifying phenomena (i.e., taxonomy) systematically and objectively (i.e., empirically) without reference to *esthetic* or *poietic* points of view. For Nattiez, “neutral” means both that the *poietic* and *esthetic* dimensions of the object have been “neutralized,” and that one proceeds to the end of a given procedure regardless of the results obtained” (Mosley, *Gesture, sign, and song*, 13). In lieu of the detailed consideration that this position requires, suffice it to say that Peirce’s insistence on the tri-relative nature of semeiosis means that interpretation cannot be filtered out of the analysis, set aside, as it were, with the hope that it may become relevant at some later analytic stage. Peirce perhaps said it best when he observed that “it seems a strange thing, when one comes to ponder it, that a sign should leave its interpreter to supply a part of its meaning” (CP 5:448n).

<sup>28</sup> Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York, London: Schirmer Books; Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1980).

<sup>29</sup> Agawu, *Playing with signs*, 49. For more extended discussions of Agawu’s semiology, see Hatten, “Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music Kofi Agawu Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Carolyn Abbate and William P. Dougherty, *The Quest for Interpretants: Toward a Peircean Paradigm for Musical Semiotics*, *Semiotica* 99 (1-2): 163-84.

of various musical parameters and a signified whose nature “remains implicit in the historically appropriate label invoked”.<sup>30</sup> Example 1 depicts the dichotomous structure of this relationship in the context of its Saussurean origins.



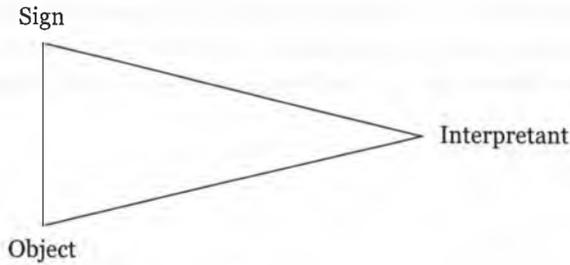
Example 1. Dyadic model of the sign (after Saussure), with mapping onto the standard view of a musical topic

It is precisely here that Peirce’s semeiotic offers a ramified, innovative, and revolutionary conception that clears a path through the thorny issues surrounding the interpretive significance of the musical sign, providing a portal to the very essence of musical semeiosis. For Peirce, the sign is triadic (ex. 2), and he defined it as “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the “interpretant” of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its “object”. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the “ground” of the [sign]”.<sup>31</sup> In Peirce’s triadic scheme, semeiosis (or sign action and sign interpretation) only arises when three items (a sign, its object, and its interpretant) coalesce in such a way that the sign stands for some object to an interpretant that translates the sign and thereby stands for the same object as potentially another sign. Thus, according to Peirce, semeiosis is “an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a coöperation of “three” subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs”.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 39.

<sup>31</sup> CP 2:228; see also Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 99.

<sup>32</sup> CP 5:484; see also *ibid.*, 282. Eero Tarasti avers that “the whole dispute over whether the structure of the sign is binary or ternary is out-dated, since what is essential is not the inner organization of the sign but its functioning as part of the semiosphere, a continuum of signs” (Tarasti, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics*, xiv). In the context of this article, Tarasti’s argument rings hollow: It is precisely a view of the structure of the sign, and specifically, the structure of the musical sign, that determines how it participates in the web of sign relations. Like all well-formed hypotheses,



Example 2. Triadic model of the sign (after Peirce)

There are several cardinal advantages to Peirce's triadic conception of the sign.<sup>33</sup> First, a sign is a genuine triad or gestalt that cannot be broken down: no one of its three members can be defined or understood without reference to the other two. Consequently, while specific analyses require an examination of each component separately, all components must ultimately be analyzed in relation to the integrated whole.<sup>34</sup> Second, the central emphasis in Peirce's semeiotic is on interpretation. Throughout his voluminous writings, Peirce steadfastly and consistently maintains that a sign is a sign only if it is interpreted: to be a sign is ipso facto to determine an interpretant. Third, the interpretant is a translation into another (potential) sign that can take the form not only of thoughts (logical interpretants), but also of actions (energetic interpretants) and feelings (emotional interpretants). Thus, one's mental representation of the word "man" as a logical interpretant of the sign "homme" does not differ in terms of semeiotic pertinence from the energetic interpretant embodied by one's stopping at a stop sign or the emotional interpretant embodied by one's relief at seeing one's luggage after an airline decided it needed a few days away. Fourth, sign and interpretant are distinguished from one another in that the interpretant is determined by (or follows)

---

a theory of musical semiotics must address the critical questions surrounding its basic premises to have any practical relevance to the object under examination and to avoid charges of theoretical impoverishment. The sophistication of Peirce's semeiotic, a singular result of its emphasis on the triadic nature of the sign, is the vehicle that leads to acute and astute semeiotic analysis.

<sup>33</sup> In the following points and, indeed, in my understanding of Peirce's semeiotic, I have greatly profited from my study with two scholars whose respective construals of Peirce are models of clarity and perspicacity; see Shapiro, *The Sense of Grammar* and Savan, *An Introduction to C.S. Peirce's Full System of Semeiotic*. Hatten also explores some of the differences between dyadic and triadic conceptions of the sign (Robert S. Hatten, "A Peircean Perspective on the Growth of Markedness and Musical Meaning", in *Peirce and Value Theory: On Peircian Ethics and Aesthetics*, ed. Herman Parret, Semiotic crossroads 6 (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1994), 349–58).

<sup>34</sup> The circularity with which the constituents of the sign are defined is not vicious. As Shapiro observes, "the mutual ontological dependency of the three constituents on each other is a reflection of the structure of semeiosis" (Shapiro, *The Sense of Grammar*, 48). Incidentally, this axiomatic ontological dependency is absent from Nattiez's focus on the neutral level (see note 8 above).

the sign. Consequently, triadic analysis reveals semeiosis to be a dynamic process that embraces growth, change, evolution, temporality, and teleology.<sup>35</sup>

Armed with an overview of Peirce's triadic conception of the sign, it is time to analyze a specific musical example. Measures 97 to 108 of example 3, a passage from the development section of Beethoven's Piano Sonata op. 2, no. 3, represent the topic fantasia. These measures are a particular configuration of musical elements that stand for some object to an interpretant; in other words, they are a sign. Considered in itself, this sign has specific features (what Peirce called the "ground") by which the object it stands for is interpreted by the sign (i.e., interpretant) into which the original sign is translated. The ground is not the same as the sign-vehicle, because a sign-vehicle may have many features that are irrelevant to its functioning as a sign: for example, a road sign with a curved arrow will iconically signify its object regardless of the particular color, material, or shape of the sign, or regardless of whether it is tacked to a tree or supported by a stake. In example 3, the ground of the topic-as-sign is: (1) the conjunct ascending chromatic bass line; (2) the unstable and wandering harmonic progression exemplified by the series of passing chords bound by common tones; (3) a thwarting of harmonic expectations (e.g., the fortissimo arrival on the B-flat major-minor seventh chord in m. 97 implies a continuation of the circle-of-fifths progression of previous measures, but it actually initiates the chromatic bass ascent to D); (4) the use of potentially tonally-orienting chords (e.g., major-minor seventh chords [mm. 97-8; 103-4], diminished-seventh chords [mm. 99-100], second-inversion triads [mm. 101-2, and 105-6]) without local resolutions of their implied tonal directionality; (5) the full keyboard texture created by the quasi-improvisatory sixteenth-note broken-chord patterns of the right hand and the closely-spaced chords of the left hand; and (6) the somewhat unpredictable patterning of the four-note arpeggiated figuration. This piece-specific occurrence of the fantasia, or "token", is an idiosyncratic instancing of a set of more abstract characteristics, or "type", whose relatively invariant nature supports a supple range of play in actual realizations. The abstract traits that define fantasia as a type include the following:<sup>36</sup> (1) a freely

<sup>35</sup> This evolutionary component further distinguishes Peirce's semeiotic from Saussure's semiology in that Saussure strove to filter diachrony out of his synchronic analyses. Peirce's emphasis on semeiosis as synthesis (or *thirdness*, as he called it, after his triad of categories), which by definition embodies processes of inferential growth — abductive, as well as deductive and inductive — better accommodates the inherent relationship between synchrony and diachrony, and thus, as Shapiro argues, "change is... conceived as an aspect of continuity" (ibid., 19; also see Savan, *An Introduction to C. S. Peirce's Full System of Semeiotic*, 9–14). In a series of articles, Hatten has demonstrated how this perspective can help a music theorist account for style growth and, ultimately, style change (e.g., Robert S. Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation*, 1st ed., Musical meaning and interpretation [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994]).

<sup>36</sup> I have pointed out elsewhere (see William P. Dougherty, "The Quest for Interpretants: Toward a Peircean Paradigm for Musical Semiotics," *Semiotica* 99, 1–2 [1994]) that one of the

improvised character, which is neutral with respect to mode, meter, or tempo; (2) wandering harmonies; (3) chromatic bass lines; (4) sequential patterns; (5) disjunct and often elaborate (or even eccentric) figurations; (6) modal coloration; (7) loose and discontinuous structural relationships; (8) an unconstrained juxtaposition of rhythmic or melodic figurations; (9) sudden and sometimes violent contrasts in textures, dynamics, harmonies, and registers; and (10) a general thwarting of expectations. These abstract traits are part of the dynamic object of the musical sign in this case, and, following Peirce's understanding of the sign in relation to its object as one of "secondness" (a relation characterized by brute and obstinate existence and related by opposition and contrast to some other existents),<sup>37</sup> there is a necessary dyadism in its description. The essential point to note is that this relationship is part of the larger triadic semeiotic, which must account for the interpretants ('thirds') that subsume it.<sup>38</sup> As Hatten observes, "[...] topics [...] involve

---

difficulties with topical analyses is a lack of clearly defined musical attributes that characterize any specific topic either at the level of the composition (which I am here calling the topical token) or at the level of the style (which I refer to as the topical type). In his study, Agawu (Agawu, *Playing with Signs*) does in fact provide useful descriptions of some of the features that determine a topic, but the reader must generally extract them from the context. My listing of characteristics here, which borrows from both Agawu and Ratner (Ratner, *Classic Music*) while it goes beyond them, is offered as a prolegomenon to a more thorough catalogue of topical attributes. Jonathan Bellman (Jonathan Bellman, *The style hongrois in the music of Western Europe* [Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993]) addresses the problems associated with loose characterizations of overarching topical categories in his examination of the *style hongrois* topic, and in the process he offers a detailed explication of the characteristics associated with the *style hongrois*. Raymond Monelle (Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral*, Musical meaning and interpretation [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006]) provides a path-breaking discussion of the hunt, military, and pastoral topics that takes as its starting point many of the ideas discussed in this essay. Hatten (Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven and Interpreting Musical Gestures*, 2004) provides many insightful descriptions of the musical characteristics associated with certain topics.

<sup>37</sup> Peirce coined the neologisms firstness, secondness, and thirdness to distinguish his categorial theory from those of Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel. The metaphysical breadth of Peirce's categories makes it impossible here to offer anything more than a glimpse into their natures. For Peirce, firstness is quality, secondness is relation, and thirdness is mediation (see Peirce's famous 1867 essay "On a New List of Categories" reprinted in *W* 2:49-59, *EP* 1:1-10, and Peirce, *Peirce on Signs*, 23-33).

<sup>38</sup> In the interests of clarity, I skirt a number of crucial issues here surrounding Peirce's hierarchic divisions in his theory of the categories (thirds embed seconds, which embed firsts), but a semeiotic analysis of topics at the level of style would necessarily treat them as signs, and therefore would be concerned with the similarities and differences in grounds, objects, and interpretants that are evident in fantasia as a type and, say, Sturm-und-Drang as a type. To reconstruct the broad oppositional characteristics that determine a stylistic type, theorists may avail themselves of the evidence provided by individual tokens and the information contained in contemporary writings. However, the free range of compositional play in tokens (in terms of both syntactic functions and semantic functions) may engender new stylistic types, and thus types (or thirds at the level of style, in Peirce's hierarchic nesting of categories) embody a potential for growth in that any compositional token (a second at the level of the piece) may carve out a new

syntheses whose emergent interpretation cannot be merely after the fact, as a mere summing up of analytical detail. Nor, on the other hand, can critical interpretation ignore these processes by presupposing that listeners somehow “put it all together in their minds.” Rather, the modes of synthesis and emergence can and must be woven into the very fabric of musical explanation”.<sup>39</sup>

Example 3. Beethoven, Piano Sonata op. 2, no. 3, mm. 97-110

The issue of the object of the sign, or what the sign represents, is more treacherous. Peirce defines the object of a sign as “that with which [the sign] presupposes an acquaintance in order to convey some further information concerning it”.<sup>40</sup> Savan explains that by the object of a sign, Peirce means “1) that which is prior to the sign, and is therefore known collaterally, and 2) that which is shared by a sign and its interpretants, that which is public and is essential to a community”.<sup>41</sup> Peirce further segments his conception of the object by dividing it into *immediate objects* and “dynamic objects”: “we must distinguish between the Immediate Object, — i.e. the Object as represented in the sign, — and [...] the [Dynamic] Object, which, from

type (or third, at the level of the piece) that is then assimilated as a type in the style (or third on the style level). Another way of putting it is that laws (types or thirds) are not exhausted by their specific cases (tokens or seconds). For a more detailed discussion of style growth and style change in terms of Peirce’s categories, see Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*.

<sup>39</sup> Robert S. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert*, Musical meaning and interpretation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 3

<sup>40</sup> CP 2:231: see also Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 100.

<sup>41</sup> Savan, *An Introduction to C.S. Peirce’s Full System of Semeiotic*, 26.

the nature of things, the Sign *cannot* express, which it can only *indicate* and leave the interpreter to find out by collateral experience".<sup>42</sup> Short explains this distinction as follows: "The immediate object is the world, or some part of it, as the sign represents it to be, while the dynamic object is the world — or relevant portion of it — that will actually determine the success or failure of any given interpretant of the sign".<sup>43</sup> In effect, this differentiation is a continuum, which begins with the object as the sign represents it (the immediate object) and ends with the object as it would be known after full and exhaustive investigation (the dynamic object).

An example might help clarify the distinction. I feel pleasure when I recognize an old friend approaching me from afar. As the person draws closer, a more thorough investigation reveals that the dynamic object (my actual friend) corresponds to the immediate object of the sign, or those characteristics of the sign (gait, height, hair color, and so on) that indexically indicated my friend. The sign has therefore offered an assurance to the interpretant (my pleasure) that the dynamic object and immediate object are in fact the object that the interpretant interprets. Alternatively, should fuller investigation reveal that the person approaching me is not my old friend, then the dynamic object of the sign (now the stranger) impinges upon and reshapes the immediate object, and I am forced to recognize the fallibility of the interpretation in this instance.

In music, a play with the difference between immediate object and dynamic object might be heard in deceptive cadences, phrase elisions, enharmonic reinterpretations of German augmented-sixth chords, or Haydnesque uses of closing thematic materials as opening themes. But in general, so-called absolute music tends to blend the immediate and dynamic objects into a qualitative complex. Be that as it may, for the fantasia token in example 3, and for the fantasia as a stylistic type, the expressive attitude that constitutes the immediate object might be labeled "searching instability" and the dynamic object might be the larger relevant intertextual relations as well as the socio-cultural and historical attitudes that contextually constitute a portion of the real world known through prior experience with other signs and through further consideration of this sign.<sup>44</sup>

I advance my specification of the expressive attitude represented by the sign with trepidation, and I qualify it by claiming, to echo Agawu, that I am not as con-

<sup>42</sup> CP 8:314.

<sup>43</sup> Short, *Semiosis and Internationality*, 214. Other logicians, such as Frege, Russell, and Quine, have tried to parse, albeit in varying ways, this difference in terms of sense/reference, *Sinn/Bedeutung*, or connotation/denotation. While Peirce's immediate/dynamic distinction is somewhat similar to these other pairs, it is generally construed by Peircean scholars to be much broader.

<sup>44</sup> By assigning a linguistic label to the expressive attitude that might constitute the immediate object, we have necessarily entered the realm of interpretants; in other words, "searching instability" is actually a sign of an expressive attitude, or, rather, another interpretant of the musical sign. To talk about objects (or, for that matter, to talk about signs), one must use interpretants (which are, after all, other signs).

cerned with the “what” of musical signification as I am with the “how”. As a result, the term *expressive attitude* is meant to convey a responsive disposition that the musical sign represents, a disposition that could be (provisionally) adopted by a competent interpreter as a (potentially) valid description of the immediate object. It is not an assertion of the one or the only object. Nevertheless, any attempt to examine music critically as a semeiotic phenomenon must try to account for the object of the sign, however tentatively. Otherwise, terms such as “represents, signifies, stands for, suggests,” and their congeners will become even more suspicious in musicological discourse than they already are. In light of these caveats, perhaps it is enough to assert that the immediate and dynamic object of any sign function as the prior and necessary conditions of signification and as a context that establishes part of the conditions from which interpretation can proceed.<sup>45</sup> As will become apparent, the interpretant is the arena of critical interpretation and appraisal.

The most valuable and enduring legacy of Peirce’s semeiotic is the concept of the interpretant. A red light is simply electromagnetic radiation at a particular wavelength; a fluctuation in air pressure indicated on a barometer is simply a change in the weight of the circumambient atmosphere. They become a sign, of danger in the first case and of rain in the second, only when they are interpreted, or taken, as a sign. Although the concept of the interpretant is unquestionably the most fundamental component of Peirce’s doctrine of signs, it also introduces an array of complications, in large part due to the fact that Peirce’s own accounts of it vary depending on the context in which he discusses it. Indeed, throughout his writings he continually refashions his conception in an on-going struggle to hone its modalities. Nevertheless, the concept is critical, and problems of textual exegesis should not deter us from exploiting its full explanatory potential.

Recall Peirce’s definition of the sign cited above: “A sign [...] is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign.” Peirce also says that “a sign [...] is an object [i.e., an entity or a thing] which is in relation to its object on the one hand and to an interpretant on the other hand in such a way as to bring the interpretant into a relation to the object corresponding to its own relation to the object”.<sup>46</sup> At other points, Peirce defines the interpretant as “the proper significate outcome of a sign”,<sup>47</sup> or as “the idea to which [the sign] gives rise”,<sup>48</sup> or as the “cognition produced in the mind”.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, in many respects, one of Peirce’s earliest definitions of the interpretant is his most accessible: the interpretant is “a mediating representation which represents the

<sup>45</sup> Shapiro, *The Sense of Grammar*, 38.

<sup>46</sup> PW, 32.

<sup>47</sup> CP 5:473; and Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 275.

<sup>48</sup> CP 1:339.

<sup>49</sup> CP 1:372; and Peirce, *Peirce on Signs*, 183.

relate [i.e., sign] to be a representation of the same correlate [i.e., object] which this mediating representation itself represents".<sup>50</sup>

On the basis of his triad of categories, Peirce divides the interpretant into two intersecting trichotomies. The first trichotomy consists of "immediate interpretants, dynamic interpretants," and "final interpretants." Briefly, the immediate interpretant is the explicit content of the sign that enables "a person to say whether or not the Sign was applicable to anything concerning which that person had sufficient acquaintance," or "the total unanalyzed effect that the sign is calculated to produce [...] [prior to] any critical reflection".<sup>51</sup> The dynamic interpretant is the actual semeiotic effect of a sign. The final interpretant is the full semeiotic effect that the sign would produce were it given a sufficiently long run and were it to satisfy fully the law, habit, or rule that governs the succession of dynamic interpretants.<sup>52</sup> In this scheme, there is one immediate interpretant, many dynamic interpretants, and one final interpretant. The immediate and final interpretants are ultimately correlates, except that the indefinitely postponed final interpretant includes the actualized dynamic interpretants. We are in the realm of the dynamic, or *in medias res*, which is to say that we are abductively or hypothetically testing the possibility of the immediate interpretant and the interpretive rule of the final interpretant.

Nattiez has appropriated Peirce's notion of so-called unlimited semiosis — wherein an interpretant creates "an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign" that spins a web of sign, object, and interpretant relationships — to support his claim for an infinite chain of meanings that arise from any musical sign.<sup>53</sup> But, according to Peirce, dynamic interpretants do not spin off unfettered. Instead, they are governed by the law-like regularity embodied in the final interpretant, the goal toward which they tend and that they reach given ideal circumstances and an indefinitely long run. Thus, the number of dynamic interpretants is finite, and the notion of the final interpretant hints at the means by which subjective interpretations can be grounded in a broader intersubjective framework. As such, the concept can help us account for the relatively consistent interpretations of musical signs — interpretations that tend to be self-corrective.

Peirce's second trichotomy of interpretants consists of "emotional interpretants" (feelings), "energetic interpretants" (actions), and "logical interpretants"

---

<sup>50</sup> CP 1:553; W 2:53 [see also W 1:446, 1:473-479, and, especially, 1:523]; and *ibid.*, 28. Incidentally, Savan suggests that Peirce might have profitably retained the term "correlate" in place of what he eventually called the *object* (Savan, *An Introduction to C.S. Peirce's Full System of Semeiotic.*, 28). This terminological shading probably underlies the subtitle of Robert S. Hatten, "A Peircean Perspective on the Growth of Markedness and Musical Meaning," in *Peirce and Value Theory: On Peircean Ethics and Aesthetics*, ed. Herman Parret, *Semiotic crossroads* 6 (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1994), 349–58.

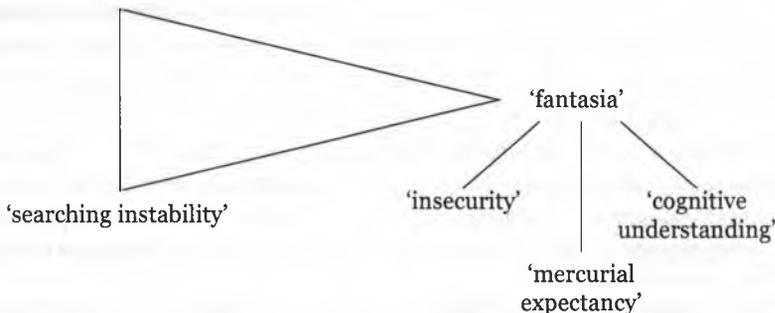
<sup>51</sup> PW 110.

<sup>52</sup> PW 110; and CP 8:184.

<sup>53</sup> Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*, 6-8.

(cognition). I will illustrate the details of this division by returning to example 3. As detailed above, mm. 97 to 108 are a sign that stands for an object, or expressive attitude, that is called “expectant instability.” One interpretant of the sign is the topical label *fantasia*, a term that is a translation of the musical sign into another semeiotic system, a procedure Jakobson calls “intersemiotic translation”.<sup>54</sup> This translation, in one form or another, is characteristic of all musical analyses. The expressive significance of the original sign is an actual semeiotic effect that stands in the same relation to the object as the original sign itself, and it is therefore a dynamic interpretant that can be analyzed along the continuum of emotional, energetic, and logical interpretants. In this case, the emotional interpretant, or what Peirce calls a “feeling which we come to interpret as evidence that we comprehend the proper effect of the sign”,<sup>55</sup> might be characterized as a sense of insecurity or unsteadiness. The energetic interpretant, or what Peirce envisions as an act in which some energy is expended, be it muscular exertion or the mental energy associated with the manipulation and exploration of the inner world of ideas, might be the recognized feeling of mercurial expectancy. (I use “recognized feeling” rather than “actualized feeling” to avoid an overdetermined theory of meaning based on simplistic assignments of emotion to musical motion.) Finally, the logical interpretant, or general habit of understanding actually produced by a sign, might be the realization that the expressive significance of the sign has been critically understood and provisionally or abductively valued as a culturally recognized cognitive category — an interpretant that would be tested through further consideration of the sign itself. The semeiotic structure of this musical sign is diagrammed in example 4.

measures 97-108  
(chromaticism, wandering  
harmonic progressions, etc.)



Example 4. Concretization of the musical sign in Beethoven, Piano Sonata op. 2, no. 3, mm. 97-108

<sup>54</sup> Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1987), 429.

<sup>55</sup> CP 5:475; see also Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 277.



The exclusive focus on one aspect of the musical sign in example 3 is insufficient on at least two counts. First, it ignores the fluidity of the musical surface by isolating twelve measures, ignoring any immediate contextual relationships that obtain. It also does not account for the expressive significance that has accrued (e.g., the fantasia elements of the transition theme, mm. 27-39) and that will accrue in the movement (e.g., the fantasia that opens the coda, mm. 218-31, or the fantasia elements [in particular, the chromatic descent] embedded in the counterpoint of the so-called false transition in the recapitulation, mm. 147-55). Nor does it account for the way in which the wandering harmonic progression typically associated with the fantasia compositionally abets the relative large-scale harmonic stability assumed by the false recapitulation in m. 109. Second, the analysis treats the musical sign as minimal and not as complex. Therefore, it ignores the concerto-like brilliance embedded in this particular fantasia token, a topic that is extensively exploited and developed throughout the sonata (obvious examples are the cadenza in the first movement [m. 231] and the virtuosic displays in the final movement). To be sure, most musical signs are replete with an amalgamation of topical references that are conjoined through various procedures and thereby contribute to the semeiotic richness of the musical surface. Indeed, one of Agawu's most consequential contributions to a topical theory of musical analysis is the recognition that topics are not only explicitly signified, but also latently implied, embedded, emergent, transformed, foregrounded and backgrounded, and/or hierarchically organized.<sup>56</sup> Although he does not detail the interpretive consequences of these possibilities, this supple richness in the types of signification play can be accommodated and explained by the semeiotic approach outlined here.

Returning briefly to the transition theme of the sonata (ex. 5), the primary topic of mm. 27-39 is a singing style whose defining characteristics are a homophonic texture emphasizing a lyric melody with a limited compass and mainly conjunct movement. As an overarching, stylistically available type, the singing style as a sign at the level of style might be said to have an expository lyricism as its object and a sense of untroubled serenity as one of its dynamic emotional interpretants, thus making it appropriate at and adaptable to relatively stable formal junctures, and these attributes are largely inherited by the token of op. 2, no. 3.<sup>57</sup> But the token in these measures is also infused with (and perhaps confronted by) a latent fantasia, the ground of which is the modulatory and sequential character of the passage and the chromatic descent in both the melody and the bass. Clearly, the phrase extensions, syncopations, mode, and key, while largely neutral with respect to the topics

---

<sup>56</sup> These important varieties of topical interplay are from Agawu (Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 38-9, 42, 50, 86-7, 129).

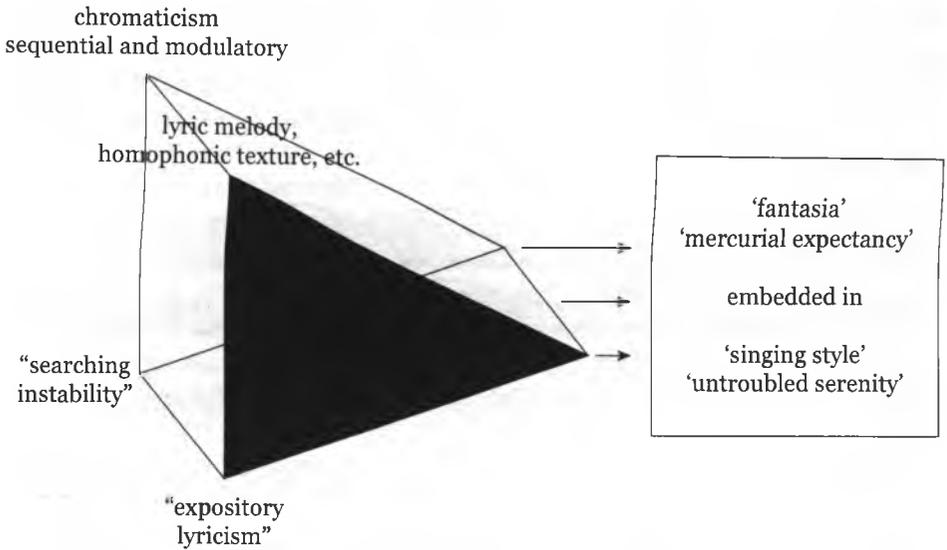
<sup>57</sup> Incidentally, Beethoven refashioned this theme from material used in his early (1785) Piano Quartet in C major, WoO 36, no. 3 (mm. 37-47). The earlier work has a slightly different accompaniment pattern and some differences in ornamentation, and it lacks a repetition of the theme in D minor or a thematic expression of G major in the second theme group. In addition, unlike op. 2, no. 3, the Piano Quartet does not exploit the fantasia characteristics of the material, although there is a nod in the direction of the theme in the development section (mm. 84-85).

currently under consideration, also contribute to the play, and a more complete semeiotic analysis of the passage would necessarily include them as important dimensions.<sup>58</sup> I have tried to capture the semeiotic richness of these measures in terms of its blending of sign functions and, in particular, the composite interpretant that is perforce created in example 6.<sup>59</sup>

Example 5. Beethoven, Piano Sonata op. 2, no. 3, mm. 27-40

<sup>58</sup> I emphasize again that in this article I am concentrating exclusively on a specific topic as a sign to demonstrate the efficacy and applicability of Peirce's theories. But compositional procedures and processes (e.g., tonicization, mixture, modulation, key relationships, voice-leading, texture, chord spacing, form, and so on) are obviously signs, too. Thus, while textbook definitions of mixture typically emphasize that a borrowed chord usually retains the harmonic function of its diatonic counterpart, there is nevertheless a change in expressive meaning that goes beyond a mere change in diatonic color. The problems surrounding the types and modalities of these expressive alterations are difficult ones, but they are amenable to insights from semeiotic approaches to musical analysis (see Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven* and Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes.*, William P. Dougherty, "Mixture, Song, Semeiotic," in *Music and Signs: Semeiotic and Cognitive Studies in Music*, ed. Ioannis Zannos (Bratislava: ASCO Art and Science, 1999), 368–78. Naomi Cumming, *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), and David Lidov, *Is language a music? Writings on Musical Form and Signification*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005)).

<sup>59</sup> A similar play with the blend of the lyric and fantasia topics (including a hint of the Sturm-und-Drang topic) is found in the second theme of the op. 2, no. 2 piano sonata, mm. 58–83. In that sonata, the contextual characteristics (i.e., the display episode [mm. 84–91] and the scherzando-like return to transition material [mm. 92–103] that immediately follows) suggest, as Dahlhaus has pointed out (Carl Dahlhaus, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Approaches to his Music*, with the assistance of trans. Mary Whittall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 103–4), that the interchange and redistribution of attributes (or sign, in semeiotic terms) between formal sections creates an ambiguity (which, when perceived, is an interpretant) that is a formal idea in itself (i.e., it collapses immediate and dynamic objects).



Example 6. Concretionization of a compound musical sign in Beethoven, Piano Sonata op. 2, no. 3, mm. 27-39

The ambivalence with which much of the music-theoretic community has greeted appeals to semiotics can largely be blamed on the shaky supports that have been used to construct various music-semiotic theories. An unfortunate consequence of these unstable underpinnings is that the potential value offered by applications of semiotic theory to musical analysis has been undermined by charges of terminological impressionism, at best, or interdisciplinary legerdemain, at worst. But by casting the expressive significance of a musical sign as one of its most secure cornerstones, a triadic conception of the sign, securely grounded in Peirce's general theory of signs, provides a sufficiently solid foundation from which musical semeioticians can erect a sturdy and substantial semeiotic edifice in which the realities of musical experience are comfortably housed. The focus on one specific topic as one type of musical sign has been intended not only to demonstrate how this perspective challenges the hegemony of dyadic models but also to illustrate how the complexity of the issues at stake may be better addressed by a more fertile and cogent model. Composers use signs, but musical signification results from the play of interpretants. Redirecting analytic energies to an explicit engagement with this play will aid the quest to solve the riddle of music's special modes of signification. In the process, it will help establish a truly cohesive theory of musical semeiotic.

## Bibliography

- Agawu, V. K. *Playing with signs: A semiotic interpretation of classic music*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Bellman, Jonathan. *The style hongrois in the music of Western Europe*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993.
- Coker, Wilson. *Music and Meaning: A Theoretical Introduction to Musical Aesthetics*. New York: Free Press, 1972.
- Cook, Nicholas. *A guide to musical analysis*. New York: George Braziller, 1987.
- Cumming, Naomi. *The sonic self: Musical subjectivity and signification*. Advances in semiotics. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- Dahlhaus, Carl. *Ludwig van Beethoven: Approaches to his music*. With the assistance of Trans. Mary Whittall. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.
- Deely, John N. *Basics of semiotics*. Advances in semiotics. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Dougherty, William P. "Mignon in Nineteenth-Century Song: Text, Context, Intertext." *Essays in honor of Steven Paul Scher and on cultural identity and the musical stage*. Word and music studies 4. Edited by Suzanne M. Lodato, Suzanne Aspden, and Walter Bernhart, 123-41. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2002.
- . "The Play of Interpretants: A Peircean Approach to Beethoven's Lieder." In *The Peirce seminar papers: An annual of semiotic analysis*. Edited by Michael Shapiro, 67-95. Oxford: Berg, 1993.
- . "The Quest for Interpretants: Toward a Peircean Paradigm for Musical Semiotics." *Semiotica* 99, 1-2 (1994): 163-184.
- . "Musical semeiotic: a Peircean perspective." *Contemporary Music Review* 16 (1996): 107-117. doi:10.1080/07494469700640211.
- . "Mixture, Song, Semeiotic." In *Music and Signs: Semiotic and Cognitive Studies in Music*. Edited by Ioannis Zannos, 368+378. Bratislava: ASCO Art and Science, 1999.
- Dunsby, Jonathan, and Arnold Whittall. *Music analysis: In theory and practice*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1988.
- Eco, Umberto. *A theory of semiotics*. 1st ed. Midland Book 217. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976.
- Emerson, Edward W. *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Poems*. 12 vols. 9. Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1904.
- . "The Sphinx." In *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Poems*. 12 vols., 20-3 9. Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1904.
- Fisch, Max H. "Peirce's General Theory of Signs." In *Sight, sound, and sense*. Edited by Thomas A. Sebeok, 31-70. Advances in semiotics. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.
- Hatten, Robert S. "Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music Kofi Agawu Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music Jean-Jacques Nattiez Carolyn Abbate." *Music Theory Spectrum* 14, no. 1 (1992): 88-98. doi:10.2307/746084.
- . "A Peircean Perspective on the Growth of Markedness and Musical Meaning." In *Peirce and value theory: On Peircian ethics and aesthetics*. Edited by Herman Parret, 349-58. Semiotic crossroads 6. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1994.
- . *Musical meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, correlation, and interpretation*. 1st ed. Musical meaning and interpretation. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

- . *Interpreting musical gestures, topics, and tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert*. Musical meaning and interpretation. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.
- Jakobson, Roman. *Language in literature*. Edited by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1987.
- . "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation." In *Language in literature*. Edited by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy, 428–35. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Levy, Janet M. "Texture as a Sign in Classic and Early Romantic Music." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 35 (3): 482–531.
- Lidov, David. *Is language a music? Writings on musical form and signification*. Musical meaning and interpretation. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- Liszka, James J. *A general introduction to the semeiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- Locke, John. *An essay concerning human understanding*. Edited by Alexander C. Fraser. 2 vols. Dover books on western philosophy 2. New York: Dover Publications, 1959.
- Micznik, Vera. "Gesture as Sign: A Semiotic Interpretation of Berg's Op. 6, No. 1." *In Theory Only* 9, no. 4 (1986): 19–35.
- Monelle, Raymond. "Music and the Peircean Trichotomies." *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 22, no. 1 (1991): 99–108.
- . *Linguistics and semiotics in music*. Contemporary music studies 5. Chur, Switzerland, Philadelphia: Harwood Academic, 1992.
- . *The musical topic: Hunt, military and pastoral*. Musical meaning and interpretation. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.
- Mosley, David L. *Gesture, sign, and song: An interdisciplinary approach to Schumann's Liederkreis opus 39*. New connections 3. New York: P. Lang, 1990.
- Nattiez, Jean J. *Music and discourse: Toward a semiology of music*. With the assistance of Trans. C. Abbate. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- Nattiez, Jean-Jacques. *Fondements d'une sémiologie de la Musique*. Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1975.
- Ojala, Juha. *Space in musical semiosis: An abductive theory of the musical composition process*. Acta semiotica fennica 33. Imatra: International Semiotics Institute at Imatra; Semiotic Society of Finland; Dept. of Musicology, University of Helsinki, 2009.
- Parret, Herman, ed. *Peirce and value theory: On Peircian ethics and aesthetics*. Semiotic crossroads 6. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1994.
- Peirce, Charles S. *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. 6 vols. 1–6. Cambridge: The Belknap press of Harvard university press, op. 1931.
- Peirce, Charles S. *Philosophical writings of Peirce*. Edited by Justus Buchler. New York: Dover Publications, 1955.
- Peirce, Charles S. *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, volumes vii and viii*. Edited by Arthur W. Burks. 2 vols. 7–8. [S.l.]: Harvard University Press, 1958.
- Peirce, Charles S. *Peirce on signs: Writings on semiotic*. Edited by James Hoopes. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.
- . *The essential Peirce: Selected philosophical writings*. Edited by Nathan Houser and Christian J. W. Kloesel. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992–1998.
- . *Writings: A chronological edition*. Edited by Max H. Fisch. Bloomington [u.a.]: Indiana Univ. Press, 2010.

- Peirce, Charles S., and Victoria A. M. L. S.-W. L. Welby-Gregory. *Semiotic and signification. The correspondence between Charles S(anders) Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby (Victoria Alexandrina Maria Luisa Stuart-Wortley Lady Welby-Gregory)*. Edited by Charles S. Hardwick and James Cook. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Pr, 1977.
- Ratner, Leonard G. *Classic music: Expression, form, and style*. New York, London: Schirmer Books; Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1980.
- Saussure, Ferdinand d. *Course in general linguistics*. Edited by Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger. Trans. Wade Baskin. LaSalle, Ill: Open Court, 1986, c1983.
- Savan, David. *An Introduction to C. S. Peirce's Full System of Semeiotic*. Toronto: Toronto Semiotic Circle, 1988.
- Sebeok, Thomas A., ed. *Sight, sound, and sense. Advances in semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.
- Sebeok, Thomas A., Donna J. Umiker-Sebeok, and Evan P. Young, eds. *The semiotic web 1988. Approaches to semiotics 85*. Berlin, New York, Amsterdam: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989.
- Shapiro, Michael. *The sense of grammar: Language as semeiotic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.
- , ed. *The Peirce seminar papers: An annual of semiotic analysis*. Oxford: Berg, 1993.
- Short, Thomas. "Semeiosis and Intentionality." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, no. 17 (1981): 197–223.
- Short, Thomas L. *Peirce's theory of signs*. Digitally printed version. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne [etc.]: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Stopford, John. "Structuralism, Semiotics, and Musicology." *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 24, no. 2 (1984): 129–137. doi:10.1093/bjaesthetics/24.2.129.
- Tarasti, Eero. "Some Peircean and Greimasian Semiotic Concepts as Applied to Music." In *The semiotic web 1988*. Edited by Thomas A. Sebeok, Donna J. Umiker-Sebeok and Evan P. Young, 445–59. Approaches to semiotics 85. Berlin, New York, Amsterdam: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989.
- . *A theory of musical semiotics. Advances in semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- van Baest, Arjan, and Hans van Driel. *The semiotics of C.S. Peirce applied to music: A matter of belief*. Tilburg: Tilburg University Press, 1995.
- Zannos, Ioannis, ed. *Music and Signs: Semiotic and Cognitive Studies in Music*. Bratislava: ASCO Art and Science, 1999.