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Musicology as a meta-theory of musical meaning

ABSTRACT: The article is dedicated to the problem of musical meaning and its role in contemporary musicological and semiotic research and reflection on music and musical culture. Nowadays, semiotics of music became semiotics of becoming rather than semiotics of being, as it was earlier during the period of structuralism. What became the important is that the category of aisthesis is emphasized as well as the question of the experience, the aesthetic dimension of that experience and the subject itself. It is interesting to evaluate the postmodern thought as well, taking the question of its positive vs negative virtues, and — as a result — do not treat the postmodernism in negative way only (the aesthetic and the cognitive value of the sublime).

To see the current changes of musicology one can speak not only about its relative autonomy and how to understand the limits of the discipline but also how to redefine the scope and core of musicology by treating to find more unconventional, closely ethic, perspectives and approaches (means: imagination, freedom of thought, openness to alternatives and to praise the uncertainty). If the musicology could be ready and able to join some efforts from other humanities: semiotics, history of arts, anthropology and cultural studies, the thesis of the musicology as a meta-theory of musical meaning could be valid.

KEYWORDS: music, semiotics, meaning, musicology, interpretation, meta-theory, postmodernism, ethic

1.

In the search for a *mathesis universalis*, it is not only musicology that has achieved but modest results. As the inner dynamic of our discipline shows, we find it easier to stick to traditional, strongly-rooted methods than to venture forth into the unknown and risk losing our sense of security in clashes with new points of view. In this respect, semiotics is and is not an exception. This ostensible contradiction can be explained by means of two theses: firstly, of all the humanities, semiotics, as the theory of meaning, is the most capable of self-reflection, which fuels its constant flux. This capacity keeps semiotics in a state of creative tension and prevents it from hiding behind the thesis — correct, as it happens — of the specificity of the object of research, namely music, as musicologists unattuned to the turbulence in the humanities willingly do. Of particular interest today might appear to be those points of contact between musicology and semiotics which result from the premise that musicology is centred on interpretation (we have no certainty as to its cognitive

limits and consequences, particularly on the side of the receiver), whereas semiotics is centred on experience understood as the “coming out of meaning”.

Secondly, drawing on an idea of Pavel Florensky’s, we will say that semiotics, which gives rise to aesthetics and to all axiological reflection, takes its strength from the idea of the original sin.¹ And that is what makes semiotics today particularly sensitive to experience and experimentation, those cognitive adventures of man which engender the most enigmatic meanings, including in art and its interpretation.

The Garden of Eden was a “commune of persons”, based on unity and direct experience, precluding dualism, and so signless. The fall of man is, among other things, a fall into semiotics. It is the serpent that leads Eve into semiotics, who gives the first historical lesson in signs. He reveals the principle of all semioticity: *binary opposition*. In separating the upper from the lower waters on the second day of creation, God created Binarius, “two”, the symbol of Satan. When the two becomes independent, confusion arises. Two has a female character and so the devil first tempts the woman. In the Book of Genesis (3:6), we read: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and ate (...)’; reference here to three functions, one of which is aesthetic: “delight to the eyes” (alongside the material, “the tree was good for food”, and the cognitive, “to make one wise”).² Original *aisthesis* and the first semiotic relationship: that is the context to which semiotics is currently returning after an age away.

2.

Putting forward, even going so far as to adopt the thesis that musicology is a meta-theory of musical meaning, adds strength to that voice within the space of the humanities which harmonises with the fundamental premises of the debate on the axiological heritage of postmodernism. The questions and the answers are as follows: Firstly, has postmodernism, as a shrill diagnosis of a century of crisis in Western culture (counting from approximately 1860/1870), left as its legacy any axiological category worth discussing today? Yes – *the sublime*. Secondly, has postmodernism done nothing but harm to philosophical thought, or has it not? No. It has brought an awareness of the need for Sense, for Meaning, and thus for Value, to a degree greater than before. Postmodernism’s balance sheet is not purely negative.

The arrival and the “explosion” of postmodernist thought were not only a reaction to the existing paradigms, with science and its pan-technicisation in the

¹ Pavel Florensky, *Ikonoostas i inne szkice* [Iconostasis] (Warszawa: PAX, 1991).

² *The Book of Genesis* (accessed June 29, 2014, www.vatican.va/...genesis/./bible_genesis_en.html), chapter 3 (3:6).

forefront, disintegrating under the weight of the experience of the Holocaust. Dispensing with metaphysical problematic both in practice and in reflective thinking, “forced” even Martin Heidegger to utter in 1966 (in an interview given to “Der Spiegel” on 23 September of that year) words which we would not have previously expected from the author of *Being and Time*. Heidegger said: “Philosophy will be unable to effect any immediate change in the current state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all purely human reflection and endeavor.[...] The only possibility available to us is that by thinking and poetizing we prepare a readiness for the appearance of the god [...] insofar as in view of the absent god we are in a state of decline [...]”.³ Let us recall, however, that as far back as thirty one years earlier Edmund Husserl (Praha 1935) expressed concern over the spreading crisis of West European culture and civilisation, attempting to turn phenomenology into the point of reference for the burning need of renewing the state of Europe, Mankind and the humanities. Europe had to wait another thirteen years, until 1979, for the appearance of Jean-François Lyotard’s postmodernist manifesto, which put a line through the cultural and civilisational heritage of the Enlightenment by declaring the end of Grand Narratives, including Science and its achievements (the atomic bomb and gas chambers). However, this excess was an integral part of the postmodern worldview, while the definitive battle with the Western European heritage of “powerful thinking” turned postmodernism into the common enemy of traditional philosophy and criticism. An assessment of postmodernism must take into account the fact that even that most destructive of worldviews which happened to the twentieth century can be credibly justified by the transformations in the thinking and the values of the period in which it functioned.

As has been noted by Steven Connor, the final phase of the postmodernist movement, which he describes as the phase of popularisation (I would prefer to describe that phase as one of deeper self-reflection), which falls to the mid-1990s, evokes debate on the possible positive results of the postmodernist rebellion⁴. It seems to be a most interesting stage both for postmodernism itself, an assessment of its achievements, and for revealing those elements in it which might contribute to the grounding of a number of problems, questions and values directed towards traditional sources, but posed not in the old, now anachronistic form, but in a form that has been radically experienced and thought through. What is of interest is that the matter primarily concerns ethics, but also such concepts as “hope” (Richard Rorty vs Frederic Jameson), or sensitivity. I bring these concepts to mind not because they exhaust the set of categories of positive late- or post-postmodern thinking. I bring them to mind because, for me, they constitute a significant base for one’s own way of understanding humanities and musicology. If Jan Patocka

³ Martin Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save Us”: The *Spiegel* Interview (1966) accessed December 14, 2014, <http://www.ditext.com/heidegger/interview.html>.

⁴ Steven Connor, *Introduction*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (Cambridge 2004), 4, 15.

was right in describing modernity as a “culture of insensitivity”⁵, then Richard Rorty’s essay, to which I refer and from which I draw a number of premises for the postmodernist context of the debate on one of the possible dimensions of musicology, constitutes an important element in discovering the positive aspect of the vivisection of postmodernism and its values.

In a text from 1991, significantly titled *Ethics of principles and ethics of sensitivity*, Rorty, sometimes alleged to be linked to postmodernism, in taking up deliberations on the idea of committed humanities, directed towards literature, recalled the figure of Socrates.⁶ Rorty’s Socrates, who appears here as a symbolic character, is pathologically uncertain, asking questions without expecting definitive answers. He is by way of being a “literary critic”, who favours art and not science as the central element of culture. His task as a teacher consists in spreading unease and doubt, and pointing to those books which will ensure that the desired unease will take on even more complex forms.⁷ The postmodern critic of postmodernism adds to the semantic field with the figure of Socrates at its centre such categories and concepts among which an “ironist” can move freely: sensitivity, imagination, freedom of thought, openness to alternatives and uncertainty.

Rorty, who was seeking a new impetus for the humanities and philosophy in the intensity of their contacts with literature, unwittingly came close to the views of Leszek Nowak, a Polish philosopher, who had spoken of the need to strengthen these ties, which would be beneficial to both sides. This open, inviting tone of two sensitive philosophers representing such diverse worldviews, results from the assumption that it is not only science but also art which provides us with a credible picture of the world and mankind. Admittedly, it does so in a different manner, but variety, dialogue, or even conflict, are naturally part of that attitude. This kind of turning to ethics and literature provides, to a degree, evidence for the intensifying diktat of the natural sciences. Their radical empiricism and reductionism place art and the products of human cultural endeavour in the position of objects the origin and ontological status of which are fully determined by evolution. However, recognition and acceptance of these achievements cannot constitute support for the judgment that science is always right and that philosophy is always wrong. The principle of “consilience” (Edward O. Wilson), postulated in scientific methodology, may serve both sides of the argument, but on the condition that we do away with the diktat of any point of view, that we allow them to function in support of a better understanding of the processes which surround us, and thus the criteria of value which lie at the foundation of our activities — in science, in the life of the community, and in art.

⁵ Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *Duchy Europy*, [*Esprits d'Europe* (Paris: Calmann — Levy, 2005)] trans. Jan Maria Kłoczowski (Sejny: Meridian, 2012), 171-6.

⁶ Richard Rorty, “Etyka zasad a etyka wrażliwości” [*Ethics of Principles and Ethics of Sensitivity*], *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2002), 52.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

In constructing the basic theses of musicology founded on Rorty's principles within the framework of the ethics of sensitivity, as well as the position awarded to the category of meaning within that order, I make use of the methodological proposals put forward by Ewa Domańska. In her conception of "unconventional history" she proposes confronting the concepts which characterise that idea with those which, according to the author, belong to "academic, conventional history." This confrontation can be summarised as follows:

- epistemology *vs* ethics and aesthetics, the problematics of ethics and aesthetics, the mutual reductions and dependencies between them, also in shaping our attitude to the subject, dominate over the cognitive function of science;
- conventionality *vs* values, a return to, and placing at the centre, of the problematics of axiology, in view of the critical potential in the post-postmodern discussion, exceeds the role of that which is conventional and axiomatic in science;
- description *vs* representation, postmodernism came to regard the category of representation as compromised; we return to it today, but asking new questions about the subject and the rules of representation;
- objectivism *vs* subjectivism, the radicalism of subject-centred attitudes is worthy of deeper interpretation, as is indicated not only by such radical conceptions as that of Andrzej Falkiewicz, but also, for example, that of Charles Taylor with his strong ethical motivation;
- cause-effect relationship *vs* disturbing this relationship, metaphorical thinking, the increasing importance of metaphor when one admits as justified the thesis that not only science but also art provides a credible picture of the world;
- truth *vs* sincerity, sincerity becomes a counter-figure to truth according to the premise that truth is an instrument of compulsion in every form of its existence, from physical to symbolic;
- linear time *vs* gaps, fragments, the fragment as one of the central categories of postmodernism gains in value, although questions about the "Whole" continue to be asked, and the discourse conducted around that dilemma focuses also on the two issues presented below, i.e., the tension between realism (narration) and factualism and the critical and subject-committed stance of the sensitive humanities, which finds its expression in the multiplicity of equally valid styles;
- fetish of fact and origin *vs* criticism;
- realistic narrative style *vs* experimenting with various styles.⁸

One of the themes which link many of the scholars mentioned here is the role of the turning to ethics in humanistic research which focuses as in a lens the majority of the parameters of "unconventional history" quoted earlier. "Ethical criticism — as I wrote elsewhere — is built on a foundation which is in equal measure controversial and inspiring, [...], on the continuity which exists between reading

⁸ Ewa Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne [Unconventional Histories]* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2006), 78.

and life, between a book or music and the tangle of thoughts and attitudes which they evoke. The existence of a close relationship between a work of art (*reading in order to live* — says Martha Nussbaum) and the experience of it can lead to a search for heterogenic references, often complex and unforeseen either by the recipient or the communicative intention of the work itself; such references may serve to enrich the recipients' condition, increase empathy and mutuality in their lives, create various interactions in the Interhuman space, as well as stimulating the adoption of attitudes towards other areas of art and, in the wider perspective, a spontaneous development of critical culture".⁹ This deeply humanistic tone of ethical criticism is becoming increasingly apparent in the voices of some musicologists. Julian Johnson in "Who Needs Classical Music?" (2002) sketches a picture of music as a means of strengthening authentic subjectivity, an ethical affirmation of what is deeply human in us. Music serves to "redeem", and Lawrence Kramer follows a similar thread in his "Why Classical Music Still Matters" (2007).

3.

Semiotics today is rightly considered to have inherited from structuralism a negative attitude towards the question of the subject, the person. The opinion that contemporary semiotics is the semiotics of *becoming*, rather than *being*, is symptomatic of a shift in orientation. It is connected with the view of the processive nature of the subject itself and emphasises the value of dynamic objects in the production of semioses (we will say, by way of example, that the work of art is reality in motion). The interpretation of music has also formed a certain type of theoretical thinking according to which musical discourse possesses subject-like properties, in the sense in which an aspiration to achieving particular states manifests itself in musical process. For Scott Burnham, this way of thinking originates in the reception tradition of the "heroic" style of Beethoven's music. A concentration on the subject as the chief actor in meaning- and world-making processes (Nelson Goodman) allows us to number among the growing interests of semiotics "experience" (of every kind, not just empirical), "passion", "sensitivity", "sensuality" and — importantly — such notions of language which accentuate its role not so much in the representation, as in the creation of reality (*possible worlds*).

Enquiring what kind of motion, becoming or dynamic is at issue in this paradigm, let us remind ourselves of the second part of Heinrich Heine's definition of music. In his "Letters on the French Stage" (1837), Heine says: "Music is a strange

⁹ Maciej Jabłoński, "O czym nie można mówić, o tym trzeba mówić z wnętrza. Niepewna myśl muzykologa z powodu "Obrony żarliwości" Adama Zagajewskiego" [*Whereof one can not speak, thereof one must speak from ones inner life. Musicologist's uncertain thought derived from "Fervour Defence" by Adam Zagajewski*], *Res Facta Nova* 9 (18) (2007), 188.

thing. I would almost say it is a miracle'; but poet also declares: "for it stands half-way between thought and phenomenon, between spirit and matter, a sort of nebulous mediator, like and unlike each of the things it mediates — spirit that requires manifestation in time, and matter that can do without space".¹⁰ This formulation reveals to us the fundamental weight of the matter. Music emerges time after time from the space of "transition" — the borderline world between the movement of the "day" and the meditation of the "night", between thought and word, pre-sign and sign. It is eternal motion, an endless "inter" between inspiration and objectivity, like the journey it befalls man to make through life. Plato uses (e.g. in *Republic*) the term *metaxu*, for being "between", between our earth, our familiar, concrete, material environment, and transcendence or mystery. *Metaxu* defines the situation of man, who being in constant motion betrays one of the sides. We are dealing here not only with experience in the sense of the traditional philosophical category, which is a conscious act of the direct or indirect apprehension of some object, but with the experiencing of transcendence or instability, experience that is not certain of its object. In this last case, semioticity is identical to the content given it by Julia Kristeva. In her opinion, "the semiotic" is a representation of urges and the body, referring in equal measure, never apart, to both sense and sensuality, sign and senses; for Eero Tarasti, "the semiotic" is the "khora", the prelinguistic realm of gestures, rhythms, intonations and kinetic energy". Kristeva develops this idea, inverting Descartes's proud words. *Ego affectus est, non contractus*: I am affect, not restriction (*non contractus*). We are to be unstable in our openness. The only possibility is *raptus* — rapture, a wholly unjustified leap from one state to another, a leap to which we are prompted not only by religious experience, but also by music.

The semiotics of passion, thoroughly subject-centred, engages aesthetics and ethics, and also, in the narrative layer, a non-realistic or even anti-realistic type of strongly committed narration. The consequences of these paradigmatic changes also concern, to an increasing extent, musicology, which, besides many other questions, has to consider the problem of experience in all its subtle riches, certainly not reduced merely to the laws of perception and to conclusions arising from considerations and research within the framework of the "biomusicology paradigm". The discussion of the figures of subjectivity proposed by Carolyn Abbate, Karol Berger and Aaron Ridley, rejecting ontology in favour of aesthetics, that is, performance and its experiencing, is an interesting example of our discipline's interest in this area. The question of the immediacy of the experiencing of music and its discursive fruits is not the exclusive dilemma of postmodern thinkers; it was discussed in the 1920s by Charles Seeger, fully aware of the gulf that was developing between the experiencing of music and the verbalisation of that experience. The American

¹⁰ Heinrich Heine, *The Miracle of Music* (accessed June 29, 2014, ratiocinative.wordpress.com/2013/07/20/the-miracle-of-music-heinrich-heine/).

musicologist unswervingly maintained that *musical knowledge*, arising through the process of the cultivation of music, of our intimate and intuitive contact with it, can never be satisfactorily translated into *knowledge about music*, which helps to form the foundations of the discipline that is musicology.

In putting forward a hypothesis according to which we may regard musicology as a metatheory of musical meaning, I have in mind the following issues:

- firstly, defining the position of musicology within the humanities today is still an ongoing task;
- secondly, the range, aims and methods of the humanistic disciplines need to be made more precise on the basis of the dualism: naturalism — antinaturalism, with the problematic of musical meaning belonging to both these boundary perspectives, as well as being absorbed to varying degrees by intermediate approaches;
- thirdly, a significant element co-defining the premises specified above is the problem of the linguistic expression of the given experience of music enriched by the ethical, subject-centred and metaphysical dimension of the experience and how it is captured by language;
- fourthly, the attitude which I describe as sensitive musicology creates the possibility of a positive approach to the issues specified here and, as a consequence, concentrating on the meaning of “meaning” as a semiotic category, which enters into relationships with such areas as phenomenology or metaphysics (*philosophia perennis*). In the debates about the legacy of postmodernism, concepts such as metaphysical meaning, humanities for wisdom, the Presence or, on the other side — new romanticism as a dramatic return to the discussion about the shape of the “subject,” seem to bring an interesting contribution to the discussion about the philosophical potential of contemporary musicology and music semiotics.

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