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DIVERGENCIES BETWEEN LINGUISTIC MEANING AND MUSICAL MEANING

The improper extended use of the term "meaning" has its source in an unprecise comprehension of its concept. This is so because the concept of meaning involves philosophical conflicts. The indiscriminate employment of the notion of meaning dissimulates a diversity of meaningful realities and even levels their differences. A probable cause is the magic power of words that suggest the ontic status of those realities (always denounced by Russell) in combination with a precarious sense of criticism.

When we talk about the meaning of linguistic concepts and the meaning of music, it is easy to come to the conviction that both have the same procedures for creating meaning. But they only seem similar. I think that there are decisive divergencies between those domains. I will try to expose them from the point of view of linguistic meaning and start from the following three linked ideas:

1. Linguistic meanings are susceptible to definition.
2. Linguistic meanings admit synonymity.
3. Linguistic meanings can be organized in structures (syntagmas) where the resulting meaning does not modify substantially by inner mobility.

I want to confront the above aspects with hypothetically similar aspects in the realm of music.

1. Is it valid to talk about musical *definition*?

The existence of dictionaries proves that it is possible to formulate a semantic-linguistic definition. Wilbur Quine[1] speaks about the *lexical definition*, which offers a paraphrase, that is a second, synonymous expression. Jerrold Katz[2] characterizes this as a *theoretical definition*, which is an article in a dictionary that represents each sense of a term by means of a theoretical construction.

The meaning of a word, its conceptual content, can be defined by means of other words or concepts. The characteristics of the *definiendum* are explained by the *definiens*. There is admittedly an equivalence between

1 Quine, W. van Orman: *From a logical point of view.* Cambridge/Mass., Harvard 1953. (*Desde un punto de vista logico.* Ed. Ariel. Barcelona 1962.)
2 Katz, Jerrold: *Semantic Theory.* Harper & Row 1972 (*Teoria semantica.* Ed. Aguilar. Madrid 1979).

the two terms. Let us take an example: "table" (*definiendum*) can be defined as a "piece of furniture made of wood or any other stuff, compound of a great board supported by one or more legs, used normally for meals or other activities" (*definiens*). Thanks to the mentioned equivalence, we can substitute the definition for the *definiendum* "table".

Katz believes that theoretical definitions provide semantic information while lexical definitions (e.g. dog/canine, dog/hunt) are based on pairs of terms of the same language or pairs that combine, for instance, two languages. Lexical definitions do not furnish cognition. The stylistic connotations, in their various versions manifested in the *definiens*, are irrelevant for my present purpose because they do not invalidate the logical equivalence. However, if we take care of the aesthetic value of stylistic differences, we approach the domain of literature and, in analogy, to music. In this case, divergencies become less definite, less reasonable. My proposal is to look at music as opposed to the common linguistic communication.

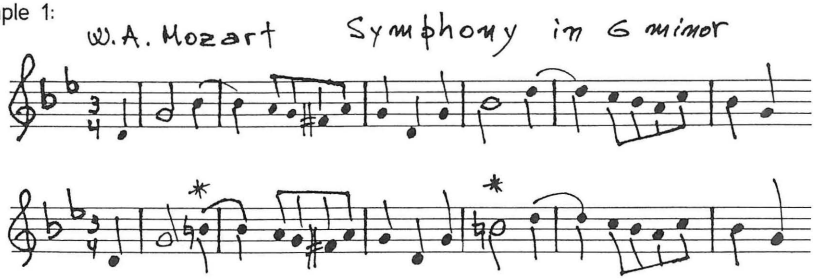
Is it correct to talk about 'musical definition'? One of the first problems we face is to find, in the field of music, a delimitation equivalent to a linguistic *word*. The word was treated by contemporary linguistics as a useful differentiating means to impose order to discussions. This delimitation of the word deals with the difference between "monemes" and "phonemes" in order to denominate the "double articulation" of language. André Martinet promotes the use of "monemes": the minimal meaningful unity. How could such a "minimal meaningful unity" be identified in music? What kind of stability could it possess? If it were possible to determine a musical "moneme", it would depend on the context of the melodic structure. That is, a moneme as defined above could be a "motive", a "phrase", even an isolated musical sound, depending on the circumstances.

However, supposing we want to give each of the above options the right to be a "minimal meaningful unity", how could we propose a definition? In my view the following is very important. I think that in the realm of music it is not possible to formulate a definition by employing other meaningful unities because it is impossible to invoke the fundamental condition of *equivalence*. A conjoint of sounds (a sonic structure) *is not* equivalent to another conjoint of sounds, which could be taken as its "definition". Because of the very nature of music, two musical conjoints (for example: two melodies) are two *different* conjoints with their respective diverse connotations: both acoustic and semantic. If they were equivalent, an indistinct substitution, such as admitted by logic

with regards to linguistic definitions, would be valid. In the field of music, however, every substitution modifies the very *sense* of the phoneme, because the musical sense cannot be *isolated* from the sonority in which it is embodied in a singular indissoluble way. This has to do with the "adherence" between song and sense that music does not share with the ordinary use of verbal language. An exception is the "musical" intonation of the phrase, but in this case we are close to the artistic intention.

From the starting point of the musical tradition in the Occident, it has been clear that a minimal perturbation in a melody (for instance the accidentals "flat" or "sharp") is sufficient to come to the conclusion that a change takes place in the melody.

Example 1:



This precision concerning the individuality of the sound became meaningless in the works of "experimental" music (widely spread around the "sixties") where musical effects proceeded from grouping or clustering sounds. In those cases, "clouds" or "nebula" were aesthetically more important than a succession of determined sounds. Those "clouds", as the so-called "clusters" in pianistic resources, for instance in the music of the American composers Henry Cowell and Charles Ives, are sonic conglomerations. They are proposed without specification of their components, produced with the intention to obtain a qualitative "atmosphere". Even in these cases the atmosphere that the composer wished to obtain is not indifferent.

Does it make sense to speak of a "non-equivalence", to think about the possibility of a definition of a sonic group by means of another sonic group? What should we think about certain examples in Occidental music, of melodic structures without any specification of the instruments to perform them with, which was the usual practice in the Renaissance? I believe that not even in these cases can we talk of equivalence, although two different musical instruments perform the "same" melody.

"Same" is only an abstract criterion, the concretion of a sonic phenomenon has another aesthetic value.

The present considerations hint at the traditional organization of the sonic material. In these defined circumstances the principle of "non-equivalence" between melodies (or other musical fragments) is valid, even between those that differ only by one sound (see example 1). This is because our auditory evaluation finds them irreconcilable, incomparable. Our auditory evaluation does not accept a substitution. This criterion becomes particularly clear in the musical structure called "variations on a theme ...". The theme can have different variations: melodical, rhythmical, harmonical, in the "tempo" or through contrapuntal differences, among others. Is it possible to say that a theme preserves its "identity" under the circumstances of musical variations? Which identity? Is it, on the contrary, that the theme in the musical sense changes at every opportunity, conserving only an "ideal" abstract identity?

If we accept the fact that musical sense is "incarnate" in the sonority and is identified with it - as I did say before -, the variations on a theme would be real unities which are different each time. It is remarkable that we perceive, on hearing, the underlying similitude between the original theme and the varied theme. Interesting for the musical structure (musical form) is exactly this recognition of the characteristics of the theme under its varied appearances. Of course, between the original and its variations a physiognomical similarity can be perceived if certain proportions are preserved. This leads us to the question of an identity of structure, i.e. the phenomenon produced when a melody is "transported" from one tonality to another, preserving its interval relations.

What is the very nature of this structure, this kind of "abstract melody" mentioned before? Is it music? An ideal entity immutable by accidental or intentional changes of its acoustic incarnations? Is it a sense we can consider independent from sonority? Although these questions are not easy to answer, the difference between sonic identity and structural identity of a musical fragment happens to be quite comprehensible.

2. Does musical synonymity exist?

The question of linguistic synonymity shows similar traits to those referred to the subject matter of point 1. It is supposed that the linguistic definitions guarantee an equivalence of meaning. Then, the

licit substitution of the word and its definition is transferred to the relation between two (or more) words. This is, otherwise, characterized as "lexical definition" (for example: strange/rare, scourge/flagellate, softness/flabbiness). Their functional equivalence is accepted on the ground of the equivalence of their meanings. In colloquial language, I can replace "ship" by "boat": their applicable meaning is equivalent.[3] Their functional value inside the proposition is also equivalent. The considerations with regards to the stylistic differences between a term and another term are the same as to the subject matter of "definition".

Is musical synonymity acceptable? If synonymous words are those words that differ phonetically but have the "same" meaning, we shall not find anything similar in music. There, sonic difference always causes a difference in meaning (apart from the cases of "cluster music" described above). Leonard Meyer[4] said, within another context: "In the simple folkloric melodies as in the great symphonies a sequence of tones presented at the beginning can appear a second time at the end. But in this case its meaning has changed fundamentally." That is, even the "textual" repetition of a melody produces a change in meaning. I am talking here of "meaning" and "meaningful difference". I am emphasizing this because any attentive perception receives a meaning which becomes revealed: it has to do with the sense of organization, the singular structuring of perceptual data.

The circumstance that there is no musical meaning independent from the significant channel, as I have shown, provides the arguments for a differentiation between language and music with respect to synonymity, too.

Because of the equivalence of meaning - if that is possible -, two words phonetically different can be used to allude to the "same" meaning. Within a language, this functional identity can be proved - by employing the process of substitution - if the same meaning is reached independently of the words in which it is embodied. I want to pose the questions in other words: how do I know that "ship" and "boat" mean *the same*, that they are synonymous?

3 The phrase "applicable meaning" alludes to the *use*. The theoretical discussions about the problematic identity of the meanings of those words will not be dealt with in this paper. Refer to the classic works by Ryle, Quine, Christensen, among others. Anyway, synonymity works and has a pragmatic justification even if there can be a substantial disagreement over the question in which way it is related to semantic eqivalence. There is also a good approach from the semiological point of view in Luis Prieto, *Pertinence et Pratique*. Paris, Les Editions de Minuit 1975.

4 Meyer, Leonard: *Musica. The Arts and Ideas*. The University of Chicago Press 1967. Papers about the subject "music and esthetics" can also be found in: Julio Lopez, *La musica de la posmodernidad*. Ed. Anthropos. Barcelona 1988 and Luis Alvarez, *Signos esteticos y teoria*. Ed. Antropos. Barcelona 1986.

Philosophers of the positivistic school circumscribe this problem with the circumstance of "use". For instance, Rudolf Carnap[5] formulates the concept of synonymity without an open compromise with the nature of meaning. He says: "Two expressions of the language L are *synonymous* for X in a time t if they have the same intention in L for X in the instant of time t." Likewise, the intention is defined as "the general condition that must satisfy an object y so that (the interlocutor) X is ready to apply the predicate 'Q' to the object y".

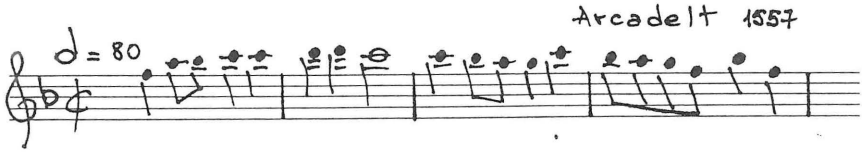
A sufficient condition is that the equality of the meaning of both terms is prescribed by the use in the common operation of the language. However, the thought of the "equality" of the meaning appears subrepticiously in this "is ready to apply" any of two synonymous terms. And, in a certain curious sense, on the horizon we encounter the possiblity of thinking about the meaning independently of the significant, even when the meaning *is not* the referent. This sounds as if the speaker said to himself: "each time that I wish to allude to the meaning 'S', I can employ the terms 'ship' or 'boat'". And, in fact, he selects the terms from a paradigm to insert them into the syntagm.

Let us return to the domain of the musical fact. Consequently, a question comes up: what can be an example of synonymity in music? how can two different musical fragments reach the "same" meaning? To answer this question, this "same" meaning should be isolated in a (supposed) concept independent of the sonic material concept. However, how can one mark the limits of a melody outside its musical meaning? Let us suppose that we wish to talk about a melody, substitute or define it, as we can do with the meaning of "ship". I find, at the beginning, two alternatives equally inacceptable from the musical perspective:

a) to define the melody in technical terms,
b) to define it in extra-musical terms.

I propose to examine the following example:

Example 2:



5 Carnap, Rudolf: Meaning and synonymity in the natural languages. In: *Antologia Semantica.* Ed. Mario Bunge. Buenos Aires, Nueva Visión 1960. Translated M. Bunge et. al.

What can I say about it from the viewpoint of a)? For instance, that it is written in G clef, in F major tonality, on a binary bar, that its figuration reposes on half-notes, crotchets, whole-notes. But, how much do these technical descriptions bring us closer the musical meaning? The description can reach extreme precision and describe each of the "bars" in every constructive detail. However, such a description could not express the sonic peculiarities of the example which are patent to a spontaneous audition.

With the alternative b) I can attempt to describe the melody of Arcadelt in terms of: noble, joyous, among others. Other persons can find other adjectives depending on their own personal experience.
Neither of these two approaches ensures the perception of the sonic singularity of the given example. Because, really, is it not true that we shall find a lot of melodies different from this one by Arcadelt being susceptible to similar descriptions? Let us note, first, the following things: the procedure of extra-musical description builds a significative domain placed over the musical level. At the same time, the adjectives provide an indigent resource for the description of the sonorous phenomenon because of their extreme generality. This is the reason why those verbal descriptions (both technical and adjectival) do not suffice as synonymous expression of the musical meaning.

3. Does a syntagmatic mobility exist in music?

This third question continues the former arguments. It seems useful to begin with the language model. In the Spanish language (my first language) there is a notorious flexibility. Then, I shall take examples from my own language and provide an explanatory translation. The syntagmatic structure accepts a great deal of inner replacements.
An example will illustrate this point. Even though an artificial proposition, it is correctly formulated:

1) "El padre, generosamente, regaló a su hijo un caballo para que pudiera cabalgar por esa pradera."

   "The father, generously, gave his son a horse so that he could ride through the meadow.)

I chose the two following propositions out of all the possible transpositions that this proposition allows without infraction of the syntactic rules:

2) "Generosamente, el padre regaló un caballo a su hijo para que pudiera cabalgar por esa pradera."

(Generously, the father gave a horse to his son so that he could ride through the meadow.)

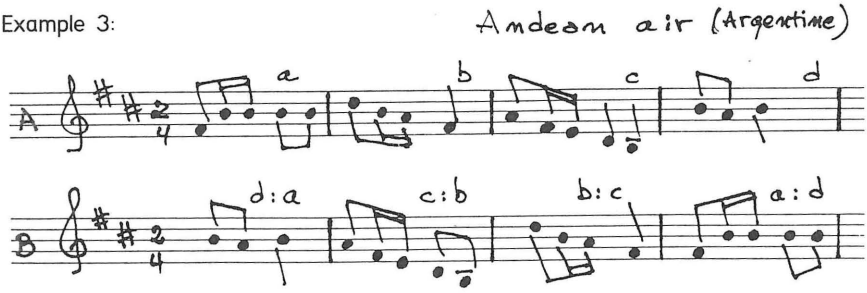
3) "Para que pudiera cabalgar por esa pradera, el padre regaló, generosamente, un caballo a su hijo."

(So that he could ride through the meadow, the father gave, generously, a horse to his son.)

Following our former argumentation, it is acceptable (within the limits of colloquial use) that the linguistic meaning of these three propositions stays unmodified on account of the syntagmatic mobility. I repeat that the preference for one of them, for instance for reasons of emphasis, brings the communicational procedure closer to the aesthetic-literary realm. In colloquial language, there is no significant difference and all three propositions are equivalent.

I think that this procedure is *not applicable* in music. At least, in the tonal "traditional" music, the various musical phrases that constitute a musical "period" present an organization whose structure seems to possess an immovable logic. This way, the transposition or change of one or more phrases of the musical period causes a change of sense in the entire structure of the fragment, i.e. the whole conjunction becomes transformed. The "meaning" of a musical structure results not only from the "meaning" of its "natural" parts or sections but significantly also from the order they follow in the sequence.
A single example will illustrate the exposed idea:

Example 3:

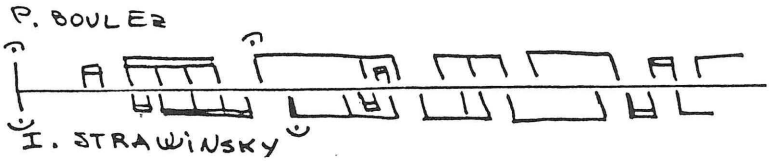


Even from the "disengaged" viewpoint of the pragmatic position (expressed in the phrase: the meaning is the use), linguistic meanings and musical "denotative" meanings show a different behavior. According

to the ideas dealt with above, this has to do - on the one hand - with the degree of independence they exhibit with respect to the significant (see: definition, synonymity), on the other hand, with the more or less strong cohesion of the respective structures.

This concept of musical, "meaning" *adhering* to the sonic course is opposed to a musical meaning that could be described in extra-musical terms because the extra-musical description involves an independent signification regarding the sonority itself and leads to a devaluation of the sonic individuality. The concept of "adherent musical meaning" is also opposed to a concept that places meaning on the abstract level of the technical definitions (see point a)). In the same way, despite the predicated adherence, the concept of "technical meaning" diverges from a supposed objectivity of aesthetic values. Technical definitions are no aesthetic definitions. I don't object to the statement, however, that the beauty or value of a musical fragment lies objectively in the sonic organization. As we know, different directors, for instance Boulez and Strawinsky, made rhythmic variations on the bars 70 and 72 of "Le Sacre du Printemps".[6]

Example 4:



This involves aesthetic differences.

The musical structure, among other technical-musical factors, seems to have a sense that emerges from the materiality of the sound. However, the following occurs: it is decisively founded on the formal order at the same time.

In view of the problems which are caused by the ambiguous and indiscriminate use of the term "meaning", it would be a possibility to name this intelligible level of the musical fact (both formal and material) "signification". It is really presented as a sensuous evidence with a serious approach to musical logic.

6 Locatelli, Ana Maria: *La notation de la musica contemporanea.* Buenos Aires, Ed. Ricordi. 1973.

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