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BETWEEN SEMIOTICS, MUSIC AND SIGNIFICATION

I would like to present to the reader a unique volume, one born from a passion for knowledge, an attempt at understanding music in its deepest essence, and the question of whether this art can transmit meaning. This passion has led researchers to semiotics, structuralism, and trends in the global humanities that have uncovered those elements that constitute a work, that allow for communication in a nonverbal language—what can be encoded and what can be decoded, what has changed over the centuries, and what has remained constant. This has given rise to three closely related trends that have been developing for over 50 years: musical semiotics, musical signification (meaning), and musical narratology—all inspired by linguistics and literary studies, all adapting tools from these disciplines, all proposing a new perspective on music that was impossible for the tools typical of musicology or music theory, and which have thus allowed for a completely different understanding of music.¹

Moreover, these trends complement each other perfectly, intertwine with each other, and are very often complementary, for example, that the “[t]opical and narrative analysis of compositions” are “related to music signification” (Grabócz,

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¹ These phenomena were perfectly captured by Márta Grabócz, who wrote:

Beginning in the mid-1970s, numerous currents of the humanities, such as structuralism, post-structuralism, cognitive sciences, literary semiotics, narratology, and gender studies, have powerfully influenced musicology. The integration of new disciplines into the framework of traditional musicology reinforced the weight and value of these approaches as they engage in an “aesthetics of content”, by which I mean the analysis of expression in music: thus, music signification—that is, musical semiotics—was established. (2020, p. 197)

2020, p. 202). Together, they allow for a multidimensional analysis of a work; separately, they permit the understanding of music from the perspective of its semantic and communicative potential, as well as its component parts, which form a musical narrativity and serve to communicate the significations (meanings) contained within sounds, ideas which date back to Antiquity: from Plato through the sophisticated compositions of medieval composers, *dramma per musica*, the connection between music and passion (and affect), to musical rhetoric and programme music, as well as references to melodies or genres that are culturally entangled, sometimes symbolically (e.g., salon dances, national anthems, church sequences such as *Dies Irae*, 19th-century leitmotifs, or melodies associated with, for example, a specific country, such as *Ranz des Vaches* with Switzerland). Each of these areas is deserving of a separate book, and most of them have been analysed in numerous volumes, both individual (e.g., Abbate, 1991; Agawu, 1991; 2008; Grabócz, 2009; Grimalt, 2020; Hatten, 2004; 2018; Kramer, 2002; Monelle, 1992; 2006; Stefani, 1976; Tarasti, 1978; 1994; 2000; 2002; 2012), and collective (e.g., Andreica, 2022; Grabócz, 2007; 2021; Hellaby, 2023; Sheinberg, 2012; Tarasti, 1995; 1996; 2006).

This volume, whose history is largely connected with the *16th World Congress of Semiotics/16th World Congress of the IASS-AIS (Warsaw 2024)*, contains 9 texts. In the Introduction to Volume 38(1) of *Studia Semiotyczne*, I mentioned the panels held during this Congress and that the three of them were organised “under the patronage of the Polish Semiotic Society (PTS)” (Gamrat, 2025, p. 6). The *Semiotic and Artistic Realities* panel was the direct inspiration for the Call for Papers for Volume 38 of *Studia Semiotyczne*. However, another “artistic” panel was held under the auspices of the PTS, which I helped organise together with Prof. Eero Tarasti (University of Helsinki); this panel was titled *40 Years of Musical Semiotics* (Wąsik, 2024, pp. 36–37, 273–290). The participants of this panel also submitted their texts. Therefore, the Editor-in-Chief of *Studia Semiotyczne*, Prof. Tadeusz Ciecierski, and I decided to publish a second volume on semiotics and the arts, this time a “musical” one. This volume can be considered a musical extension of the previous volume, 38(1), which concludes with a text on music in the context of reality and semiotics (Chagas, Petković Lozo, 2025). This time, however, the reflection on the connections between music and semiotics is much broader.

The panel *40 Years of Musical Semiotics* was preceded by a special issue of *Roczniki Humanistyczne* edited by Prof. Tarasti, titled *40 Years of Musical Signification* (2024), which was related to the 40th anniversary of the Musical Signification project (MS or MSP).² Musical Signification, as Márta Grabócz explains:

² The project *Musical Signification* was launched in Paris in 1984 by Eero Tarasti and other European scholars, including Marcello Castellana, Daniel Charles, François Delalande, Costin Miereanu, Luiz Heitor Corrêa de Azevedo, Gino Stefani, and Ivanka Stoianova. Eero Tarasti has been, and still is, the director of this Project. Every two to four years (since 1986) there has been organised an *International Congress of Musical Signification (ICMS)* which is one of the most important world fora for scholars of musical

can be defined as the verbal reconstruction of a lost musical competence, a kind of musical knowledge quasi-forgotten through the ages, yet perpetuated in musical practice by interpreters and transmitted from generation to generation by various instrumental and vocal schools. The notion of signification covers the various *expressive types* within each musical style, types of expression linked to a given *musical formula* from a technical perspective, and referring to the same “cultural units” recognized by members of the given culture or society. (Grabócz, 2016, p. 325)

This concept is larger than even musical semiotics or musical narratology—it connects them both and covers each and every concept concerning signification (meaning) in/and music.

In this volume, we present the results of a researcher trained in musicology who is entering the field of semiotics in order to advance a deeper understanding of a musical work. We can thus explore what happens when semiotics starts as a secondary field of research, but becomes the primary tool of research and scholarly communication. As Jerzy Pelc postulated in 1970, semiotics can unite researchers from various fields (p. 9), this time from various fields of music studies: historical, analytical, or philosophically-oriented musicology, music theory, and performativity studies. Hence the diversity of this volume in terms of the topics focused on, as well as the historical periods, continents, and research perspectives.

The volume opens with Eero Tarasti, who in his extensive essay, *The Fruitful Interactions of Existential Semiotics and Musical Analysis: New Ways and New Challenges*, offers a panorama of the consequences of the emergence of existential semiotics (of which he is the creator), which, a quarter of a century ago, marked the crucial importance of considering musical signification. The new uses for this theory, which the Professor is constantly developing, are evident in the final sections of his essay, in which he applies his theory and Zemic analysis to avant-garde music of the 20th and 21st centuries. Ulrika Varankaitė, in her text, *Meaningful Music Listening: Inspiration and Self-Transcendence*, comments on theories about musical listening, music as a means of connecting people via meaning, feelings, and the perception of music, as well as extramusical associations that each listener can find (and give to the music) in a very individual way, depending on their own experiences and capacities. This is a very modern and new approach to musical signification and the field of musical semiotics. The semiotic nature of listening, examined from a perspective combining phenomenology and existential semiotics, is proposed by Sebastián Nabón Hernández in his essay titled *Silence and Sound as Interrelated Phenomena: The Existential Semiotic Nature of Listening and a Methodological Consequence*. He refers to Oscar Bazán’s work titled *Del Silencio* that is the basis for the analyses presented in his article. This essay acts as a transition to the second part of this

signification/meaning and musical semiotics. The next one—the *16th International Congress on Musical Signification*—will be held in Helsinki, at the Sibelius Academy between 2nd and 6th June 2026.

volume in which the authors present some case studies analysed from various semiotics perspectives.

Ricardo Nogueira de Castro Monteiro (*The Hidden Meaning of the Feast: Representations of Gender, Class and Ethnic Oppression in a Performance of the Brazilian Guerreiro*) chooses for his analysis “a traditional Brazilian folkloric manifestation associated with the Christmas cycle, [which] encompasses an Epiphany” (p. 81 of the current issue) called *Guerreiro*. It is presented from the methodological perspective of existential semiotics (Zemic analysis) and concepts by Stuart Hall and Kimberlé Crenshaw that permit the showing of the *Guerreiro* in a larger cultural, social, and political context. Füsün Deniz Özden, for her part, presents Ali Ufkî Bey’s (Wojciech Bobowski, Albertus Bobovius, Ali Beg) concept of music notation in the context of Turkish culture and history, as well as by referring to phenomenology and the semiotics of culture. The three following articles concern musical narrativity connected to musical semiotics, musical analysis, and existential semiotics, using these combined methods to examine music from various epochs—from Mozart’s 18th-century piano concerto (Panu Heimonen’s *Steps Toward a Normative Music Analysis: Making Moral Choices Through Sympathetic Narrativity in Mozart’s Piano Concertos K. 453, 466 and 467*), to virtuosity in piano toccatas (Julian Hellaby’s *Toccatas: Spielfiguren, Virtuosity and Narrativity*) and contemporary piano concertos by 20th- and 21st-century Polish composers such as Witold Lutosławski, Krzysztof Penderecki, and Zygmunt Krauze (Anna Nowak’s *The Potential of Narrative Strategies as Factors of the Composer’s Idiom*). The volume closes with an article by Elodie Verlinden, *Dancing Cyborgs, Robots, Avatars, and Holograms: Reconfiguring Audience Reception in Performing Arts*, in which the author analyses the dance of non-human beings from a semiotics perspective, showing in which way the meaning in the dance of such agents can bring significance to dance and to the arts in general.

I wish the reader a pleasant and fruitful read, and hope that the multifaceted reflection in this volume will enliven the discussion on the relationship between music, meaning/signification, and semiotics.

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