

EERO TARASTI*

THE FRUITFUL INTERACTIONS OF EXISTENTIAL SEMiotics AND MUSICAL ANALYSIS: NEW WAYS AND NEW CHALLENGES

SUMMARY: The article presents a synthetic panorama of the fruitful intersection of existential semiotics and musical analysis, as well as the Zemic model created by Eero Tarasti and its application to music. This article offers not only a panorama of existential semiotics applied to music analysis but also a critical review of the field of musical semiotics. Existential semiotics applied to musical analysis is commented and followed by some examples of its application to—among others—works by: Frederic Chopin and Claude Debussy, as well as referring to music by Johann Sebastian Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven, Robert Schumann, Jean Sibelius, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ernest Chausson. The new applications and challenges for existential semiotics can be seen on the example of 21st-century music, especially to the music of Krzysztof Penderecki and Arvo Pärt.

KEYWORDS: existential semiotics, musical semiotics, musical signification, musical meaning, Zemic model in music.

In the memory of Gino Stefani (1924–2019)

* University of Helsinki, Faculty of Humanities. E-mail: eero.tarasti@helsinki.fi.
ORCID: 0000-0002-6960-1395.

1. Introduction

This essay was published in 2020 in the Brazilian journal *MusiMid 1* (Tarasti, 2020a). This version was reworked and extended to show new possibilities offered by the application of existential semiotics in the field of 21st-century musical analysis. My main concern is to present recent novel developments in my approach to existential semiotics and its application to music analysis. It goes without saying that this concerns not only European classical music—though it is naturally my own closest empirical area—but all musical cultures. Semiotic theory has always aspired towards universality and validity as a metalanguage portraying any social or cultural praxis. However, the examples for my analysis were taken from Western music (18th–21st centuries).

When starting existential semiotics, I was always aware of the risk in trying to develop a new program. It is much better to repeat the commonplaces and move along generally accepted lines. The one who attempts to invent and discover is soon the only one in that line, as we read in the famous Goethe poem: *Wer sich der Einsamkeit ergibt, Ach! der ist bald allein* [Who gives himself to loneliness/ah! he is soon alone].¹ But in some cases, this is unavoidable.

My theories have grown organically since their beginnings in Lévi-Strauss's ideas and continuing in the Paris school, and in its “return” to German philosophy, then back to semiotics, and from there back to my very first empirical field, music.

Why should there be a particular epistemological basis for one's work in musicology? Theodor Adorno, in spite of everything and his colossal errors, was an ideal. His theory and discourse were completely Hegelian. That distinguishes him. Yet most music semioticians are empirically minded scholars starting from music theory (and musical practice).

Then there are pseudo-semioticians of music who speak about semiotics and musical meaning but accuse other semioticians of narrow-minded linguistic imperialism. They use the term “semiotic” but never define what is meant by it. This attitude stems from British cultural theory. They determine themselves by saying that they represent the voice of the subaltern, of the marginal, i.e., popular culture—without understanding that what is marginal in the present world is definitely classical music.

2. What Is Music Analysis After All

But I want to go directly to the core issue of this paper, namely, what I call “Zemic analysis” in my present theory of existential semiotics. Yet, before I start to elaborate this new model, we have to ask some fundamental questions: what is analysis after all, what are we aiming for there? Every musicologist faces the task of producing an analysis of music. The purpose of an analysis is to provide

¹ One of the *Harpfensänger* [Harp singer] songs from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (Goethe, 2015, p. 425)—translation after (Oxford International Song Festival, n.d.).

a verbal portrayal of the musical object under discussion and to write it in such a way that the reader can imagine the music. And moreover, the word “what” refers to the entire experience we have of that piece of music. Such is quite practically the life of a music scholar.

Then, depending on what audience the analysis is intended for, the scholar chooses a textual strategy. If it is for a program note of a concert, or cover text for a record or speech for a general audience, or a paper at a professional musicology symposium, or at a conference with non-musical participants, the text is always different. Yet, the analysis itself is unavoidable. The challenge is, for instance, to clarify on the basis of a written document or score what an unknown composer’s hitherto unheard work is like. The analysis is therefore *descriptive*, but it must not be reductionist so that the music itself disappears under the analysis, its schemes, diagrams, and techniques. On the other hand, it does not need to be *prescriptive*, i.e., that with it we should be able to produce the musical utterance again, i.e., write the score or play it. But it is still prescriptive in the sense that we have to be able to imagine or conceive the work, to “perform” it in our minds. What does this mean?

Furthermore, when we speak about a semiotic analysis, we can well encounter the question: what are you striving for with your analysis? What is its purpose and use? Since the analysis in the scientific sense takes place on an international level and is written in some generally understood language, we can say that it reveals hidden meanings and structures of the music under observation. Thus, a person, a semiotician or music scholar, who has competence in the culture which produced the work can make such concealed significations explicit; they can be discussed in a methodological language that all understand. We do believe, perhaps naively, that semiotics still is such a language of international scholarship. Taking into account how Western art music heritage has expanded all over the world, to cultural spheres far beyond the European one, such a task is a serious one and helps people everywhere to study and understand that music.

Now, there is much analysis of music that is not semiotic but represents other traditions and types of metalanguage. Let us think of German traditional music analysis since the nineteenth century. One aspect is that on the level of writing, when reading essays by Hugo Riemann, Ernst Kurth, Adolf Bernhard Marx, Heinrich Schenker, August Halm, etc., there is a certain impressiveness as early as there, in their *écriture*, as the Frenchmen would say. Not being a deconstructionist à la Derrida, much of the meaning of the analysis stems from the metalanguage it tries to form about the music. Through it, we try to make reading models of extremely complex musical texts. Definitely, other types of such analyses are those which try to clarify the basic function of music cognition and create generative, paradigmatic and other “systems” which often start from quite rudimentary musical examples persuading the reader to believe: this is only the beginning, wait for a while, we shall in the future—when the method and metalanguage develops—give you more complete analyses. Unfortunately, the experience is that such a moment often never comes.

Anyway, while reading those old classics, we have the feeling that we are reading something essential. Also, the language and discourse produce their own meanings. Meanings are of our own making, but at the same time of the making of other people, *les Autres* (Sartre) constitute some kind of reality and resistance which corrects the mistakes and returns the text to write paths. Without it, the analysis does not keep its feet on earth. It is like Greimas once said to me: we need intuition (we were speaking about Henri Bergson), but it has to be made into a model communicable to others. Then the other factor mitigating our theoretical fervor is the sense of history. I have never been able to think of musical semiotics without being in touch with musical history and “historical musicology”, as they say in Germany. Therefore, it has been a joy to notice that after several world congresses of musicology, our discipline, i.e., musical semiotics, seems to be finally accepted as its own scientific paradigm even by most conservative-minded scholars.

3. Musical Meanings Appear

Yet, it is true that nowadays musical meanings are not only studied by semioticians or music scholars devoted to semiotic thought. Quite generally, it is admitted that music is meaningful. Even in such a pure music theory as the Schenker method, among others, one of its leading representatives, Edward Laufer, once said to me that it needs to be completed with a kind of semiotic aspect to be really efficient. Charles Rosen, who wrote so many seminal texts about classic romantic style, admitted in his last book *Music and Sentiment* (2010) that he is more interested in how composers use and apply different affective meanings than just labeling them as musical “signifieds”, as I would say. He states:

Other approaches to affective meaning in music that do not rely upon a code centered on single and simple parameters are far more fruitful... these serve as musical analysis. However, my own purpose here is more narrowly historical, to display the radical changes in the methods of representation of sentiment imposed on composers by changes of style over two centuries. (Rosen, 2010, pp. 27–28)

What is typical here is that Rosen does not use terms like “semiotics” and “meaning”, or “signification”, albeit what is involved are just these aspects (and although he here mentions Márta Grabócz, Robert Hatten, and myself).

However, as said earlier, many other approaches are dealing explicitly with meaning in music, and they seem or pretend to be experts in this field without any knowledge of what has happened in our paradigm of musical semiotics since it was founded in Europe in a congress in Belgrade organized by Gino Stefani in 1973. In cognitive studies meaning is mentioned but reduced to neural studies, which at best lead to statements such as that music has something to do with emotions (i.e., Allwood, Gärdenfors, 2008). Linguists have, since the beginning, been tempted by music and its analogies to language, by the simple fact that they are both linear, temporal, put signs one after another, following certain rules

which define which phrases are well-formed and grammatical and which are not. Quite remarkable studies have been done in this sense, such as Nicolas Ruwet or Fred Lerdahl (collaborating with Ray Jackendoff), and other Chomskyans, sometimes linguistically oriented scholars like quite recently Wolfgang Wildgen in his *Musiksemiotik. Musikalische Zeichen, Kognition und Sprache* (2018); he sees music in the evolutionary aspect of language acquisition, but seems to pass by the enormous quantity of music semiotical literature as such.

4. Does Anyone Want to Be a Semiotician?

The so-called cultural studies approach, which has become almost dominant in sociology, anthropology, and ethnology recently, stemming from British cultural theory, talks much about meaning and music, but the main thesis is that music is definitely cultural (just as in Germany they said that music is essentially historical). Michael Ryan, with Brett Ingram and Hannah Musiol, write in a book titled *Cultural Studies: A Practical Introduction* that:

We may still question if music “makes sense” but our use of the term draws our attention more directly to what it makes us feel and what it makes our bodies do, rather than what it makes us think... Music occupies vaguely defined territory which blurs the distinction between mind and body, conscious and unconscious experience, the self and others... The personal is political... music is one of the primary ways by which we create and maintain our identities. (2010, pp. 105–107)

Chris Barker’s *Cultural Studies Theory and Practice* (2008), written as a course book for universities, launches new terms like “culturalism” instead of structuralism, agency, ethnicity, race, television, consumption, youth, digital media culture. When music is inserted into this framework, its meanings are seen to stem directly from these contexts. The music they speak about is definitely popular music. It is considered marginal or subordinated. The only treatise on modern culture that I have noted to defend classical music heritage is the one by Roger Scruton. Otherwise, music appears as technology of the self (Nora, 2000) or as spectacle (Debord, 1995). So the question is also about which musical practice, i.e., genre and style, we are talking about. All the sophisticated theories on musical meaning developed in the last decades by music semioticians do not interest but passingly these adherents of “music as culture”. Thus, we are never brought to know how, in fact, all this “recontextualization” touches the musical message itself and its structure.

Likewise, new ideas about multimodality in music emerge in studies, i.a., by Lyndon C. S. Way and Simon McKerrell in what they call *Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies*; they admit that there is such a thing as semiotics and often use the term “semiotic” in diverse connections: “Much has been made of the semiotic connections between music and language... however, our position is that music is not a language...” (2017, p. 11). And later, they claim:

Music cannot be considered a language because of its semiotic ambiguity... More processual understanding of musical meaning in multimodal discourse, whereby music's meanings are emergent... depending largely upon the social and cultural bodies that hear them. Our bodies are cultured (Way, McKerrell, 2017, p. 11)

By this argument, music is not language; they seem to be justified in ignoring all the literature written about music as a non-verbal semiotic tool of signification and communication (cf. works by such scholars as: Gino Stefani, Vladimír Karbusický, Jaroslav Jiránek, Márta Grabócz, Raymond Monelle, David Lidov, Robert S. Hatten, Byron Almén, Leo Spitzer, Susanna Välimäki, Eero Tarasti, etc.).

In the same way, Roger Scruton, in his *The Aesthetics of Music* (1997), by arguing that music is not language, also excludes the avenue of musical semiotics. Therefore, they all ignore any such study that treats music as a form of linguistic communication. What is then this new idea of multimodality? One would be tempted to think it is a kind of state before musical utterance involving all sense organs, i.e., something before the real intertextuality emerges in music, i.e., references to other arts as an endless chain of interpretants, as Peirce would say. Nevertheless, “We define a mode to not to be corollarous with a channel of human perception (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell) but as a socially agreed channel of communication” (Way, McKerrell, 2017, p. 7). The key issue here becomes the “discourse”. Certainly, music is discourse in a broader sense following French theoreticians since Foucault and Marcuse covering all forms of symbolic power (I shall soon return to this argument). Yet, the multimodal issue as a new approach to musical meaning remains vague itself. Maybe it is a kind of *khora*, as understood by Kristeva (or earlier by Plato) meaning the pre-language field, kinetic energy of our body before the “patriarchal order”.

Altogether, in many fields people talk about semiotics, but they do not want to be identified or recognized as semioticians. If they were to do so, they feel they would be joining a historic paradigm of science that has long since been forgotten and abandoned.

To make things still more complicated, even among music semioticians, there are gaps between different schools and orientations. Sometimes the gaps are due to simple language barriers; those moving in English circles do not read French or German sources, and vice versa. Jean-Jacques Nattiez's school separated itself a long time ago from those who gathered under the flags of the international Musical Signification project since 1984. The Music dictionary published by Einaudi does not even mention such a community, which has arranged 15 large congresses, maintained a doctoral and postdoctoral seminar on musical semiotics, produced dozens of doctoral theses, having thus major international educational relevance (this well-known omission has been analyzed by Jean-Marie Jacono in 2008) This is a pity since without believing that there might loom a new chance for “unified science” as the logical empiricists did in the 1920s, the view that music functions as signification and communication would fertilize the whole musical culture around us beyond genre distinctions, i.e., between classical and popular music styles.

After these preliminary and contextualizing reflections, I dare to go back to the present state of the art of my own new approach, both to the semiotic theory in general and to its musical applications. I do not want to repeat here what is easily readable in my books, of which I want to mention the two published by Mouton de Gruyter in Berlin: *Semiotics of Classical Music* (2012) and *Sein und Schein* (2015). In fact, they should have appeared in reverse order since the latter contained the essentials of a theory used in the first one. However, one may notice that in the first one, side by side, with analyses which I could already call “existential semiotics”, like the ones on Mozart’s D minor and Schumann’s C major *Fantasies*, there are still studies which belong to my earlier phase as a semiotician at Greimas and Paris School, such as the Wagner essay on *Die Walküre* (2nd act, 4th scene). I want to mention this since I have heard lately at the world congress of semiotics in Kaunas, June 2017, people say that I have altogether left the “old” Greimassian approach now. That is not true. In science, so-called progress or at least movement forward takes place such that the older theory remains valid but within the limits given by the new theory which surrounds it, i.e., it is *englobant*, as Greimas used to say. Thus, one may well stay a Greimassian music semiotician or something else and be at the same time an existential one.

5. New Epistemology

In what follows, I briefly repeat the core ideas of the latest phases of existential semiotics, particularly regarding the so-called “Zemic” model. Thus, what is involved in musical context has to be called *Zemic analysis of music*. However, here an empirically minded music scholar can still stop and ask: why should we have such a complicated philosophical theory behind us in order to analyze music, if the beginning is always musical experience? As Charles Rosen argues:

Dealing with the representation of sentiment in music, I shall not often attempt to put a name to the sentiment, so readers who expect to find out what they are supposed to feel, when they listen to a given piece of music, will be inevitably disappointed. Happily, however, it is mostly quite obvious. That is; some music is sad and some is jolly... The power of music to illustrate sentiment and to awaken emotion in the auditors has been recognized and asserted for centuries, indeed for millennia. (Rosen, 2010, pp. 5–6)

Why shall we take pains to build up huge philosophic-epistemological systems in order to analyze such a simple, immediate, and evident phenomenon as musical experience? My counterargument is that there are a lot of musical facts around us, some say musical signs, or let us be satisfied to call them only facts... or rather data. Yet, data as such are nothing without a theory, a conception of what is pertinent. Even Nattiez, in his paradigmatic study on Debussy’s *Syrinx*, once admitted that we could not study one piece alone without accounting for all the other pieces by Debussy (1973). So, there must be a network of data—but

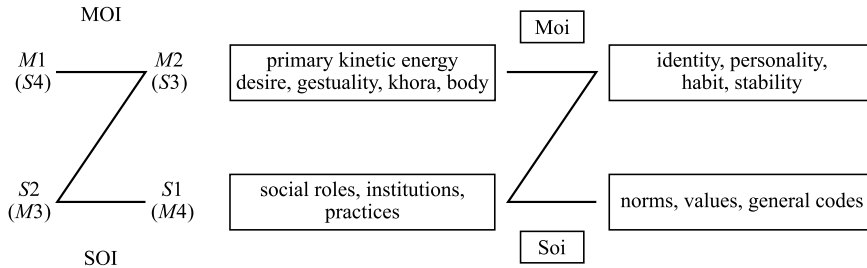
even that is not sufficient. There has to be an interpretational network to which the musical sentiment, experience belongs. Only then does it become meaningful.

Discourse about music has many levels: description, analysis, theory, and ultimately, at the top, epistemology. Living examples of great musicologists show clearly the necessity of a theoretical ground. Theodor Adorno could be called a kind of pre-semiotician, albeit he never used such a term. His estimates are sometimes comical, like his claim that Beethoven's side theme in the 2nd movement of the Fifth Symphony is a failure because it is so bombastic. As a philosopher, he thought himself to be at a higher stand than mere musicians. However, his writings are completely based and dependent on his Hegelian background. Therefore, they are also difficult for a modern reader who is not familiar with that conceptual jungle.

However, an epistemology is necessary for a more profound discourse about music. And once we take that step, we have to admit that even those philosophies change; they are in flux. Why should we be satisfied with what the giants of semiotics once said, from Greimas to Lotman and Eco? Greimas argued that his ideal of science is that the method is so rigorous, that he would sign any study made by his students: the results were guaranteed by the generative course. I always thought that luckily that was not true, otherwise there would never be any advancement in science.

6. Zemic Model

Now it is time to go back to the theory of existential semiotics and see what its relevance could be for musical semiotics. After many phases of elaboration, this new theory has reached a point that is crystallized into what I call a "Zemic" model. Epistemologically, it has many ingredients which have been smelted together to form a structure representing nothing less than the human mind. The Zemic model simply consists of inner movement and tension among four modes of being; this dynamism is portrayed by the letter "Z". The varieties of the mode "being" are articulated following Hegelian logic on the one hand, i.e., being-in-myself, being-for-myself, being-for-oneself, and being-in-oneself. These four cases follow to some extent the Paris school of semiotics and the famous Greimassian "semiotic square": *S1*, *S2*, non-*S1*, and non-*S2* (1979). Yet, categories of *Moi/Soi* are also embedded there, quoted from Paul Ricœur (1983) and Jacques Fontanille (1998). Altogether, the model is an ontological hypothesis about human reality (see Figure 1).

Figure 1*Eero Tarasti's Zemic Model*

Note. Source: author's own elaboration.

The model is the answer to the crucial question of multimodal studies, critical discourse analysis, cultural musicology, research on music as social semiotics—namely, how are we social, after all? Because society is *within* us. If the social were not dwelling inside us, it would not exercise any power on our behavior. The human mind—which is just modeled by the Zemic—is not only a more or less solipsistic Moi, it also contains Soi as one moment. Therefore, I was surprised to read Tia de Nora:

Music is not merely “meaningful” or “communicative medium”. It does much more than convey signification through non-verbal means. At the level of daily life, music has power. Music may influence how people compose their bodies, how they conduct themselves, how they experience the passage of time, about others and about situations. (Nora, 2000, p. 16–17)

In our terminology: bodies—Moi1, experience—Moi2, conduct—Soi2, and time—Soi1. We are talking about the same thing. But there is *no power without signification*. Nothing can move us unless we feel it has some meaning. Signs are social powers, as Umberto Eco said as early as in 1968 (cf. 2014). Musical signs are not an exception. The Zemic model is an effort to articulate this basic situation.

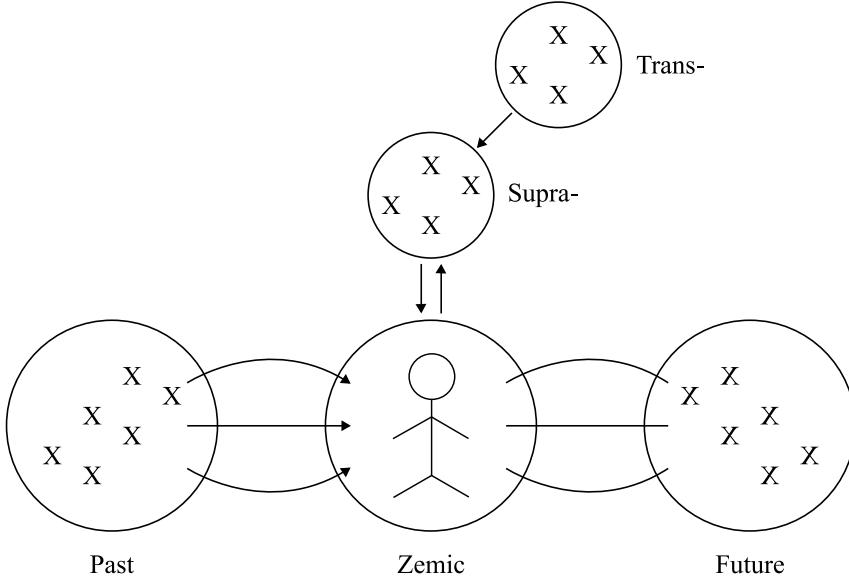
There are several more or less other hidden references in the model, like to Theodor Adorno's distinction *Ich und Gesellschaft* (Moi/Soi) or Lévi-Strauss's *sensible* (Moi) and *intelligible* (Soi), or to Jaspers's *gegenständlich/ungegenständlich*. This model I have already dealt with in several published essays and books of mine (Tarasti, 2000; 2012; 2015).

From this starting point, we can take one step further and ponder how the Zemic world unfolds or diminishes by projecting it in the timeline to the past or to the future, whether it gets there through strengthening its own structure, substance, and elements, or whether it contrarily tries to expand to all dimensions. Accordingly, also towards *transcendence*. An expeditor would always discover the same “Zemic” world; the American Indian or the Polynesian aboriginals

would be only negations of our Zemic, not any really unique and independent substances. Therefore, our subject is in the fulcrum of being. To him/her, signs inundate from four directions; from the now moment, past, future, “suprazemic” level, and transcendence (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

The Zemic Levels



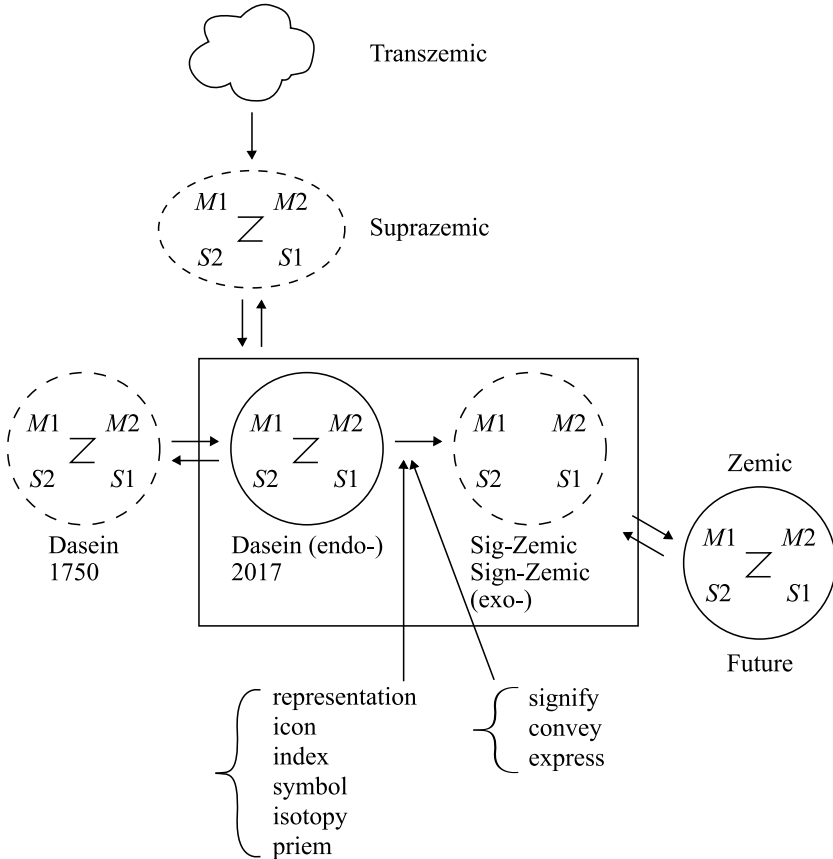
Note. Source: author’s own elaboration.

They are first mere data for him. Yet, he has a kind of *Vorverständnis* of what they are. He recognizes in them at least those four species: *Moi1*, *Moi2*, *Soi2*, and *Soi1*. He articulates *Dasein* or the immediate *Umwelt* by them. Consequently, the *Dasein* consists of act-signs, where the signs of the future are its pre-signs and the past ones, from history, its post-signs. Our model does not deal only with a pure phenomenological now-moment but reaches history as well as the future. This is important considering its musical applications later.

In order to see what is involved in this complicated network, let us again see the diagram, which allocates the different spheres and interpretations of the Zemic to their proper places (Figures 3 and 4):

Figure 3

The Detailed Zemic Elements



Note. Source: author's own elaboration.

Figure 4

Logical Interaction Within the Zemic Model

- 1) $\rightleftharpoons \iff$ Similarity vs difference (contrariety).
- 2) \rightleftarrows Zemic movement in two directions (enacting semantic categories of material/immaterial (*gegenständiglich/ungegenständiglich*) and one/many).
- 3) \updownarrow Movement towards and from transcendence.
- 4) \longleftrightarrow Dialogicity, i.e., Zemic in the world of other Zemics.

Note. Source: author's own elaboration.

In the center, there are two “Zemics”: the Dasein or Zemic of the act-signs—and its representation in signs: “sig-zemic” or “sign-zemic”. The empirical focus of our study is something which we obviously cannot doubt, but which we can verify anytime and to anyone, i.e., immaterial, from *gegenständlich* to *ungegenständlich*, from one to many; taking into account *transcendence*, from trans-ascendence to trans-descendance; and last: *dialogical principle*, i.e., formation of Zemic in the world of other Zemics (cf. Tarasti, 2020b; 2021).

Now it is high time to go back to music. To what extent is the Zemic model pertinent when we elucidate musical significations? For the first, as early as in my *Semiotics of Classical Music*, I defined the Zemic modes of being regarding music: Moi1 = “body” in music, kinetic energy, the physical aspect of music. “Der erste Element in Musik ist Klang” [The first element in music is sound—own translation] said conductor Christian Thielemann (2012, p. 138); so it is sound, it is the Peircean Firstness, something immediate without yet any reflection or conscious articulation; Moi2 = is the same as the Greimassian *actoriality* in music, i.e., themes, motifs which are more or less anthropomorphic representations of our human subjectivity, person, something which among others Leonard B. Meyer in his theory of melody (Meyer, 1973) labelled as the archetypes of melodies: scale, broken triad, gad and fill, axis. Soi2: genre, form, topics, rhetoric, or the rules and formal constraints which make music social communication and praxis, and Soi1: values, musical aesthetics, more or less abstract concepts ruling over the whole musical process of generation.

This may still sound schematic and rudimentary but we may say that there is no musical utterance or text that would NOT contain in various degrees these four modes. I have often used the following example with piano: Chopin *Etude* op. 25 No. 1, A flat major: Moi1 = it is the vibrating sound produced by constant arpeggiation (see Figure 5a), Moi2: there is a melody in the upper line (Figure 5b), Soi2 = the genre of the piece is piano *étude* and so it follows its rules; Soi1: it has the aesthetics of romanticism, *Schönheit und Poesie*, beauty and poetry as said to me by my Polish piano teacher Jan Hoffmann once. Therefore, the appearance of the Zemic is something quite concrete and familiar to everyone.

Figure 5

F. Chopin Etude Op. 25 No. 1, A Flat Major, Beginning Bars a) Constant Arpeggiation Marked; b) With Marked Upper Line Melody

a)

Allegro sostenuto (♩ = ca 92)

The musical score for Figure 5a is for the beginning of Chopin's Etude Op. 25 No. 1. It is in A-flat major and 3/4 time. The tempo is marked 'Allegro sostenuto' with a quarter note equal to approximately 92 beats per minute. The score shows the first two measures of the piece. The right hand plays a constant arpeggiated pattern, and the left hand plays a similar pattern. Red circles are drawn around the first few notes of the right hand's arpeggiation in both measures, highlighting the constant nature of the pattern.

b)

Allegro sostenuto (♩ = ca 92)

The musical score for Figure 5b is the same as in 5a. However, the red circles are placed around the upper line melody (the right hand's notes) in both measures, highlighting the melodic line instead of the constant arpeggiation.

Note. Source: author's own elaboration.

How the Zemic analysis really goes in practice, I have no space here to elucidate in detail, but the reader may have a look at my recent essay in the 2020 anthology *The Routledge Handbook of Music Signification* edited by William P. Dougherty and Esti Sheinberg.

7. Music and Globalization

Now I want to go even further back to the musical field and, at the same time, develop the model of analysis further. I got an important impulse at the symposium on *Musique et Globalisation*, chaired by Zélia Chueke and her team *Groupe de recherche musicale brésilienne* (GRMB) in January 2020 at Sorbonne University. Namely, I had to ponder one central phenomenon on the contemporary worldwide musical culture, explicitly the so-called globalization. This became to also a test of how my rather theoretical philosophical model, with its origins in continental—particularly German—philosophy and classical semiotics—notably the Paris School of Greimas—would serve when we search for answers to problems in our present musical life.

First, what is globalization in music? It is a phenomenon of communication which has enabled the simultaneous presence and existence of all the world's musical heritages and cultures and a quick shift from one continent to another. It has made possible the expansion of Western art or classical music to countries whose

cultural background is completely different from the one in which this music has its origins. When, via the internet, all musical messages reach our minds immediately, what is involved is the McLuhanian “hot society or community” of fast communication, what Jean Baudrillard once called the ecstasy of communication.

Yet, if musical *signifiers* are transferred fluently at the speed of light from one place to another, does this concern also the *signifieds* or contents? Hence, the problem is a semiotic one. Does the correct signified go automatically with the signifier or with the physical aspect of the sign vehicle, or does it remain somewhere on the journey? I have once written about this in my *Minnesota Diary* (2004). One would be tempted to think that with globalization, there would have emerged a particular genre of universal music, in the sense in which Friedrich Schlegel once spoke about universal poetry when comparing Indian and European literature. Would thus the cheerful connection of the West and East, acclaimed once by Goethe in his *West-östlicher Divan* (1819) be possible also in music?

One might be tempted to think so at first, when one recalls, in the context of musical performance, how Korean, Chinese, and Japanese musicians distinguish themselves brilliantly in our international competitions in all genres of classical music and win them. Have they reached this level only by *mimesis*, i.e., by imitating, resorting to recordings of various historic Western interpretations and adopting their styles and ideas into their own playing? This is in no case the whole truth. They have, namely, most often correctly acquired the contents and aesthetics of European music, albeit they have grown and been educated in completely different cultural conditions. How then have signifieds been able to travel such huge distances over continents and then been transmitted to listeners completely convincingly? The fact that we even pose such a question is based to some extent on the misbelief and colonialist prejudice that some culture has a privilege to the art created on its soil. Only a German can understand Wagner, only a Frenchman Debussy, only a Russian Tchaikovsky, or only a Finn Sibelius, or only a Brazilian Villa-Lobos. One should remember the prophetic words of Bela Bartók from as early as the 1940s in *Über die Rassenreinheit der Musik* (1957): No nation has its own music—all of it is a loan! Did he already anticipate the situation in the global era? Accordingly, the only right identity would be the one of a nomad composer, testified by the case of some Stravinsky and theorized by Daniel Charles (2001).

8. “Hear Music Like *This*”

However, a total and global understanding is based upon the particular semiotic structure of music. Every musical message is generated by a complicated process. What is experienced in music as heard is only a phenomenon, an appearance, the surface. Yet, from this surface, the music listener reasons and makes inferences to depth direction and reaches the processes which produced it. If he/she happens to find them, he/she is enchanted and satisfied, just as if he/she had rediscovered his or her lost fatherland, as Marcel Proust once said about

musical performers. Then the musical interpretation is correct whether it is given in New York, Paris, Helsinki, Beijing, Tokyo, Sao Paulo, or Bogota. What is involved is what Greimas and the Paris school called *structural semantics*, *sémantique structurale* (Greimas, 1966; cf. Greimas, 1979). It has been built into every musical message. It is intuitively present, but can it be rendered from immanent to manifest, from implicit to explicit? This is the challenge of semiotics, and particularly existential semiotics.

If the issue is approached from the perspective of communication, then not. The music listener hears only the surface of music—but from it, gates are opened to the meaningful universe of the work, and these gaps can be called “attraction points”, as the art historian Altti Kuusamo has proposed for the visual arts (2013). From them, one can proceed to the analysis of semantics; it can be ultimately put in a special notation at the side of the notes, somewhat like in Schenker analysis; this has been a problem throughout my semiotic studies of music, namely to find a proper notation for the results, such as that developed for modal grammar—see my study on Chopin g minor ballade op. 23 in 1992—and it is even more acute in my existential analyses (the only one having gone the same path has been the young English scholar Tom Pankhurst with his Schenker oriented methods and applications to existential semiotics; cf. 2008).

After all, what is involved is also what Ludwig Wittgenstein noticed in his *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (I was once, as quite a young student, recommended by the Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright, a follower of Wittgenstein in his chair at Cambridge University, to read what he said about music, but at the time I did not care; it is only now I am able to study Wittgenstein, although I cannot say I would have quite understood it yet). Wittgenstein spoke about hearing as something. In order to understand music, we have to hear music as some meaning which is in the message itself, but at the same time, behind it. If this connection is not found in the interpretation, i.e., in the performer, singer, pianist, or conductor, the performance is wrong, and one may notice it. Is listening as something a particular phenomenological reduction in which the musical signifier reaches its *noema*, intention, as Husserl said?

Let Wittgenstein say: “Only of course, if I say to someone: ‘Hear it like *this*’, he must now be able to say: ‘Yes, now I understand it; now it really makes sense!’ (Something must click)” (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 546). Moreover:

Would it be imaginable, given two identical bits of a piece of music, to have direction placed above them, bidding us hear it like *this* the first time, and like *this* the second, without this exerting any influence on the performance? The piece would perhaps be written for a chiming clock and the two bits would be meant to be played equally loud and in the same tempo—only taken differently each time. And, even if a composer has never yet written such a direction, might not a critic write it? Would not such a direction be comparable to a title to Programme music (*Dance of the Peasants*)? (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 545)

And later, he asks the question: “Would it make sense to ask a composer whether one should hear a figure like *this* or like *this*; if that does not also mean: whether one should *play* it in this way or that?” (1980, p. 1130). Finally, he points out: “Remember that one may say: ‘You have to hear the tune like *this* and then also *play* it correspondingly’” (1980, p. 995).

However, one can notice how the starting point in Wittgenstein’s works is almost always language. “That the world is my world, shows itself in the fact that the limits of the language (the language which only I understand) mean the limits of my world”, he says in *Tractatus* (2001, p. 74). That might be contested by the musical and any non-verbal experience. In his *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, one could read:

Understanding a piece of music—understanding a sentence.

I am said not to understand a form of speech like a native if, while I do know its sense, I yet do not know, e.g., what class of people would employ it. In such a case one says that I am not acquainted with the precise shade of meaning. But if one were now to think that one has a different sensation in pronouncing the word if one knows this shade of meaning, this would again be incorrect. But there are, e.g., innumerable transitions which I can make and the other can not. (1980, p. 1078)

Next, I can give some examples of “listening as something” in Wittgenstein’s sense.

* *Allegretto* from Beethoven’s 7th Symphony. There is a hermeneutic program of this piece by Arnold Schering (1936), such that it portrays the funerals of Mignon from Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*. If the conductor knows this reference, he certainly chooses an appropriate tempo, i.e., not too fast, which unfortunately happens all too often even among great conductors.

* Mozart’s d minor *Fantasy*, the main theme: it is supposed to be a “danceless dance” which provides its proper gestuality; later chromaticism stems directly from Belmondo’s aria in the *Abduction from Seraglio*. It is the rhetorical figure of *uspiratio* or weeping.

* Chopin’s F minor *Fantasy*; the march at the beginning, it is said in Paris that it represents the Polish prisoners in Siberia under the Russian tsar, certainly the tempo here is clear in any case but its modality and atmosphere is like that.

* Debussy’s piano piece *l’isle joyeuse* evokes Watteau’s painting *Embarquement à l’isle de Cythère*. The musician must get the same airy expression in his/her playing.

* Sibelius: beginning of the Violin concerto, the side section is a Finnougrian topos; this would need more explanation. Yet, the opening of his 1st symphony is a lamentation of a runic singer. That should be known to performers.

* Schumann's C major *Fantasy* op. 17, the end of the 1st movement: quotation from the Beethoven song *An die ferne Geliebte* or the third movement floating figuration in the side section: the end choir in mountains in Goethe's *Faust II*.

* Chausson: opening of the Piano quartet A major: the theme is nothing but the clock motif from *Parsifal!* The main theme of the slow movement *très calme* is just a transformation of the *Abendmal* motif from the same opera.

Thus, the list could be continued as long as one wishes. Accordingly, and in fact this shows indeed that music is cultural, since musicians educated outside the European tradition cannot know them by any means—and even our own young musicians often do not know these things. There must be a fully competent person, some art educator, supervisor, to tell them that. If one hears those passages “as” those topics or in connection to that other, secondary sign or interpretant as Peirce would have said, then the performance becomes different, closer to what can be taken as “authentic”.

9. Ways of Generation

But now this is not yet a solution to our problem, i.e., why people living outside this culture and without that information still are able to interpret this music correctly and convincingly, even those who do not know these “cultural units”, to use the term due to Umberto Eco.

The core methodological issue here is that music can be generated in two manners: either we can apply the idea of Greimas's *parcours génératif*, and then this process leads from deep structure to the musical surface, or to the so-called “discoursivisation”. We can there distinguish two parallel lines: syntax and semantics. They mean in music the following: syntax = the rules whereby we put signs correctly one after the other, so that they end up with a grammatical or “well-formed” phrase; semantics: the meanings which are articulated at the same time.

I have made a variant of it for musical purposes already in my monograph *A Theory of Musical Semiotics* (1994), in which I chose only those levels that I found relevant to reading complex musical texts.

Nevertheless, now in the time of existential semiotics, we can think about whether such a “generation” could take place with our Zemic model. It has not yet been tested. This would be something truly new. What does it mean?

If in the Greimassian model there are two simultaneous levels of generation and that process leads organically and quasi-automatically to the surface, then in the Zemic model there are four such simultaneous levels or “boxes”; they do not lead directly into anything in the surface because in-between take place numerous rearticulations in the sense of the linguist André Martinet and the philosopher Sören Kierkegaard, i.e., “leaps”. Albeit, if we knew which Zemic forces were behind it, we could not automatically reason the end result. I can here only mention some possible errors in this respect:

Moi1—body: it is argued that music is only *Klang*, sound or rhythm, or kinetic substance, or gender, and that the masculine/feminine is always heard in music.

Moi2—person, actor: it is claimed that the actor, “composer” is unequivocally manifest in a composition: if the composer has a bad ideology or he is mad like Schumann, it is definitely heard in music.

Soi2—practice: music follows genre, form, social norms only and exclusively.

Soi1—values: everything derives from musical aesthetic.

Yet the situation in music generated by Zemic is more complicated since the levels influence each other and fight with each other for the foremost place in the music, i.e., they are in a struggle about the position of the attraction point in the reception of the listener. Can we also apply here Greimassian generation to Zemic and say that semantics and syntax also rule over the four modes of Zemic:

- * the syntax of the body: combinations of certain gestures;
- * the semantics of the body: the dominance of the energy, like in the ideas of power by John Ruskin, for example, *Appassionata*, *Rheingold* overture, *Atmosphères* by Ligeti, etc.;
- * the syntax of the person: thematicity, like in Rudolph Reti;
- * the semantics of the person: melody and identifying with it;
- * the nominations of these according to the actantial model of Greimas: helper, opponent, sender, receiver, subject, object, or by their characters, like in the study by Panu Heimonen on Mozart’s piano *concerti*: benevolent, aggressive, humble, subordinate themes, etc.;
- * the syntax of the practice: for instance, sonata form, *Satzform*, periodic structure, row, Schenkerian *Ursatz*, the position of a note in *Urlinie* or *Grundbrechung*, *fokussieren/ausfalten*;
- * semantics of practice: determined by the genre, like opera, recitativo, operetta, waltz, lied, march, military, church, chorals, rhetorical figures like katabasis/anabasis and their theological semantics, ellipse, anaphora, oxymoron, trope, etc.;
- * syntax of aesthetics—they are of course the manifestations of the aesthetic: tragical, comic, grotesque, gracious, everyday, etc., and their combination, consequentially or superimposed, like in Mozart’s aesthetic syntax: tragic and Turkish, i.e., comic at the same time: Piano sonata A minor opening;

* semantics of aesthetics: the crystallization of the aesthetic moments into meanings, meanings are not arbitrary but dictated by the structure.

Let it be as it is, but these mechanisms of generation are taken to be universally valid and cause classical music to be performed and understood everywhere “correctly”. Whoever can decode them from the musical text and also encode them into a performance. They are the algebra of the brain, as Lévi-Strauss said, cognition as we often hear nowadays. One may consequently state that this mechanism of generation is also in the background of the aforementioned globalization and makes it possible in its positive meaning.

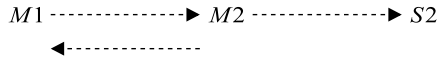
10. Communication Among the Zemics or the Selves

However, if we think of what happens on the surface of the musical text, i.e., “music as heard”, it is the fight of the attraction point or which Zemic mode catches the primary attention. In fact, this problem leads us to think that the Zemic modes, i.e., Moi1, Moi2, etc., together constitute kinds of “selves”, kinds of independent singular entities; we may ponder how they are in contact with each other, i.e., how they communicate. If we think of any concrete sig-zemic unit, it consists of Moi1 or gesture, Moi2 or actor, Soi2 or form, and Soil or aesthetics, to simplify these categories a little. Which Zemic modes are compatible and which incompatible? So, the sig-zemic is a melting point of all those modes; they can be called, like in the philosophy of McTaggart (*The Nature of Existence*, 1988), “selves”. We can say that one self becomes dominant and attractive as an immediate perception because 1) its Zemic is somehow overwhelming in relation to others, which are weaker, 2) it is a knot point of several Zemic modes. Selves are groups of Zemic modes. The selves are in communication with each other, say, in the sonata form primary theme with the secondary theme, or they have inner communication within themselves. So, a theme or Zemic unit becomes an attraction point 1) by its energy, i.e., Moi1, 2) by its actantial power, i.e., motivic force or melodic character, as a “leitmotif”, 3) by its actantial role, due to form, genre, etc., 4) due to aesthetic idea, say, nationalism: Finlandia, Emperor hymn in Germany, religious quality in the quotation of a hymn like in Mendelssohn’s Reformation symphony or of a revolution song in Shostakovich symphony, etc. But what does it mean to say that these Zemic modes communicate with each other and within our minds?

It is not always easy to translate McTaggart’s concepts into semiotics or into a metalanguage comprehensible in this context. Let us, for instance, quote a fragment from the Chapter XXX *Further Considerations on Selves*, in which he concludes that:

all that exists is spiritual, that the primary parts in the system of determining correspondence are selves, and that the secondary parts of all grades are perceptions. The selves, then, occupy a unique position in the universe. They, and they alone, are primary parts. And they, and they alone, are percipients. This distinguishes them from their own parts, which are all secondary parts in the system of determining correspondence, and which are perceptions and not percipients. (McTaggart, McTaggart, 1988, Vol. II, p. 120)

First, what McTaggart understands by “determining correspondence” equals what we understand by communication. Self = Zemic, primary part = mode of being, i.e., M_{11} , M_{12} , etc. Then we have to explain what he means by “percipient” and “perception”. Percipient = primary part, i.e., Zemic mode, which has the capacity to receive messages from other primary parts. Perception = the state of the mode after it has received a message, information, or perception, for instance, in the model:



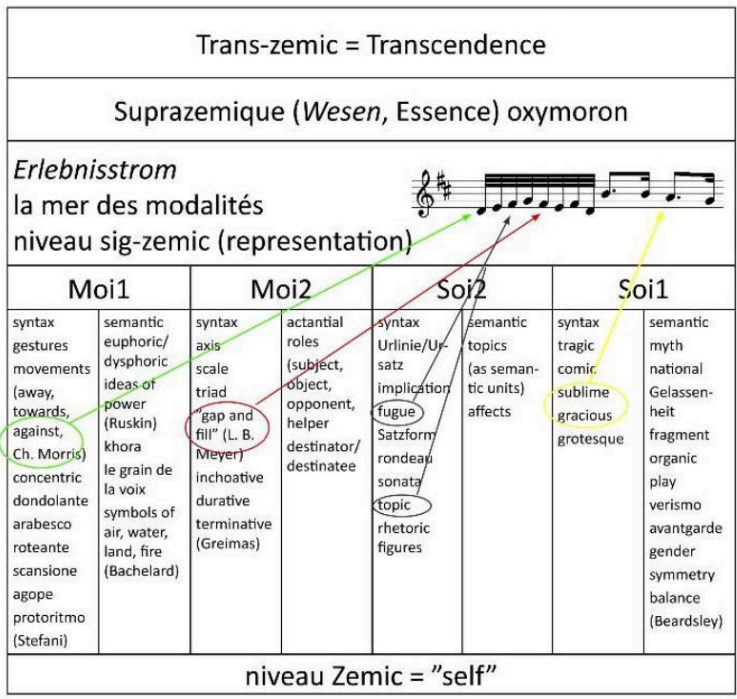
The percipient M_2 can both receive and send signs to others, like in this case to S_2 . This needs semantic investment: if the person has a dominant M_2 , i.e., personal authority and S_2 professional position like a school teacher, and the other partner is living only in the mode of M_1 , like a teenager, not yet having a well-determined personality or clear social role sense, then the communication may not be successful at all. Well, that happens in the Zemic world itself. What about sig-zemic, i.e., level or representation? We can imagine a musical piece in which one theme lives only in its M_{11} , i.e., by its undefined, inarticulate kinetic energy and another theme which is a clear actor, having a certain actantial role, say, like primary theme in a sonata or recurring rondo theme in a rondo form or a fugue theme, then these sig-zemic units may not interact, i.e., meet other musical “selves” at all in a piece.

One aspect that makes the situation still more complicated is that after the Zemic world or Dasein, so to say, comes the supra-zemic level, as it was said earlier. Or the level Hegel called the realm of Essence (*Wesen*; 1969; cf. Inwood, 1995). On this level we have to take into account four different aspects: 1) Is the sig-zemic similar to Zemic or different? Is it iconic, indexical, symbolic in its mode of representation? Such issues we can ponder only by shifting us to the supra-zemic level of reflection. 2) Is it in a dialogue, i.e., forming or transforming the primary part Dasein into artistic expression like James Joyce writing about his *Dubliners* or Marcel Proust about his Paris? 3) Is it embodying or sublimating, i.e., is So_{11} gradually stepwise filled by M_{11} or is M_{11} stepwise sublimated into So_{11} ? This is just what the letter “Z” in the original model was supposed to indicate. 4) Is it transcending, i.e., treated by negation or affirmation?

11. Music and the Stream of Consciousness

Now we are ready to constitute a new type of “generative” model for our existential process of something being understood in a deeper sense; we have been able to form a metalanguage and define concepts, whereby we can explain and make explicit cases of communication with very complex processes of signification. We can take as a concrete illustration the short fugue theme of D major from J. S. Bach’s *The Well-Tempered Clavier I*. We can, with the attached chart, note how many different Zemic modes and parts contribute to its meaning. Beginning from its immediate structure split into two halves contrasting with each other and those forming what is called in rhetoric oxymoron, or trope by Robert Hatten (2004), different colors in the diagram illustrate the procedure of how this simple and short sig-zemic unit utilizes its arsenal of signification, i.e., how it picks up from that treasure its proper characters and “primary part” in order to serve its function as a fugue theme in that type of musical text (Figure 6):

Figure 6
The New “Generation” of Musical Signs



Note. Source: author’s own elaboration.

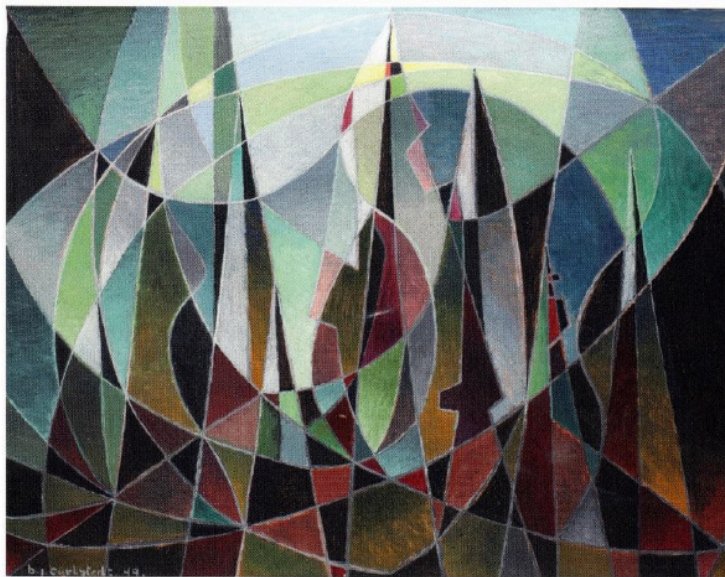
Moreover, one may notice that the level of real music, i.e., as empirical reality lives in a kind of stream of consciousness, i.e., Husserlian *Erlebnisstrom* in which the temporality takes all signs under its formation, under its particular kinetic energy and *Bewegungsphase* (Kurth, 1917). McTaggart speaks of *A*, *B*, and *C* times, which means that if *A* and *B* are units in causality, i.e., in temporal consecution, then *C* time is beyond it; it is a kind of “transcendental time” or rather timeless state in which there is no longer anything like past, present, future, but only something before or after. So, it comes close to what Ernst Cassirer understood by the mythical time, *avant/après*. However, music lives in the stream of our musical mind and perception, which could as well be called the sea of modalities [*La mer des modalités*]. Taking into account the primal continuous flux, the nature of this stream, what is then our sig-zemic unit or utterance there, in which the primary Zemic world is reflected and which it represents? How is it segmented, or how can it be segmented if at all? How does it distinguish from the murmuring and foaming sea of modalities in its background, which is in fact our substance? How does it generate itself from the Zemic? Furthermore, if a sig-zemic rises up, rises from other sig-zemics, how does it get chained with other sig-zemics and ultimately lead by relation of implication (Meyer, 1973) into other sig-zemics? How can any syntactico-semantic unit of Zemic, some particular sign, be in relation to another completely different kind of unit? Or which kind of communication or perception relationship dwells among them? This will be the continuation of our theory, here I cannot yet go further.

To conclude, we might make an intertextual experiment with music and painting. Birger Carlstedt was a Finnish-Swedish avant-garde painter (1907–1975) who passed through different styles, ending with quite abstract non-figurative visual language. His wife was a Danish pianist, who settled in Finland after the war, France Ellegaard (1912–1999), who was called the “Piano Queen of Scandinavia”. When she played at their atelier house close to Helsinki, the husband painted, and once the result was an oil painting named *Uponnut Kat-draali* [The Sunken Cathedral] due to the fact that his wife had played this Debussy prelude. Now we might ponder if our Zemic model is able to portray this interartistic communication or *ekphrasis* as follows.

Carlstedt painting: *Moi1* = the water, *Moi2* = the towers of the cathedral, *Soi2* = cubistic techniques, *Soi1* = avant-garde aesthetic, constructivism, non-figurative aspiration, impressionism. But how does Carlstedt’s painting serve as the *ek-phrasis* of Debussy’s musical work? What are the sig-zemic signs in Debussy? *Moi1* = the sound, the chords blurred by pedal effects, blending the harmonies, *Moi2* = parallel chord passages, non-functional harmonies, yet the music motif or actor of the cathedral raises up from the sonorities, *Soi2* = genre of a character piece for piano, *Soi1* = impressionistic aesthetics, as one can see in the following figures (Figures 7a and 7b).

Figure 7a

Birger Carlstedt, Upponnut Katedraali [The Sunken Cathedral] (1949)



Note. Source: Carlstedt's exhibition catalogue (Malmström, Endén, 2019).

Figure 7b

Claude Debussy, La Cathédrale Engloutie (1910); Beginning Bars

A page of musical notation for the beginning of Claude Debussy's 'La Cathédrale Engloutie'. The score is written for piano and bass. The title 'Profondément calme (Dans une brume doucement sonore)' is at the top, followed by the tempo marking '♩ = 44 circa'. The music is in 3/4 time. The piano part features a series of chords and arpeggiated figures, with dynamics marked 'pp' and 'Doux et fluide'. The bass part has a more melodic line with some triplets and fingerings indicated. The notation includes various ornaments and articulation marks.

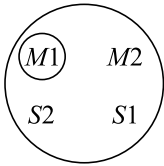
Note. Source: author's own elaboration.

12. Zemic Analysis: New Ways and New Challenges

21st-century music, especially avant-garde music that is born out of Western Classical way of thinking and composing could be seen as a true challenge for existential semiotics as well as semiotics in general. As I said at the beginning of this essay, my conception of existential semiotics and its application to musical analysis could be applicable to non-Western music and music not in the traditional Western notation and composition system.

Recently, I applied my method to the music of Krzysztof Penderecki—an icon of Polish 20th- and 21st-century music, one of the greatest contemporary composers, who passed away in 2020. My analysis of his sonoristic works (such as *Threnody*, *Fluorescences*, *Anaklasis*), and *Cello Concerto No. 2* shows in which way Zemic analysis can be applied in this kind of avant-garde music. At the beginning of my analysis, even the notation—an innovative graphic notation—was a challenge, but all the cluster chords, etc., could be understood, as the elements imply a movement that is a sign connected to a musical situation and—then—to an aesthetic reflection. The musical elements (cluster chord, quasi-melodic, or rhythmic motif) connected to the fundamental elements of the Zemic model, and in this way, I analyzed Penderecki's music. However, this kind of analysis cannot be shortened to a few paragraphs, I propose examining the diagram (see Figure 8 on the next page) of the Zemic analysis of *Anaklasis* that I presented in the open-access academic journal *Roczniki Humanistyczne* (2024). I also analyzed his music using existential semiotics, connecting to the idea of the musical metaphors and epistemes that open a new way of analysis and interpretation of avant-garde music (Tarasti, 2026). Moreover, Zemic analysis could be applied to the music of Arvo Pärt, which I presented in October 2025 at the Launasmaa Pärt Center in Estonia.

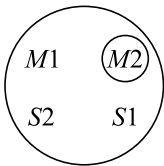
And soon, in June 2026, the next *International Congress of Musical Signification (ICMS)* will be held in Helsinki—the 16th of this series of scientific events, titled *Music as a Meaningful Art*. Many scholars from around the world will come to Helsinki for this event and will speak about various faces of musical signification, musical semiotics, and my existential semiotics, once again applied by others and used in ways that I use and in new ways. We will see...

Figure 8*Zemic Analysis of Penderecki's Anaklasis*

1) *M1* field opens but it has dramatic expression of *Befindlichkeit* like Wagner's *Walküre* and its opening string *ostinato!* *Tutti archi* pronounces a cluster chord which sounds tragical

18 + 20 + 25

⇒ this indeed leads to a more sublimated passage.



2) in which short fragments of full themes, i.e., motifs, pieces of a row are heard in all registers dissipated, but this is also like a negation of Darmstadt school of serialism, so it is a non-*S2*, but this is almost transcendental reaching high, light and immaterial registers, so 25 + 18 + 18 + 18 ↑↑

3) now percussion group is foregrounded vaguely referring to actoriality, but rather with a fugal lexeme emancipates mute from direct actoriality bars 25–105 this is like a long *Durchführung* in a sonata, but also virtuoso, i.e., evoking *S2*, certain genre of performance at the same line.

4) that leads ⇒ to a glissando of strings, i.e., *M1* also elevating, striving for transcendence ↑↑ but leading to enigmatic piano tones prepared note (with jazz brushes), returning our actor on the earth.

Note. Source: author's own elaboration.

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