

Issues of "Meaning" in Music (Either: "Music" as individual works/utterances [individual "presentational objects"] or as interconnected repertoires/genres)

The issues at hand, along with the way that you pursue them, are inextricably linked to your own conclusions regarding:

- 1) Issues of *ontology* and "realism/anti-realism": what is the mode of existence of the work of art? Does an art-utterance exist "in reality," and as a "whole," centered object? Does it exist apart from our conception of it? Or is the art-object only an "object-effect" produced, for example, by "discourse" within a larger network of power-relations?
- 2) Issues of "*truth*" and the various philosophical conceptions thereof (correspondence, coherence, pragmatic, redundancy, a mere "truth-effect" produced by discourse, etc.). In approaching works of music, the "truth" question typically intersects with (or is sometimes subordinated to) the concept of *meaning*—that is, to issues related to the "certainty" (or lack of it) that a centered "meaning" is reasonably extractable from an utterance or art-object.

In all instances of interpretation, you, as analyst or historian (or both), must decide: where do *you* locate meaning? Or, perhaps better, which type(s) of meaning-effects do you find significant and why? Do you prefer to pursue a single strategy toward the approach of meaning, or do you wish to explore conflicts/dialectics among different conceptions of meaning? Which approaches, if any, do you discount or disallow in your own work? Why? These are also questions that you should apply in your reading of the work of others.

Various approaches to musical "meaning" include (but are not limited to):

- 1) No meaning within the work. (Strict deconstruction; meaning can never be grounded.)
 - a) "Hard" position: no "transcendental signified"; endless play of signifiers, "il n'y a pas de hors-texte," etc. Resonates with a nihilistic skepticism toward knowledge. Particularly interested in discovering and calling forth suppressed absences within a text. Crucial: the "opening" of a previously closed text to the dissemination of multiple meanings. Presumable strategy: to demonstrate, playfully and ironically, how a work de[con]structs its own purported meaning—actively to decenter and destabilize meanings, perhaps as an anti-disciplinary goal in itself.
 - b) Softer position: meaning "unstable" (as suggested in [a]) but for practical purposes contained within certain conventional limits. "proximate" meaning or "relative specificity" possible as meaning-effects within communities, etc., while acknowledging, in the final appeal, the hard-line position in [a].

- 2) No inherent meaning in the work, but rather multiple, relative meanings, depending on each listener. (In the strongest of cases: Each hearing is equally valid, because there can be no grounding validity. Cf. Stanley Fish, reader-response theory. Cf. Rohrschach blots; reading cloud-pictures. What is the role, if any, of the “expert”?)
- 3) The meaning resides only in performances. The work is an art-object existing as a set of instructions for (often non-verbal) realization in real time by real performers. Its meaning resides essentially within the artistic traditions and individual realizations of performance (which are generally not translatable into words). One might wish to argue that this may be the only pure hermeneutics of recovery [?], insofar as it is difficult to imagine any performance stemming from a hermeneutics of suspicion [?]. (But is it a “hermeneutics” at all?) The key element, bearing claims of “truth,” “meaning,” and “authenticity,” is the artistic re-creation of a presentational display-object, whose significance is to be discerned primarily through the power and magnetism of the temporal display and the rapt attention—the “magic”—that underpins the event. Problem: how does one discriminate among performances? Are all performances “meanings”? See [2] above.
- 4) Determinable, work-immanent meaning, considered apart from the historical circumstances or intention of the composer. The presentation-object is understood as a set of internal formal relationships. Formal analysis of the isolated object. Often coupled with an implicit or explicit disavowal of “the intentional fallacy” (that is, an agreement with Wimsatt). What fits here?: Pure music theory? Americanized Schenker? Or do these systems not make such claims? Cf. English: “New Criticism.” Analysis can serve multiple ends:
- Explication of the inner dynamics of the unique, individual art-object?
 - Illustration of the power of an analytical system? (but...which? and why that one?)
 - As power and solidarity demonstrations—club-membership within a community of interpreters?
Among whom: academics? “experts”? which experts? who decides?
 - etc.
- 5) Composer’s concretely intended meaning, either as originally stated or as presumed, deduced, or inferred from available evidence—as opposed to any subsequent meaning imposed upon it by an audience, a critic, etc. The goal is to “discover” or bring oneself into alignment with the originally intended *meaning*, as opposed to any later *significance* that might have accrued to the work in its course through history. (This is the position of E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*.) The approach here can be varied—and potentially complex. Aside from the “hard-line” Hirschean position—often tacitly assumed or applied in music-historical practice—one might also be aware of philosophical expositions of “intentionalism” (Ingarden; more recently, Searle), systems involving the “Implied Reader” (Iser) or “Ideal Listener”; and perennially vexing issues in hermeneutic theory (Gadamer; Ricoeur). In nearly all instances the process of [5] will place a premium on the “hermeneutics of [sympathetic] recovery” (*Verstehen*) as opposed to the hermeneutics of suspicion and critique (*Erklären*). Related issues/problems:
- Can any meaning be recaptured “objectively” or at least with reasonable certainty? (Hirsch) What implications does this have with regard to textual criticism (the preparation of “critical editions”)?
 - Is a merely “doubling” commentary (as Derrida might call it) valuable? Why? Does it “close down” a text when the more proper task is to “open” a text to multiple readings? Is closing down the joyous, *jouissance*-related proliferation of meanings within a text an effect of disciplinary “violence,” the authoritarian “policing” of knowledge? (Derrida, Foucault, Barthes). Is such an interpretive position gendered as masculine?

- c) Does the composer exist as a subject who we can assert, in fact, to have "intentions" as a personal agent? Who would disagree?
- d) How do our prejudices and personal horizons merge with or alter that of the presumed author—in what Gadamer called the "fusion of horizons"? (Hirsch opposed this idea as insufficiently objective.) Is a sympathetic "fusion of horizons" the same as a merely "doubling" commentary? Does this bring us back to [b] above? Or is Gadamer arguing something else?
- e) Does the "original" meaning of a work involve its *own* dialogue or fusion with a horizon of expectations of (socially constructed?) generic norms—the generic "questions" to which it provides an answer? (Jauss, Dahlhaus, et al.) Is that the same as the composer's dialogue with them?
- f) etc.
- 6) Social Meaning or "Epistemic" Meaning lurking behind the superficially intended meaning-effect. Thus the *real* meaning is something to be unmasked, decoded, revealed through critical analysis. ("How and for what ends is this meaning-effect produced socially?") Typically, this will be an invitation to "see through" the work—to turn potential opacity into transparency—via symptomatic analysis: to infer/examine the social-discursive formation that produced it. Here one would expect to find the hermeneutics of suspicion ("interrogation," unmasking of false consciousness and illusion) rather than the hermeneutics of recovery (although the latter, within some constructions of society, is not inconceivable). Various questions:
- a) Does one ground one's "decoding-work" in such models as Giddens and Luhmann, etc.? Or in post-Marxian models? Structuralist or psychoanalytical models? Foucauldian or Althusserian models? Models concerned with gender and sexuality? Etc. Why have you chosen the model that you have? What does it exclude?
- b) How is the meaning-effect produced by the underlying structure? Wherein lies the primary agency? Is it:
- 1) discourse? (in the Foucauldian sense?): power/knowledge, often within a system of surveillance, policing, and disciplinary punishments? How is the "subject"—or the piece of music? a—produced by this discourse?
 - 2) desire? This will characteristically involve pondering recent poststructuralist and psychoanalytic (and related) theories: Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, Kristeva, Irigaray, Butler, and so on. A central question (e.g., to Butler and others): is "desire" gendered? And what kinds of gender binarisms or non-binarisms come into play at the deepest levels? Or which are only "socially constructed"? How can deep-level "desire" account for the production and reception of a piece of music? Central to certain modes of: Feminist Studies / Gay-Lesbian Studies / Queer Theory, etc.
 - 3) class, race, gender?: according to the issues of "difference," multicultural issues that inform the past and present, marginalization, subaltern status, hegemony, postcolonial studies, African-American Studies, third-world studies, etc.
 - 4) ideology? (Althusserian? Marxian? Eagletonian? Whose?)
 - 5) older systems, such as: economics? religion? Freudianism? Archetypal analysis (Jung, Frye, et al.)? etc. But on what basis can one justify the return to classical versions of (apparently) now-eclipsed methods?

- 7) "Meaning" as grasped by the work's first audiences? ("Real" audiences?) Meaning as determined by the initial contextual reception, regardless of what the author's "intentions" might have been. But what evidence do we have for these reactions? How representative are they? Why do we believe what they tell us? From which points of view are they written? Are they even accurate? Is it possible for a first audience to "misunderstand" a work? What do we mean by "misunderstand"? Are we dealing here with "meaning" or only a "meaning-effect"? Is this "personal meaning" or is it "social meaning"? Are there political implications? Do these involve issues of "nationalism" (Liah Greenfield, Ernest Gellner, etc.), the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm), or the "representation of the Other [or of oneself]" (Said's "orientalism," postcolonial work, etc.)?
- 8) "Meaning" as a variable continuity extending and changing over time and within different communities— having different receptions and dispersed effects among different audiences—some perhaps "intended," some perhaps not. The meaning, in some sense, is bound up with the totality of this continuity. Meaning thus evolves, changes, spreads through time and space: it is not a stable event. Gadamer: *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Jauss: *Rezeptionsgeschichte*. Meaning as a process unfolding diachronically, and finally lapping up to the shores of our own temporal and geographical horizon. What kinds of research would be involved in investigating this conception of the evolving "meaning" of a work? Cf. [7] above regarding nationalism, representation of the Other, etc.
- 9) The meaning of the work considered primarily within a nexus of present-day economic or political interests. The work—as object—is grasped, manipulated, "sold," "spun," and construed to serve as a tool to help work on behalf of a current persuasion or personal interest. One might try to persuade others: to buy a ticket or compact disk, to contribute to an organization, to validate one's own conception of oneself, to stamp out the spread of "bad ideas," to help one get published or to obtain academic tenure, to advance a political or cultural struggle—or to work against that struggle, for that matter. Here the appeal will usually be contemporary and personalized (explicitly or implicitly) and will directly involve categories of (salable) prestige, shame, advocacy, and so on. This may also be linked to an easily inferred program of transformational politics—for causes on the left, center, or right. Here the crucial question is: for which ends should this object (whatever it might have "meant" in the past) be appropriated *today*?