

# A Sign of the Times: Semiotics in Anglo-American Musicology

GILES HOOPER

## Abstract

This article provides a critical account of the appropriation of semiotics in Anglo-American musicology, its theoretical and discursive foundations, and its impact on the discipline in the period from the mid-1970s to the present. Starting out from the work of Jean-Jacques Nattiez and Philip Tagg in the 1970s, it traces two principal approaches in music semiotics, here termed the 'structural-analytical' and the 'semantic-interpretative', which draw in significant measure on, respectively, the Saussurean and Peircean legacies. Both differences of musicological tradition and the wider state of the discipline have a part to play in explaining why semiotics never established itself as a discrete and distinctive subfield in the English-speaking world in the way that it did in continental Europe. But with the increasing currency of, among other concerns, topic theory, theories of emotion and affect, and studies of musical gesture and metaphor, it might be argued that semiotics – or, rather, an interdisciplinary aggregation of approaches that might be termed 'post-semiotic' – has never had a stronger presence in anglophone musicology than at the present time.

This article provides a critical summary of the appropriation, development, and current status of semiotic methods within Anglo-American musicology in general, and music analysis in particular. In so doing, it not only considers the theoretical and discursive origins of music semiotics relative to specific national and intellectual trends, but also situates them in relation to broader developments within the context of the field. Any discussion pertaining to the history of a discipline must inevitably seek a balance between generalizing observation and an acknowledgement of the exceptions such generalizations occlude. This is especially true where categories or distinctions are partly shaped by language and national traditions.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the variety of ways in which semiotics has been appropriated for the study of music can be seen as reflective, and therefore also revealing, of the different intellectual and disciplinary trends that serve to distinguish Anglo-American from continental European musicology.<sup>2</sup> Semiotics arguably never quite succeeded in establishing itself as a discrete and distinctive subdisciplinary field in the anglophone context. But in the past two decades,

- 1 The relevance of language and the availability of translations should not be underestimated as factors in the development and appropriation of semiotic methods. Eero Tarasti, one of the most energetic proponents of semiotic approaches to music, once noted that 'important trends in musical semiotics [in the 1970s]' were rendered less conspicuous 'due to language barriers' (*Signs of Music*, 59).
- 2 The issue has a counterpart, and not merely analogically, in the division of Western philosophy into 'analytic' and 'continental' traditions, the former normally associated with Britain and North America, the latter with France and Germany, this despite the fact that both Frege and early Wittgenstein are key to analytic philosophy, and that various species of pragmatism and scepticism are well represented in Anglo-American traditions.

Anglo-American musicology has been home to the development of a significant interdisciplinary aggregation of approaches that I shall refer to as ‘post-semiotic’.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the superficial marginality of semiotics within Anglo-American scholarship – especially compared with its particular and more clearly defined place within European traditions – belies the centrality currently accorded the themes it has historically sought to encompass.

Some preliminary framing of this discussion is important, on the one hand to distinguish it from other reflections on the nature of the discipline in general, of the kind that are already well represented in the literature of the past two decades, and on the other to counter objections on the grounds of omission, since a holistic overview of music semiotics, fully encompassing its historical and international axes, would require at least a book-length volume. This article therefore focuses on a few essential lines of development. It considers how the development of semiotic-analytical method, as a ‘sign of the times’, suggests something about mechanisms of intellectual influence and interdisciplinary appropriation. In the first part of the article I summarize briefly the key elements of the original semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, and consider some implications of their application within a musical context. The second part focuses on the work of two figures, Jean-Jacques Nattiez and Philip Tagg, who produced the first extended work in music semiotics to be lastingly influential on Anglo-American scholarship by carrying forward aspects of, respectively, the Saussurean and Peircean legacies.<sup>4</sup> In the third part I discuss the important distinction between these two distinctive approaches, respectively the ‘structural-analytical’ and ‘semantic-interpretative’, by framing them in relation to philosophical and epistemological themes, and situating them in terms of both national-geographical and historical-disciplinary trends. In the final part, I outline the ‘post-semiotic’ sensibility referred to above and propose, by way of conclusion, that work in this area offers at least one solution to the more general disciplinary, methodological, and, at times, ideological tensions that arise between structuralism and poststructuralism, text and context, and object and subject.

## I

If semiotics is the study of signification, then it is not without irony that the universe of nominally ‘semiotic’ or ‘semiological’ practices encompasses a notable variety of assumptions, methods, and theoretical frameworks. While it might be claimed that all semiotic approaches proceed ultimately from the classic Augustinian conception of the ‘sign’ – *aliquid stat pro aliquo* – the practices associated with semiotics can encompass anything from the

3 My reference to ‘post-semiotic’ is analogous to those more Hegelian conceptions of the ‘post-modern’, which imply not a literal ‘after’, or disjunctive break from, the modern but rather something that is simultaneously a reaction against the modern and a continuation of it.

4 It is also worth noting, in line with Tarasti’s observation regarding ‘language barriers’, that Jean-Jacques Nattiez, a French scholar based in Montreal, originally associated with ethnomusicology, proved influential primarily by virtue of the timely English-language translations of his analytical studies.

complex technical procedures of paradigmatic-distributional analysis through to the hermeneutic interpretation of topic, trope, and gesture.

The dual origin of semiotic theories in the founding work of Saussure and Peirce has been rehearsed in detail elsewhere. It will suffice here, perhaps, to note the semantic tension between *semiology* (associated with the work of the former) and *semiotics* (associated with the latter), a tension that, if anything, has been amplified as these respective traditions have been applied to music.<sup>5</sup> At the broadest level ‘semiotics’ – which, despite the initial influence of the Saussurean model, has become the generally preferred term in anglophone discourse – refers to the study of ‘signs’, in which a sign is understood to be anything that can represent, ‘stand in for’, or symbolize something else (including another sign). In the main, language is taken to be just one system of signification, such that linguistics is itself considered a branch of semiotics, although there are some who still consider semiotics to operate primarily within the frame of language.<sup>6</sup> At the risk of simplification, the various species of semiotic inquiry can be viewed as motivated by, firstly, the respective Saussurean or Peircean model of the ‘sign’ that underpins their micro-level focus and, secondly, the empiricist-structuralist, or semantic-interpretative, orientation that informs their macro-level framing. This is apparent, for example, in the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss (which derives from the original Saussurean conception of language), the structural semantics of Greimas (whose early work combines Saussure and Lévi-Strauss with elements of formalist narratology), and investigations of signification and interpretation that draw more obviously on Peirce.<sup>7</sup>

Saussure’s framework centres on the famous dyadic relationship between signifier and signified, neither of which is ascribed a material reality, but which together comprise the sign that relates to a referent – which may be physical (a rock) or abstract (justice), ‘real’ (a cow) or ‘fictional’ (a unicorn). This model is notoriously susceptible to terminological confusion, since one often finds reference to signifier and signified when what is intended, at least in Saussurean terms, is sign and value (or referent): the signifier is the articulation of the signified, which latter is itself not a thing, but the ‘sense’ of the thing. Signs themselves function by virtue of difference, and this relational model lays the foundation for structuralist theory as well as the fundamental emphasis on the role of sign systems in determining our access to ‘reality’, in ‘constructing’ it, an idea that is closely related to the ‘linguistic turn’ in twentieth-century philosophical discourse. Peirce’s model is analogically similar, but

5 Eero Tarasti seeks to bridge this gap, at least terminologically, by referring to music as ‘semiotical’ (Tarasti, *Signs of Music*, 4).

6 Roland Barthes, for example, once suggested that ‘perhaps we must invert Saussure’s formulation and assert that semiology is a branch of linguistics’ (Barthes, *The Fashion System*, xi). This is reflected, in part, in a significant strand of Italian musicological scholarship, which identifies ‘semiotics’ with linguistic conceptions of musical grammar. See, for example, Baroni, ‘The Concept of Musical Grammar’.

7 It should be noted that one can of course identify many ‘historical’ approaches that might retrospectively be deemed semiotic or semiological: for example, Baroque *Affektenlehre* or the nineteenth-century debate between the ‘formalists’ and ‘expressionists’. In his *Theory of Semiotics* (1976) Umberto Eco suggested that semiotics had adopted themes largely ignored by musicology, in part because the latter had long since indirectly absorbed them.

its implication and therefore subsequent application are rather different. The *representamen* is the form taken by a sign (approximating Saussure's signifier), the *interpretant* the sense or meaning (approximating Saussure's signified), and the object that which is represented (the referent). Crucially, in Peirce's model, the centrality afforded the act of interpretation means that one sign can act as the interpretant of another sign, in a process of iteration that is logically without end; it is this idea – that of 'infinite regression' (Peirce) or 'unlimited semiosis' (Eco) – that later underwrites poststructuralist theory.<sup>8</sup>

A simple but heuristic example – the musical 'cuckoo motif' – will serve briefly to illustrate the above. The motif in question is typically realized as an iambic descending interval, usually of a minor third, though it often appears in modified guise – famously, for example, as a descending fourth in the first movement of Mahler's First Symphony. If this is a 'sign', then what is the signifier, the signified, and the referent? The most obvious answer is that the descending motif as heard is the signifier, the sense of 'cuckoo' (or 'Kuckuck' or 'coucou') is the signified, and the referent is the actually existing bird, though a 'strong formalist' would, of course, contend that it simply *is* a descending interval, signifying, in and of itself, nothing but itself. The specific nature of this particular musical sign – iconic in Peircean terms – binds together signifier and signified in a materially connected, rather than purely arbitrary, manner (there is a clear onomatopoeic resonance in the various spoken language signifiers themselves – 'cuckoo', 'Kuckuck', 'coucou').

At the same time, again following Peirce, the 'cuckoo motif' *qua* sign can itself function as a signifier (or *interpretant*) within a further sign, the referent of which might be 'nature' or 'pastoral' – *might be*, because the interpretant is reliant on a further act of interpretation. In the context of Mahler's First Symphony, for example, this latter sign may itself function as the interpretant of yet a further sign, the referent of which might be 'an idealized Arcadian idyll cut off from the advance of industrial modernity', which itself may then suggest 'nostalgia'. The web of musical, biographical, and historical understanding required to arrive at this interpretation is manifest, and sufficiently complex to ensure that divergent interpretations are likely. The 'chain of signification' described above maps the move from denotation to connotation, as theorized, for example, by Barthes, in which the denotative sign becomes a connotative signifier. It also underpins the general disciplinary shift from the (Saussure-informed) objectivist structuralism of the 1970s to the (Peirce-informed) hermeneutic poststructuralism of the early 1990s, the same distinction between 'structural-analytical' and 'semantic-interpretative' to which I alluded above and to which I return below.

If such complexity obtains in relation to a relatively straightforward instance of iconic or denotative signification, then it is hardly surprising that the semiotic analysis or interpretation of music *per se* is rendered yet more complex due to the fact that in most music signification does not function with anything like this degree of immediacy. For example, even Mahler's 'cuckoo call' in the First Symphony operates on, and intersects, a number of

8 For a detailed exposition of Peirce's model, especially within the context of musical application, see Cumming, *The Sonic Self*, esp. Chapter 3, and Monelle, *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music*, esp. Chapter 7.

different planes. The descending fourth is a recurrent motif throughout the work, appearing for example in the woodwind in bars 3 and 5 at the very opening of the symphony, and from bar 7 as part of a predominantly descending pattern of interlocking fourths. Such observation would suffice in terms of the formalist assumption that music comprises signifiers without extramusical signifieds, or, rather, that intramusical relationships should serve as the primary focus for analytical endeavour and/or aesthetic appreciation. According to this view, the relevant motif has no significance in and of itself; it acquires significance (literally) only by virtue of its place within a dynamically conceived structure. In other words, the motif does not signify anything other than a potential that is to be subsequently realized through the dialectically unfolding dynamic that obtains between part and whole. This is particularly true of the movement in question, since the descending fourth interval, although not initially deployed as the ‘cuckoo call’ motif, is retrospectively situated as the opening interval of the first theme. The latter fact further exemplifies the intersection of formal and discursive signification, since the theme in question is of course a recycling of the main melodic material from ‘Ging heut Morgen übers Feld’, the second song of Mahler’s cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*; and this reference can itself therefore connote or afford the meanings associated with the latter. In short, this simple two-note motif alone can be seen to operate on intra-, inter-, and extra-musical planes of signification, which together interactively trace a rich and complex web of potential meaning.<sup>9</sup>

## II

The example described above serves to capture concretely a wider disciplinary development that is itself defined by a shift in emphasis or focus from the distributional analysis of ‘the text’ to an interpretation of ‘text in context’, the latter conceived as an embedded process of communication and signification; disagreement about the nature of the (musical) text has underpinned many of the musicological developments witnessed in at least the last two decades. If, in the case of structural or relational-distributional analysis, interpretative intervention cannot be divorced from the analytical representation of the object in question – why is that motif salient, why is that repetition relevant, why is that transformation pertinent? – then, conversely, referential or semantic analysis is inevitably enmeshed in similarly thorny questions: for whom is one speaking; on what basis is one attributing *that* meaning to *that* sign? The contested nature of musical meaning, therefore, accounts simultaneously for both the promotion of, and the challenge to, the utilization of semiotic method in the analysis and interpretation of music. On one level, music appears to present closed structures of signification that are essentially self-referential; on another level, music appears to refer beyond itself, though it does so, in the main, without the representational content associated with other media and without the semantic content associated with conceptual (spoken or

<sup>9</sup> Eero Tarasti discusses the opening motive of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in E flat major ‘Les Adieux’ in a similar manner. See Tarasti, *Signs of Music*, 7–12.

written) language. This is essentially a semiotic rehearsal of a (very) long-standing debate; and it repays more detailed consideration.

Structuralist semiotics, in line with formalist tendencies in general, tends to view music as comprising signifiers without (extramusical) signifieds, as for example did Claude Lévi-Strauss, one of the few semioticians to consider music in any significant or extended sense.<sup>10</sup> This has an obvious counterpart, if only analogically, in Hanslick's original claim that the form and content of music are one and the same thing. As Monelle notes, 'The semiologist, like Hanslick, is more interested in the *system* of signification than the material signified; he sees systems as empty webs of relations.'<sup>11</sup> According to this view, if an indexical medium such as photography transmits what are primarily messages without a code, then music is a code without a message, and so the identification of relational structure necessarily assumes the greater importance. In a very short discussion published in the early 1970s, David Osmond-Smith posed questions that even some four decades later remain relevant to the semiotic interpretation of music. Claiming that 'the communicative elements are basically intended to convey their own formal qualities, and only exceptionally possess what may be roughly indicated as a signified', he argued that 'the basic level of analysis when dealing with musical communication is a morphological one'.<sup>12</sup> In asking whether music could be seen to manifest, in the manner of natural language, a differentiation between signifiers that could be mapped onto the corresponding differentiation of signifieds (and thus questioning whether music could be said *normally* to constitute the requisite 'doubly-articulated' code that would render it susceptible to semiotic analysis 'proper'), Osmond-Smith suggested that 'a study of music as communication would seem, necessarily, to base itself upon a morphological analysis of musical structures in relation to the formal potential of the parameters of sound-time [...] and to the structural counterpoint that operates between the parameters'.<sup>13</sup>

This basic assumption is clear in the technique that became most closely identified with a nominally 'semiotic' approach to music analysis: the distributional or paradigmatic method consolidated by Jean-Jacques Nattiez in the early 1970s.<sup>14</sup> Two points of clarification are needed here. Firstly, I refer to Nattiez's work as a consolidation because it is historically more accurate to credit Nicolas Ruwet with establishing the basic framework for 'paradigmatic analysis' in his work on the relationship between music and language.<sup>15</sup> As Tarasti notes, 'Nattiez adopted distributional analysis from Ruwet and established it for a long

10 Lévi-Strauss's treatment suggests a tenuous grasp of certain aspects of twentieth-century Western art music, and was much criticized by, among others, Nicolas Ruwet in 'Contradictions of the Serial Language'.

11 Monelle, *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music*, 10. One must assume that Monelle's observation is likewise intended analogically: it would be inaccurate and anachronistic to describe Hanslick as a 'semiologist'; the comparison obtains insofar as it suggests a concern with relational structure.

12 See Osmond-Smith, 'Music as Communication', 109.

13 Osmond-Smith, 'Music as Communication', 111.

14 See, for example, the section dedicated to 'Semiotic Analysis' in Nicholas Cook's standard textbook *A Guide to Musical Analysis*.

15 See Ruwet, *Langage, musique, poésie*.

time as *the* music-semiotical analytical method.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, I refer to this approach as *nominally* semiotic, because it is not obviously concerned with signification in any traditional or normally recognized sense, even though it strongly influenced various lines of work, especially those that maintained an underlying connection with theories of generative grammar.

What it takes from the Saussurean model is not a theory of sign function as such but rather a two-phase method: firstly, the identification of ‘pertinent’ (or paradigmatic) units; and, secondly, the analysis of the distributional (or syntagmatic) relationship that obtains between them. One might therefore argue that the mode of specifically musical analysis originally associated with semiotics in analytical circles is not actually ‘semiotic’ at all (David Lidov effectively suggested as much as long ago as 1977<sup>17</sup>) since Nattiez’s original method is not concerned with how a musical unit or a group of musical units functions as a ‘sign’ (as something that ‘stands in for’, represents, or refers to something else), but rather with identifying ‘signifiers’ *in abstracto*, and then elucidating the relationship that can be seen to exist between them, within an otherwise hermetically conceived structural whole. In fact, one of the central aims, or hopes, for this method was that it would subsequently facilitate comparative analysis at the level of genre, style, and even culture, just as cognate approaches in linguistics sought to identify deep, or even universal, structures in the grammars of natural language. Likewise, just as Saussure and his followers sought to promote semiology as a ‘scientific’ approach to the understanding of language (albeit as one system of signs among many), so Nattiez originally presented his approach as similarly ‘scientific’. However, the process of initial segmentation, which remains the necessary foundation for distributional analysis of this type, is as unavoidably enmeshed in issues of interpretative salience as is the case in pitch-class set analysis, just as both analogically share with formal linguistics an implicit dependence on the very semantic and contextual contingencies they seek to exclude.

Hence, over and above the differences that might exist in the detail of their application, one can argue that the various methods of early distributional analysis represent only the procedural husk of a framework that was always intended to do more: in short, they confuse a methodologically preparatory means with a deferred semiotic end. Attending to the ‘neutral level’ in this way undoubtedly produces an extensive descriptive account: it shares with pitch-class set analysis the capacity to generate exhaustive, if not exhausting, quantities of data. However, it fails to achieve the objectivity, in its own terms, that it unnecessarily purports to uphold. The challenge of applied method is rendered more apparent in Nattiez’s later, seminal text, *Music and Discourse: toward a Semiology of Music*, a book which, in its own way, and however inappropriately, came to define music semiotics for a certain generation of students and scholars. In contrast to his earlier extended analyses of Varèse’s *Density 21.5* and Debussy’s *Syrinx*, this later work is densely theoretical, even philosophical, and testifies more obviously to Nattiez’s background in ethnomusicology. It broaches issues

<sup>16</sup> Tarasti, *Signs of Music*, 58 (emphasis original).

<sup>17</sup> See Lidov, ‘Nattiez’s Semiotics of Music’.

ranging from ontology to the semiotics of analytical discourse itself, from the historical status of 'noise' to cross-cultural relativism, and presents, at least in theory, a far more encompassing model of semiotic inquiry. At its centre stands the 'total musical fact', which comprises the 'poietic' strategies that went into the music's making, the 'resultant trace' (often identified with the 'work itself'), and the 'esthetic strategies unleashed by that trace' (which may include performance and critical reception).<sup>18</sup> However, in so doing, it does not include any original engagement with actual music, perhaps in part because the analytical method on which it implicitly depends tends to limit its application to those forms of monophonic music that afford the kind of musical elements most propitious to the methodology. If the concrete method struggles to justify its semiotic framing, then the more rhetorically semiotic framework struggles to proffer a working application. In that respect one might suggest that the contemporaneous development of 'topic theory', for example, ultimately achieved greater success in wedding theoretical underpinning to the pragmatics of analytical application. In fact, one can plausibly argue that contemporary approaches to topic, metaphor, and gesture (the 'post-semiotic' sensibility to which I later return) have come closer to realizing Nattiez's original aim, albeit by challenging or reconfiguring the empirical-structural presuppositions on which his original method was based.

In contrast to the formal-structural conception of 'semiotic' method described above, a very different, if equally idiosyncratic, conception of semiotics was presented by Philip Tagg in 1979, just four years after the publication of Nattiez's *Fondements*, an approach deserving of some mention given its influence in promoting a particular version of semiotic study within ethnomusicological and popular music studies. At the time of Tagg's original study, *Kojak, 50 Seconds of Television Music*, popular music was simply not a viable object of institutionalized musicological study, and music-semiotic literature remained largely dominated by a focus on the Western classical repertory. The assumptions that informed work in ethnomusicology or popular music studies often differed markedly from those that underwrote the study of Western 'art' music, which itself remained the primary focus for the institutional (sub)disciplines of musicology and analysis. The formalist overtones of analytical methodology did not sit easily within the methodological or ideological frameworks typically adopted for the academic study of non-classical repertories, especially since music analysis was often perceived as the distillate of an 'art music' sensibility. To that extent, at least within the Anglo-American context, the fact that semiotic theory was appropriated only piecemeal was also a reflection of more general biases to do with repertory and methodology.

In that respect, Tagg's original work represented an iconoclastic contribution to the field, which, even now, defines the 'sense' of semiotic method for a particular generation of popular music scholars, with the exception of those few who have made semiotics the object of their research in this area. It should be noted that Tagg's study was actually subtitled 'Toward the Analysis of Affect in Popular Music' and made only minimal reference to 'semiotics' as such. It is instructive to note that Nattiez's professed 'semiological method'

<sup>18</sup> Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*, 11, 70.

arguably had less in common with semiotics as normally conceived than did a method that eschewed the designation in favour of a reference to 'affect'.

What distinguished Tagg's method most obviously from that of Nattiez was his attempt to interpret signification on inter- and extra-musical planes of meaning. That said, it nevertheless shared as a methodological starting point the need to 'parse' music into basic units of musical salience. Borrowing from Charles Seeger, Tagg referred to these as 'musemes', indicating 'the minimal meaningful unit[s] of musical expression in a given genre and context'.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, his analysis of the *Kojak* television music would begin with the identification of 'the theme tune's musemes *structurally*'.<sup>20</sup> However, Tagg's primary focus was not formal paradigmatic substitution or relation, but external paradigmatic resonance. In place of formal distributional charts Tagg's central chapter on 'Musematic Analysis' uses what he terms 'inter-objective comparison': an attempt hermeneutically to identify the musical 'affect' of individual musemes by situating them in relation to similar paradigmatic instances as they appear in a wide range of musical works. Hence the analysis *in toto* encompassed significantly more than the initial parsing, and so, in its own way, Tagg's analysis already presented a more holistically conceived realization of a model that was prospectively described, but remained practically deferred, in Nattiez's own work of the same period. In that sense Tagg's original work is closer to the contemporaneous analyses of Leonard Ratner, who, in his book *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*, provided one of the foundations of the topic-theoretical and related approaches discussed in the final section of this article.

### III

As is suggested by the summary account provided above, species of nominally semiotic approaches to music depend in significant measure on the different implications of their founding theoretical frameworks: the one, 'structural-analytical', originating from the Saussurean semiological tradition and focusing on the structural relationship obtaining between signifiers, based on paradigmatic definition and syntagmatic placement; the other, 'semantic-interpretative', deriving more from the Peircean semiotic tradition and focusing on the referentially 'semantic' nature of the musical(ly) signified and affective experience. Naomi Cumming likewise drew a distinction between 'structural' semiotics and 'semantic or referential' semiotics;<sup>21</sup> and Peter Dunbar-Hall, writing in the early 1990s, identified two key strands within anglophone music semiotics, namely 'analytical semiotics' and 'interpretative semiotics'.<sup>22</sup> The former employs a structuralist-derived segmentation and tabulation of material, focused on the immanent features of the musical text, or what Nattiez, following

19 Tagg, *Kojak*, 147.

20 Tagg, *Kojak*, 147 (emphasis added). The republication of *Kojak*, and the centrality afforded the concept of 'musemes', was not without influence. See, for example, Jan, *The Memetics of Music*.

21 Cumming, 'Semiotics', 67.

22 Dunbar-Hall, 'Semiotics as a Method', 128–9.

Jean Molino, termed the ‘neutral level’; the latter seeks to link musical ‘events’ to extra-musical concepts by considering how music signifies ‘beyond itself’ or, conversely, how it depends upon that same ‘beyond’ in order to signify in the first place.<sup>23</sup>

The distinction between ‘analytical’ and ‘interpretative’, or between ‘structural’ and ‘semantic’, may help in part to explain why semiotics failed to exert a singular impact on Anglo-American musicology; or, more precisely, why it failed to establish itself as a discrete and identifiably bounded (sub)discipline in its own terms, as compared with the continental European traditions of, say, France, Italy, or Finland.<sup>24</sup> An antipathy towards the utilization of avowedly semiotic method within anglophone musicology is commensurate with a general tendency, in the British tradition especially, perhaps, to eschew deductive theoretical systemization in favour of a more inductive analytical-critical engagement with individual works. At least as important has been the chronology and timing of disciplinary transformation. The majority of Anglo-American musicological scholarship prior to the late 1980s remained inwardly focused, with few influences from the new directions in critical theory that were then affecting the humanities. Insofar as semiotics explicitly figured, it was generally perceived as one strand in a field of formalist analytical inquiry otherwise dominated by a positivistically denuded version of Schenkerian analysis and the empiricist orientation of Fortean pitch-class set theory.<sup>25</sup>

Hence by the time Anglo-American scholarship began more obviously to look beyond its own disciplinary boundaries, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, semiotics already appeared, at least to those familiar with its modes of deployment in the previous decade, as an ‘out-moded’ branch of formal-analytic inquiry: in short, its moment might appear to have passed before it had arrived. Writing of feminism, a still more urgent preoccupation in the humanities at this time, Susan McClary once observed that ‘it almost seems that musicology managed miraculously to pass directly from pre- to postfeminism without ever having

23 As noted, there are exceptions to this basic binary depiction: Tagg’s work sought to bridge gaps in respect of both methodology and repertory. The very early work on homology and subculture in popular music studies presumed an essentialist ‘deep structure’ that was seen to manifest itself through correlative signifying practices. Likewise, Osmond-Smith, while doubting that music could be viewed as a sign-system in the manner of a natural language, did suggest that music’s formal structures could ‘take on the function of a sign’ (‘Music as Communication’, 111); and this latter potential was worked through concretely in his later analysis of Berio’s *Sinfonia* (‘From Myth to Music’), in which he sought to utilize elements of paradigmatic distributional analysis in order to correlate musical structures with the structures of myth elaborated by Lévi-Strauss.

24 A review of relevant literature provides significant, if circumstantial, evidence for this claim: the bibliography of the *New Grove* entry on ‘Semiotics’ includes very few Anglo-American scholars; of the thirty-two items included in Tarasti’s edited collection *Musical Semiotics in Growth* (1996) only three were provided by Anglo-American scholars; there is no standard British or North American ‘textbook’; the British publication *Musicology: the Key Concepts* devotes little more than a page to ‘Semiotics’; and the only systematic attempt by a British scholar comprehensively to summarize the state of specifically music semiotics is found in the work of Raymond Monelle, in particular his 1992 book *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music*.

25 On one level, this would account for a subterranean affinity between the general empiricist tenor of Anglo-American philosophical discourse and the conception of semiotic analysis for which it revealed at least some implicit sympathy during the earlier ‘Nattiez phase’. On another level, it also speaks to a more subtle distinction between British and North American sensibility: the former tending towards ‘analysis’, the latter towards ‘theory’.

to change – or even examine – its ways'.<sup>26</sup> Although the critical point, and the pointed criticism, has a much less ambiguous polemical target in McClary's case, there is at least an analogical similarity in observing in the field of music semiotics a move directly from 'pre' to 'post' without the logically intervening stage. Monelle notes that a 'rigorous scientific approach, which turned its back on any idea of musical semantics or discernible musical meaning, dominated music semiotics in the seventies';<sup>27</sup> and it was precisely a challenge to the quasi-scientific presuppositions of a certain kind of systematized formalism that provided the centre of gravity for the many disparate approaches that marked out the paradigm shift in the discipline known variously, if contentiously, as 'new', 'critical', or 'postmodern' musicology. This is exemplified by the fact that Kofi Agawu, an exponent of semiotic analysis in a more formalist sense, *pace* his criticism of Nattiez, was one of the first to articulate unease with the direction taken by the North American 'new musicology'.<sup>28</sup>

It is interesting to note some of the key philosophical figures whose thought influenced 'new musicological' developments in the late 1980s and early 1990s: among others, they include Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, and Gilles Deleuze. This is ironic insofar as the early work of Derrida, Barthes, or Kristeva, for example, was often trenchantly semiotic in approach; typically this aspect was discarded in the process of its belated (inter)disciplinary adoption and musicological appropriation. Robert Hatten captures something of this trajectory in observing that 'if Nattiez introduced the first stage of formalist music semiotics, and Tarasti, Hatten and Lidov contributed toward a second stage that reconciled the structuralist with the hermeneutic in interpreting musical meaning, then Monelle's essays [in *The Sense of Music*] could be said to mark the third stage, or staging, in which semiotic theory confronts postmodernism and emerges as visible, even after relinquishing the hitherto unacknowledged hegemony of its structuralist core'.<sup>29</sup> One might propose, and indeed advocate, a further stage, in which the hegemony of postmodern or poststructuralist thought is itself tempered by an acknowledgement of the problems it reciprocally generates.

In a sense, as a 'sign of the times', the tension between structuralist and poststructuralist conceptions of the 'text', a defining element in the transformation of musicological practice in general, is illustratively played out in the development of music semiotics. It is telling that in 1990, almost two decades after its original presentation, Craig Ayrey could cite Molino's tripartite model – describing the need to attend to immanent, poietic, and aesthetic factors – as still significant, as 'basic to the semiology, or semiotics, of music';<sup>30</sup> it is yet more telling, a further two decades on, that the attendant questions still present some of the most pertinent issues for the analysis and interpretation of music. For Monelle, the musical text is 'profoundly abstract', in the sense that it is 'not the score, not a performance, not an intention';

26 McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 5.

27 Monelle, *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music*, 29.

28 See Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 'Analysing Music under the New Musicological Regime', 'The Challenge of Semiotics', and *Music as Discourse: Semiotic Adventures*.

29 Hatten, foreword to Monelle, *The Sense of Music*, xi.

30 Ayrey, 'Introduction', 105.

its space or existence is defined by the ‘universe of texts’ or, in other words, by ‘intertextuality’. As opposed to earlier semantically or hermeneutically conceived strategies (Hatten’s ‘second stage’) this is an authentically poststructuralist move: Hatten’s ‘third stage’. However, as already suggested, this move risks a circularity that is analogically reminiscent of the reductionist paradox implicit in Fichte’s self-positing idealism. The notion of a text that is a virtual trace of multiple subject-centred perception(s), a virtual moment in the nexus of discursive propagation and interaction, reduces the text – that is to say, the putative musical object – to a kind of *noumenal* essence in the original Kantian sense, one that can only be figured in opposition to that which it is not, at which point, in a methodological version of the zero-sum game, the original aim of semiotics undercuts itself and is cancelled all the way through, by virtue of its deconstructing the very object of its inquiry. Monelle, for example, notes that Nattiez ‘locates the neutral level in a procedural and theoretical universe rather than in a material one’;<sup>31</sup> and Agawu captures the paradox in noting that ‘the anti-formalist strategy that delights in specifying the meanings of compositions has achieved little more than the introduction of a new formalism. The music itself apparently remains a treasured concept even when it is being vigorously attacked.’<sup>32</sup>

In part this is because such abstraction is ‘hard-wired’ into the universe of semiotic approaches, structural or poststructural, by virtue of the originating premise on which they are constructed. Certainly, Saussure acknowledged the diachronic axis (the transformation over time of the relationship between signifier and signified) and Peirce recognized, and posited, the active role of the interpreter (or, in the case of musical application, the listener). Nevertheless, theoretical confusion continues to cloud the relevance of these observations in respect of music, and the conclusions that are consequently derived. This is apparent in Ayrey’s commentary on Molino’s tripartite model, which replaces the ‘sender > message > receiver’ model with the ‘sender > trace < receiver’ model, the model then adopted, if not obviously realized, by Nattiez. Ayrey refers to the ‘infinite class of possible agents of interpretation of the message’ and suggests, ‘Thus, Saussure’s proposition that this relation [between signifier and signified] is always arbitrary is extended to mean that, in music as in the other arts, signifieds are innumerable.’<sup>33</sup> Hence, ‘Molino’s proposal transcends the blending of the either/or thinking recommended by those persuaded by Kerman: the symbolic system is a complex of undecidables, the absolute provisionality of which is infinite and never static.’<sup>34</sup> However, this conflates the arbitrary relationship between the Saussurean *signifier* and *signified* with the supposedly arbitrary interpretative potential obtaining between the Peircean *sign* and *referent*. Saussure’s contention was not that a sign could potentially refer to anything, but rather that there was no *necessary* connection between the signifier and signified that conjunctively comprised it, an observation as subtle as it is critical. In other words, while there is no necessary relationship or connection between the

31 Monelle, *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music*, 92.

32 Agawu, *Music as Discourse*, 5.

33 Ayrey, ‘Introduction’, 106.

34 Ayrey, ‘Introduction’, 107.

signifier ‘table’ (spoken or written) and the signified concept that it represents, this does not mean that the subsequent linguistic sign is subject to arbitrary interpretation in respect of its purchase on relevant objects (or referents) in the material ‘third-person’ world: if, when invited to ‘sit at the table’, I proceed to sit on the bed, I have not interpreted but *misinterpreted* the sign(s). Poststructuralist semiotics risks inflating rhetorical potential at the expense of its deflationary anchoring in the pragmatics of communicative praxis. It is to be expected that once one assumes the absence of signifieds, musical signifiers will be seen to ‘float free’ of contingent yet tethered signifieds in a manner that invites or even compels potentially arbitrary association; and this is why analysis is consequently driven towards a formalist elucidation of ‘abstract’ structural relation (obtaining between signifiers), *or* an empirical recording of situated perception (the inference of referents), *or* the attribution of meaning in the manner criticized by Agawu. As soon as one seeks to move beyond the intra- or inter-musical, as soon as one seeks to map the musical sign onto the ‘extra-musical’ referent, then one is already moving towards reception history, towards notions of interpretative competence and ‘the subject’.

#### IV

The above discussion suggests why contemporary work on topic, trope, and gesture provides one of the more promising synthetic or ‘post-semiotic’ directions, not least in its providing a viable model for musicological inquiry in general by virtue of navigating the twin abstractions of the structural text *an sich* and the poststructural emphasis on the discursive construction of meaning.<sup>35</sup> Beyond the ‘poietic’ (then, as now, by far the least developed aspect of Nattiez’s tripartite model) the fact of the musical material (and, in a materialist sense, the musical text) as something mediated by social and historical circumstance risks being ignored by approaches that focus either on an abstract neutral level or on the arbitrary contingency of reception and situated interpretation. Robert Hatten addresses the same in suggesting that while musical gestures ‘cannot be fully described without reference to the more “syntactic” levels of *musical structure* and process’, at the same time, ‘[b]eyond such practiced interpretive immediacy, a *competent listener* will grasp the thematic and rhetorical functions of certain gestures within a given musical style’.<sup>36</sup> In other words, attending to the structural characteristics of the object need not exclude the role of the perceiving (listening) subject; yet acknowledging the role of the subject in the construction of ‘meaning’ need not suggest the implicit relativism of an ‘open’ or ‘readerly text’. As Hatten again argues, in countering what he sees as the often illuminating, yet one-sided, tenor of postmodern contextualism: ‘an adequate explanation of style growth and change must include an account of internal generative processes, even if the initial impetus for change is an external motivation’, not least because ‘some of the ideologically based interpretations fostered by the New

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Gritten and King (eds), *Music and Gesture*.

<sup>36</sup> Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*, 2 (emphases added).

Musicology may offer suggestive webs of association insufficiently grounded in a style or its analytical evidence'.<sup>37</sup>

That said, and in proposing that such work proffers a promising integrative and synthetic model in terms of *method*, one must inevitably append a caveat. I have noted on several occasions that the appropriation and development of semiotic-analytical approaches within an Anglo-American context was informed by long-standing divisions around both repertory ('Western art music', 'Western popular music', 'non-Western music') and associated disciplinary positions ('musicology-analysis', 'popular music studies', 'ethnomusicology'). Arguably, at some level, it still is. The work of Hatten, Agawu, Lidov, and Spitzer, for example, remains focused not only on Western art music, but almost exclusively on the Classical-Romantic music of the 'long' nineteenth century (Haydn to Mahler).<sup>38</sup> This is not a criticism of their work; but it does suggest that the interpretative gain, as afforded by the interdisciplinary 'post-semiotic' method they develop, might productively be repaid by means of a reciprocal application to a broader range of repertoires. In his discussion of gesture Hatten notes the 'limits of notation';<sup>39</sup> and it would remain ironic if a method intended to escape, or move beyond, implicit analytical-structuralist assumptions, as predicated on the ideal abstraction of the notated score, were effectively to circle back and confine its application precisely to that music traditionally and most obviously associated with the same. It may be a tendentious associative leap, but Tagg's early work, as discussed above, arguably recognized, and in part anticipated, precisely this potential, albeit one that was subsequently occluded by the disciplinary contingencies (such as the reluctance to engage with popular music) to which I have also alluded.

In drawing together the disparate yet interrelated strands considered above, one might propose both a basic historical-disciplinary narrative and also a sense of prospective potential. While in theory it never became as established as it did in continental European traditions, semiotics has in practice underwritten a number of strands within Anglo-American scholarship. In their different ways Nattiez and Tagg influenced an emergent phase in the fragmentary Anglo-American appropriation of nominally semiotic method, which was, at least in the former case, explicitly underpinned by structuralist assumptions; and, in so doing, they promoted a closer interaction between 'theory' and 'musicology', partly informed by the background of the method in ethnomusicology. Since the early 1990s a 'post-semiotic sensibility' has developed, branching out in a number of different directions and influenced variously by topic theory, gesture, neo-Darwinian cognitivism, ecology, and affect. This sensibility has served to bring together different interests within Anglo-American musicology,

37 Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*, 6, 7.

38 This is also largely true, for example, of the contributions to *Music and Gesture*, with Hatten writing on Beethoven and Schubert, Monelle on Mahler, and Lidov on various nineteenth-century composers. Meanwhile, Arnie Cox's essay makes reference to Beethoven and Schubert, and Gritten's to Brahms and Stravinsky. Jane Davidson is the only author to encroach on popular music, but she is concerned with the gestures of body movement in the stage performance of Robbie Williams, rather than with the music.

39 Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*, 123.

initiating, in the wake of those shifts that saw a transition from earlier structuralist paradigms through poststructuralist to deconstructive models, a more integrated and synthetic approach that addresses the central concerns of music-analytical inquiry in the broadest sense. Such an approach will have all the more potential for realization as it finds application beyond the repertoires that presently serve as its primary focus.

In other words, and in summary, it is not so much that Anglo-American musicology does not 'do' semiotics, but more that Anglo-American musicology has rarely chosen to 'start out' from semiotics: rarely, in other words, has semiotics provided anglophone scholarship with the fundamental or systematic framework within which it operates or the working vocabulary by means of which it consistently expresses itself. However, despite this fact – which has historically rendered semiotics, as an explicit and bounded disciplinary field, superficially marginal to Anglo-American music scholarship – it is the underlying and motivating impulses of semiotic inquiry that are now, in a transformed and synthetic context, proving to be of central importance to the very same.

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