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### Revisiting Musical Semiotics: Returning to Greek Stoic Definitions\*

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**Abstract.** Musical semiotics has been on the frontlines of interdisciplinary movement in musicology and music theory. Enough is to mention the names of Eero Tarasti, Robert Hatten, Gino Stephani, Michael Spitzer and Boris Asafiev. It is difficult to add much to this rich tradition. However, revisiting the ancient roots of this discipline in the teaching of Zeno of Chitteum and his students, Cleanthes and Chrysippos (found in *Veterum stoicorum fragmenta*), may shed light on some aspects of semiotics that were once abandoned and now can be restored. From this corpus of texts, we learn about the seme (the sign and grain), semainon (the signifier), semainomenon (the signified) and semeiotike (the study of signs). It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this discovery for philosophy, religion, arts and sciences. Zeno discussed being in terms of semiotics. In his view, it is not the object that is being signified; rather the sign, as an active cause, generates and constitutes the object. Thus, the dilemma of classical ontology looms in the background of the problem of the musical sign.

**Keywords:** musical semiotics, Greek Stoics, genre, chaconne, sign

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## Introduction

Musical semiotics has been on the frontlines of interdisciplinary movement in musicology and music theory. Enough is to mention the names of Eero Tarasti, [1; 2] Robert Hatten, [3] Gino Stephani, [4; 5] Michae Spitzer [6] and Boris Asafiev. [7] It is difficult to add much to this rich tradition. However, revisiting the ancient roots of this discipline in the teaching of Zeno of Chitteum and his students, Cleanthes and Chrysippos (found in *Veterum stoicorum fragmenta*, [8])<sup>1</sup> may shed light on some aspects of semiotics that were once abandoned and now can be restored. From this corpus of texts, we learn about the *seme* (the sign and grain), *semainon* (the signifier), *semainomenon* (the signified) and *semeiotike* (the study of signs). It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this discovery for philosophy, religion, the arts and sciences. Zeno discussed being in terms of semiotics. In his view, it is not the object that is being signified; rather the sign, as an active

cause, generates and constitutes the object. Thus, the dilemma of classical ontology looms in the background of the problem of the musical sign. The global turn in semiotics — that which caused the discrepancy between its original idea and our modern interpretations — was made, inadvertently, in the teaching of Charles Sanders Peirce. [9] His views were rooted in classical nineteenth-century positivism and as such did not connect with the original postulate formed in the 3rd century B.C.E. In particular, Peirce has built his model of semiotics on several examples, the signification of a *molehill* being one of them. As sources suggest:

“Consequently, primary to the molehill’s ability to signify the mole is the brute physical connection between it and a mole. This is the sign-vehicle of the sign. For Peirce, then, it is only some element of a sign that enables it to signify its object, and when speaking of the signifying element of the sign, or rather, the sign-vehicle, it is this qualified sign that he means.

<sup>1</sup> The fragments from the Stoics mentioned in this article and quoted from Hans von Arnim are the following:

...sive, ut Zenon Citieus, animalium semen ignis is, qui amima, ac mens [...whether the seed of animals is fire, which is soul and mind]. [8, Vol. 1, p. 35]

...τὸ δὲ σπέρμα φησὶν ὁ Ζήνων εἶναι, ὃ μεθήσιν ἄνθρωπος, πνεῦμα μεθ’ ὕγρου, ψυχῆς μέρος καὶ ἀπόσπασμα καὶ τοῦ σπέρματος τοῦ τῶν προγόνων κέρασμα καὶ μίγμα τῶν τῆς ψυχῆς μερῶν συνεληλυθός· ἔχον γὰρ τοὺς λόγους τῷ ὄλῳ τοὺς αὐτοὺς τοῦτο, ὅταν ἀφεθῆ ἕξ τῆν μήτραν, συλληφθὲν ὑπ’ ἄλλου πνεύματος, μέρους ψυχῆς τῆς τοῦ θήλεος, καὶ συμφυὲς γενόμενον χρυφθέν τε φύει, κινούμενον καὶ ἀναρριπιζόμενον ὑπ’ ἐκείνου, προσλαμβάνον ἀεὶ [εἰς] τὸ ὕγρον καὶ αὐξόμενον ἐξ αὐτοῦ [But the sperm, Zeno said, is what a man intoxicates, a spirit with liquid, a part and fragment of the soul, and of the sperm of the ancestors, a treat and a mixture of the parts of the soul. The womb, conceived by another spirit, a part of the soul of the female, and being born simultaneously, hidden and born, moving and crawling under it, taking in the fluid and growing from it]. [Ibid., p. 36]

...ἔστι δὲ αὐτὸ τὸ πάθος κατὰ Ζήνωνα ἢ ἄλογος καὶ παρὰ φύσιν ψυχῆς κίνησις, ἢ ὀρμὴ πλεονάζουσα [But this passion according to Zeno; is the illogical, by the nature of the soul movements, or a superior impulse]. [Ibid., p. 50]

...εἰ μὴ τὸ παρὰ Κλεάνθει λέγειν τάχα θελήσουσιν, ὅς φησιν ἀμείνονά τε εἶναι τὰ ποιητικὰ καὶ μουσικὰ παραδείγματα καί, τοῦ λόγου τοῦ τῆς φιλοσοφίας ἰκανῶς μὲν ἐξαγγέλ’ λειν δυναμένου τὰ θεῖα καὶ ἀνθρώπινα, μὴ ἔχοντος δὲ ψειλοῦ τῶν θείων μεγεθῶν λέξεις οικείας, τὰ μέτρα καὶ τὰ μέλη καὶ τοὺς ῥυθμοὺς ὡς μάλιστα προσικνεῖσθαι πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν τῆς τῶν θείων θεωρίας [...If they do not wish to say what Cleanthes says, let them say that it is one of the poetic and musical examples, and that, in the discourse of philosophy, I can ably declare the divine and human things, and not having the words of the divine magnitudes, the familiar words, the measures and the members and the rhythms, as indeed one approaches the truth of the divine theory...]. [Ibid., p. 109]

...μηδὲν εἶναι δυνατόν ὃ οὐτ’ ἔστιν ἀληθές οὐτ’ ἔσται [...what is possible, which is neither true nor is propositional logic]. [Ibid.]

For Peirce, the relationship between the object of a sign and the sign that represents it is one of determination: the object determines the sign.

Peirce believes the sign/interpretant relation to be one of determination: the sign determines an interpretant.” [10]

So, the Peircean idea of semiotics has become basic for many others in the 20th century, including the Parisian school, Greimas, and his follower Eero Tarasti. The latter has tried to escape from such a trivial materialist and logocentric model in his *Existential Semiotics*. [11]

Indeed, despite the claim that Peirce developed “the philosophy of semiotics” — and that fits rather well into the Anglo-American idea of what philosophy is, for sure — Peirce provided a very crude concept. It relied heavily on the existence of the objective world — the worlds of physical objects, tangible and available for the natural sciences. Such a trivialization of the idea of science and, even more so, of the world in which we live, has been completely revised in continental philosophy of the 20th century. In particular, the Copernican Turn in philosophy, introduced by Edmund Husserl and his successors, rendered the Peircean view obsolete.

In particular, one has to consider the fact that the sign is the idea that is born within the human psyche, functions within it, and connects it to other psyches and other things. The psyche — the subject — cannot be eliminated from the equation.

Secondly, semiotics is inscribed into a certain model of ontology. It has to be discussed — and not shoved aside, as it is commonly happening in Anglo-American humanities; it is said that these issues are sacrificed for objective truth and true logic.

Thirdly, semiotics connects the outer worlds — let us call it for the convenience of the argument, nature, or φύσις — with the human condition, and none of these two components can claim superiority.

All this becomes even more topical when semiotics is applied to the arts, to music in particular. Peirce demonstrated his theory on examples of road signs and other objects from trivial everyday reality. The ambitions of contemporary musical semiotics stretch as far as the understanding of musical meaning.

In this respect, ancient semiotics may be defined as that which had been developing in ancient Greece and has reached the peak of evolution during the Stoic period, the third century B.C.E.

### Semiotics in Ancient Teachings

Semeiotike — the Greek knowledge of the medium of thought — is an achievement that is difficult to overestimate. More precisely, in the centuries after the Classical period — that of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Pericles — a new trend was introduced into philosophy. This time, it did not focus on conquering nature; in contrast with that, it concentrated on the thought itself. Thanks to Plato, thought has become an object of study. Zeno of Chituum, Cleanthes and Chrysippos went in that direction and discovered the new area — that of the sign as such. They diverged from the path proposed by Aristotle (that which has come to comprise the natural sciences in the next two millennia). The Stoics opened the discussion of signs as such and of logic as such. Notable is the difference between Aristotelian formal logic and the propositional logic of the Stoics. The latter does not depend on the objective content. The Stoics — as Émil Bréhier maintained in his book *La Théorie des incorporels dans l'ancien stoïcisme* [12] — could prove that night is day, if the language can provide such an opportunity. In general, the shift from “what is” to “how it is expressed” has played the formative role for the Western civilization to follow, including the newly established Christianity. In the Old Testament, the story begins with the description of nature

(in the beginning God created...) and the line of inheritance of humans (he begat him...). In the New Testament, all this entourage becomes of secondary importance to the idea that in the beginning there was the Word, the word as such, the word, not submitted to any content, the word that precedes everything that was created. This is the Stoic idea. The act of creation is likened to the act of conceiving a human being — the *seme*, semen, sperm is involved in the activation of the otherwise neutral and faceless matter. “*Aitian ton holon he duo; poioun kai to paskhon*” [“The causes of the whole are two: active and passive”]. [8] The active cause of everything (of the whole) is the Word of God that acts as semen. It impregnates the *hule* (*silva*, the wilderness, matter). Hence the idea of Logos spermatikos. For the Stoics, there was no categorical distinction between that which is studied by physics and that which is studied by psychology. The teaching of Zeno was syncretic. The Greek people considered him to be the greatest philosopher; he had a school in the center of Athens, and the grateful Greeks erected a monument in his honor during his lifetime.

The semiotics of the Stoics established three categories: *seme* (the sign), *semainon* (the signifier) and *semainomenon* (the signified). There are rubrics in the book by Cleanthes with these titles. [8] Music is mentioned in this context as well.

Another important component of Stoic semiotics — and it makes it different from the current logocentric model — is the idea of *phantasia kataleptike*. There are many attempts to interpret this term; we can begin with the Greek etymology and can tie it to the Stoic concept. *Kataleptike* — catalepsy — is the condition in which no senses are open. It is a complete block of any form of perception of reality; neither vision, nor hearing, nor the other three channels. Why was this considered by Stoics as the most important condition? In their debates with the Epicureans, they proposed that any

perception (*aisthesis*) of the objects or actions of the outer world can distract a real philosopher from contemplating the essential ideas. Stoicism is about that — cancelling any connections with the outer world, especially those that engage in sensual interaction (another contribution of Stoics to the Christian doctrine!). What is left, then, for a Stoic is only his or her fantasy. This term — musically charged as it is — requires a clarification. *Phantasia* is the inner movement in the soul — in the *pathe* — which, during the times of Pirandello was dubbed as emotion (*ek-motion*, inner motion). Aristotle in his *Peri psyches*, [13] at the end of Chapter II, attempts to describe *phantasia* as such — although he, in his scientific rigour, does not seem to accept its existence. He suggests that some — and he indicates at the followers of Plato — believe that some emotions (*pathe*) are not caused by outer stimulæ. Instead, there is motion in the soul that moves itself by itself (*seauto auto kineisthai*). And this is what moves our fantasies (fathoms, ghosts, the content of our dreaming at night and, sometimes, during the day).

There is rather annoying trend — Anglo-American thinkers are especially fond of it — to delimit the scope of reflections on music by only what is pertinent to music as such. The centuries-old slogan of formalism seems to keep the higher hand — it is often perceived as the most advanced and sophisticated approach to music. Yet, by the exclusion of the human dimension from the discussion of music, the formalists maintain the same trivial materialistic scientific mythology of the “objective knowledge at all costs.” By limiting music to “moving sound shapes,” they turn music into habitual scientific object. They place it on the tripod (the Heideggerian *Gestell*), dissect it by using a trivial form of math (definitely, pre-algebra and pre-functional) and enjoy the results that, being rather convincing for themselves, have nothing to do with musical expression or meaning.

The formalists filter out all names of musically evoked emotions (while there are semiotic schools, say, like the Olster or Viennese groups, that study the names of the emotions). They substitute the argument: indeed, there are habitual names of emotional reactions that come from everyday life. These are not pertinent to the higher domain of musical expression (although, there is music for children, for the youth, music that is enjoyed by people from the low-income strata, that is directly related to habitual emotions). Yet, if the question is set by the formalists about music in its highest forms, the answer of ancient semiotics would be that its content is in the cathaleptic fantasy (of the composers, performers, listeners or any other figure on the musical scene).

Very intricate is the relationship of words and the elements of musical expression. Here, again, one may wish not to follow abrupt directives of formalism and logocentrism. It depends, as always, on the definition of the categories at play. How is the word defined? Can it be the Word of God (or rather, the Spirit of God — *pneuma tou theou*, since God does not speak — he breathes on us)? It is the musical Word of God — the *pneuma*, flux, infusion into dead matter that makes it live. The impregnating power of the *seme* — the sign, the tone. Not the note but the tone — *ho tonos*. In the physics of Stoics, *ho tonos* meant both physical tension and the tension of the musical string. Writing music, in this sense, is pouring out the signs — *seme* — into dead structures, forms and objects and by doing so turning them into live and meaning-bearing entities.

Then, what is the place of the proverbial and ubiquitous techniques of composition? Since every student and every teacher is preoccupied with techniques — especially since Schoenberg — how could ancient semiotics approach it? *Techne* is not technique; the *technites* may sound like “technicians” but the word has the opposite meaning. *Techne* is art — and art with

its all transcendental, platonic, ideal and tragic content. By manipulating the 12 pitches — 12 points on the Cartesian plane — we cannot get anywhere in music.

Still, there are materials involved. Music, just as any other art, deals with physicality [14] — there is the vibration of a string and added vibrato, crescendo, diminuendo, the ebb and flow of meter, the formal units and their functions. How can we explain the overwhelming presence of the material objective elements in music, while, it seems, we are destined to talk about it only in lofty and unearthly terms? Is the answer contained in Zeno of Chiteum or in what is left from the rich Greek Stoic tradition? Surprisingly, one thinker came up with the answer: Bréhier focused himself on this aspect of the Stoics; hence he has written a book, titled the *Theory of Incorporeals in Stoicism*. [12] In a nutshell, we are surrounded by real objects and the processes these objects undergo. This is the domain of the classical natural sciences. Yet, there are events that happen not within the bodies but on their surface. There are many things that we subject the bodies to without ever changing them. Writing about something, interpreting something, may not affect it at all. In the terminology of the Stoics, these phenomena are labeled “the incorporeal.” We count or name such objects without ever touching them. In the long run, however, these manipulations may affect the bodies — just as the *Logos spermatikos* enlivens the *hule*. This does not mean, however, that in composition we manipulate and change any real objects.

As a follow-up of the physics of Stoics, we can establish three major levels of our relationship with reality: the immanent, the real and the transcendental. Semiotics should be placed on this three-sided map. The level of the real — the domain of object (*res, re*) — is realitively sparse in music, in comparison with the other two. In order to learn how to deal with them, one has to abandon the idea of capturing examples

of the signified as a set or group of things determined by the dictatorship of the signifier. None of the concepts suggested by Peirce will work here. Rather, one must learn how to deal with, or rather ride on the curve of breathing and gesture. And, again, not with geometric lines, but with lines of escape.

### Conclusion

So, to summarise we can place our well-known categories of semiotics back into their original context. It will take a great deal

of phenomenological reduction, cleaning and purifying, as well as enriching with important philosophical concepts — those intentionally ignored by the Anglo-American tradition. Its reliance on “pragmatism” must have reasonable limits: in their confrontation with what they call “continental philosophy,” very often, philosophy as a discipline of abstract and contemplative reasoning is completely neglected. Philosophy cannot be too pragmatic; it means that it attempts to avoid its fundamental categories and concepts.

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