# Embodying sound: The role of semiotics.

In the first lecture, I defined gesture in an unambiguously semiotic way as movement that is interpretable as a sign. But how might semiotic theory be capable of treating the subtleties of the “sign” of gesture, given its uniqueness and the analog character of its continuities?

Roland Barthes, in a series of essays from the 1970s and early 80s (1985), emphasizes embodied gesture at the expense of a semiology of discrete structure in music. In his famous essay on Schumann’s Kreisleriana he identifies significant categories that differ from the linguistic in being corporeal. A telling example is “quasi parlando,” which “speaks but says nothing: for as soon as it is musical, speech — or its instrumental substitute — is no longer linguistic but corporeal; what it says is always and only this: my body puts itself in a state of speech” (1985 [1975]: 306). As Barthes elaborates:

Such are the figures of the body (the ‘somathemes’), whose texture forms musical signifying (hence, no more grammar, no more musical semiology: issuing from professional analysis — identification and arrangement of ‘themes,’ ‘cells,’ ‘phrases’ — it risks bypassing the body).” (307)

Barthes considers music as “a field of signifying and not a system of signs” because “the referent is the body” and “the body passes into music without any relay but the signifier” (308). Music, then, is not semiotic in the sense of “an order of articulated signs each of which has a meaning” (311); rather, “musical signifying, in a much clearer fashion than linguistic signification, is steeped in desire” (312). Barthes does not deny that a semiology would be

capable of treating the “system of notes, scales, tones, chords, and rhythms,” but rather that what he finds most meaningful in Schumann goes beyond, to “the effervescence of the beats” (312), or other such metaphorical formulations.

While Barthes’s interpretations are wonderfully insightful, he leaves us with the image of semiotic theory as an encumbrance — a typical maneuver in the critical dialectic and poetic rhapsodizing with which Barthes engages our sympathies. His lack of music theoretical training, however, is more serious, since he is unable to integrate the depths of meaning that issue from style, structure, and form with his attractive, if metaphorically fanciful, figures of the body.

David Lidov, in his important article “Mind and Body in Music” (1987), offers a more compelling theoretical account of how we come to understand the gestural in music as semiotic. He describes an ongoing process through which the immediacy of kinesthetic and somatic association (described so poetically by Barthes) is sublimated into signs functioning in a formal system (71). According to Lidov, the indexical in music is that which is most particular but least articulate, which would include the gestural contributions of “tempo, rubato, nuance of intonation, and dynamic level” (73). The indexical is directly expressive in a physical sense (much as Barthes attempts to capture). The iconic, however, is already once removed, in that articulated shapes may be interpreted as “the isomorph or trace of some object or force not immediately in contact with it.” It is the performer who “reconnects them (indexes them) to the body” and thereby “reveals their force” (73). Finally, the “symbol is an articulated arrangement of articulated materials” that are furthest removed from the body, existing as “abstract types” (73). Such abstract types can substitute “formal relations [in place of] psysiological values ([such formal relations including] the developmental

calculi of fragmentation, inversion, transposition, et cetera, which can be but need not be subordinated to images of feeling)" (74).

Lidov's processive model addresses the gap between the elusive particularities of gesture and the typological demands of a semiotic theory, but at the expense of suggesting an opposition between the immediacy of gesture and the abstractness of musical categories (the motive as subject to a developmental calculus is a rather formalist view of the symbolic level). Instead of sublimation, perhaps we should be seeking a kind of emergence whereby the gesture maintains its characteristic potency while gaining a factor of generalization or type-formation (rather than abstraction). And perhaps the issue of actual performance, while critical to the aural manifestation of a gesture, is not crucial to the kinds of interpretive inferences that we can make about gestures when encountered in a richly stylistic and strategic context — even when inadequately notated in a score. To put it more strongly, if a gesture is thematized (foregrounded as a motive or theme for a work):

- it need not be abstracted from its gestural motivations,
- the modes of its development will result not merely from a developmental calculi governed by compositional craft, but from the unfolding of its gestural and implied expressive meaning,
- we can infer and establish its character without recreating it in performance, although the latter is certainly important as a heuristic means of probing a wealth of interpretative nuance.

Ultimately, a theory of gesture entails, and demands for its relevance to analysis, a stylistic theory of expressive meaning (indeed, the remainder of David Lidov's article is an impressive demonstration of the many kinds of meaning that can be brought to bear in interpreting the Chopin Ballade in Ab Major). Thus, unless we are committed to interpretation and explanation of more than the syntax of a work, we really do not need a rich theory of

musical gesture, and we can default to the motive as a more abstract stand-in for the gesture. But if gestural expressiveness is an essential motivator for compositional form and structure — and I will argue that this has consequences for our understanding of style and style change as well as for the interpretation of a work — then we must find a way to incorporate gesture in all of its particularity, in all of its continuity, in all of its analog character, and in all of its temporal shaping and shading, as part of the very foundation of structural analysis.

Beyond the limits of notation, one seeks the elusive precision of artistically conceived emotion — which is so often our instinctive and immediate interpretation of motion. We are biologically attuned to categorize nuances far beyond those for which we have labels in our language, as recent brain theorists such as Paul Churchland have shown, with their provocative discussions of neural networks that can “learn” quite subtle discriminations even without “knowing” what it is they discriminate (see, e.g., Churchland, 1995: 84-91). However, Manfred Clynes’s (1995) hypotheses of temporal and dynamic “warpings” or “composers’ pulses” (mentioned in my first lecture) attempt to establish too fixed a rubato for each composer’s measure. Ironically, the domain of gesture will not likely yield its secrets to such stereotypings, even if we accept Clynes’s earlier work (1977) on sentic shapes as a powerful demonstration of the cross-cultural consistency with which we identify particular movements with particular emotional states, and with which we produce particular movements to illustrate those states. For Clynes, precision in gesture leads unwaveringly to precision in a listener’s interpretation, and while one might agree with that observation in principle, one need not accept his proposed “warpings” as prescriptive for proper performance.

It is interesting to compare Barthes and Clynes as two sensitive listeners who have recognized and attempted to address the significance of gesture

for music. Notice how capturing the distinctive and qualitative aspects of gesture have led them to such extremes of treatment: from Barthes's poetic and nonsystematic "figures of the body" to Clynes's scientifically measured and systematic "composer's pulses." In an attempt to avoid the theoretical problems associated with either extreme, I wish to propose a more historically and theoretically grounded approach. I will argue that stylistically constrained musical expressive meaning can help orient and contextualize the kinds of meaning that a musical gesture might be called upon to convey, and suggest ways in which a performer might reconcile the competing demands of highly configured gestural landscapes, as found in Beethoven's and Schubert's late styles.

In the summary outline that follows, I offer my own grounding for a semiotic theory of musical gesture. David Lidov's processive view of the sublimation of the physical into the musical may be adapted (as seen in #2 below) along the lines of Peirce's categories (from which the icon, index, and symbol are roughly derived), without carrying over the presuppositions I find problematic. I will also draw on a later formulation of his concerning gesture as marked movement (Lidov, 1993).

# Presuppositions for a semiotic theory of gesture

- Gesture is movement interpretable as a sign, whether intentional or not, and as such it communicates information about the gesturer (or character, or persona the gesturer is impersonating or embodying).
- That information (whether or not the "intended" signification) may be classified following C. S. Peirce's categories as:

*a. qualitative (Firstness), in that it concerns the attitude, modality, emotional state, etc., of the gesturer (or presupposed agent),*
*b. dynamic/directional/intentional (Secondness), in that it reveals reactions, goals, and orientations, and*
*c. symbolic (Thirdness), in that it may rely on conventions or habits of interpretation (in contexts such as artistic styles) to convey a wealth of extra meaning beyond the directness of its qualitative and dynamic characteristics, and this "extra" may at times displace or be emergent from more immediate sources of meaning [emergence may be defined as that which is or would be unpredictable from lower levels — here, the qualities and dynamic characteristics of gestures are more immediate and hence at a lower level].*

- Another way of defining gesture is as movement that is marked as meaningful (David Lidov, 1993). The particular dimension of relevant meaning may be marked culturally. For example, a pointing finger is marked for indexicality, and other features of the gesture may or may not be marked for attention (as in an imperious gesture of pointing, which might convey power, as well as indicate an object or direction).
- Psychologically, one may choose to interpret the available dimensions for clues as to attitudes on the part of the gesturer, even when they are not intentionally marked; indeed, anyone in need, or a prisoner, or in love, is likely to over-exaggerate gestural significance in search of clues to one's fate (will one's needs be met? will one be tortured or released? will the beloved offer or continue to express love to the beloved? ).
- Intermodality is one of the most fascinating aspects of gesture, in that gestural dynamics and shaping can be expressed through many different senses, all of which share the characteristics of continuity through time:

*a. movements of the hands and arms, facial muscles, and even the body during speech communicate visually. Recent research announced on National Public Radio (4/26/97) indicates that visual lipreading in absence of sound lights up the aural language areas of the brain. Such evidence points to language as least multi-channel in its development and processing, and thus intermodality between visual and aural signals in communicating gesturally is plausible.*
*b. intonation curves underlying speech communicate aurally (and suggest the effort required to produce them)*
*c. movement as touch, communicates tactilely,*
*(d. theoretically, if less commonly, movement through a succession of tastes or smells, with variations in intensity, might share a particular temporal gestalt with another sensory modality).*

- Evolutionarily, the ability to move and the ability to perceive movement are critical; more specifically, the need to predict the predator's movements and interpret the social signals of ritualized threat within the community would have led to the fine-grained compatibility between motor and perceptual systems, a prime condition for intermodality. Another condition would be the representation in the brain of sensory perception, which may well have in common the energetics of the signal (with exception of qualia such as color, which introduce imagistic, not merely temporal shapings). We know that the brain has two modular faculties, one for richness of image and the other for temporal shaping of motion, as Oliver Sachs discovered in a famous clinical case (1985). Furthermore, there is a trend in cognitive studies to shift from a model of logical/symbolic databases and problem-solving, toward including bodily and environmental dynamics as a crucial part of the so-called "computational loop" (Clark, 1997: 83-4).

- Regardless of modality, gestures may share certain characteristics, being:
  *a. analog, as opposed to digital or discrete,*
  *b. hence, continuous in a productive sense of continuity (i.e., not necessarily continuous sound, but continuity of shape, curve, motion across silence, etc.,*
  *c. having articulate shape,*
  *d. possessing hierarchical potential,*
  *e. characterized by a significant envelope (pre- and post- movement can substantially affect the quality of the gesture),*
  *f. being contextually constrained and enriched, and*
  *g. typically foregrounded. (Obsessive repetition can level out the distinctive or marked character of a gesture and relegate it to the background, upon which another — emergent — gesture may arise. Examples would include Mozart, Prague Symphony, first movement, principal theme; Beethoven, Waldstein sonata, opening of the first movement, and Appasionata sonata, opening of the finale. Conversely, that which appears backgrounded may, by choice of the agent or the performer, become marked as foregrounded. Or the interpreter may mark an otherwise unmarked gesture, reading-in a certain significance, as in the case of an interpreter bringing a psychological need or desire to bear on the interpretation).*
  *h. being beyond precise notation or exact reproducibility, but*
  *i. amenable to type-token relationships via cognitive categorization or even conceptualization, and thus,*
  *j. potentially systematic to the extent of being organized oppositionally by type, as in gestural "languages" or ritual movements.*

- Posture may be considered as gesture “under a fermata.” A “frozen motion” or pose may reveal the energy and affect with which it is invested, including that required to move into the pose (imagine a body-builder’s routine, or certain histrionic actors in outdated acting styles). The posture thus “reverberates” with the resonance of the implied gesture of an agent.

With the invocation of one of Alexandra Pierce’s key terms (“reverberation”) I anticipate lecture three, which will treat her comprehensive approach to gesture as a means of analyzing and interpreting music on the part of the performer-as-theorist (see course outline for recommended reading). In bringing this lecture to a close, I will caution against two temptations in treating gesture semiotically: on the one hand, the temptation to formalize gesture prematurely, and on the other, the temptation to get caught up in fine-grained gestural descriptions. One way to avoid an accumulation of gestural description is to focus on thematic gestures — those gestures that enter into what David Lidov describes as the symbolic level of musical units. If we can add something to the formal description of these units and their manipulation, by a careful interpretation of their gestural and expressive character, then we may also learn something of how gesture motivates compositional choices — and ultimately how gestural interpretation can be integrated into a comprehensive approach to musical understanding.

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