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rivincita di Orfeo.
Esperienza estetica e
semiotica del discorso
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review by Luca Marconi

Stefano Jacoviello

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Luca Marconi

Taking their cue from a few essays written by Roman Jakobson, Nicolas Ruwet, Jean-Jacques Nattiez and Gino Stefani, many scholars who practice the discipline known as “semiotics (or semiology) of music” – mostly in Canada, Finland and Italy – have dealt with the relationship between semiotics and music. In recent years, many studies in this field have focused on specific problems without developing a general theoretical framework. On the contrary, Stefano Jacoviello, after having published brief and predominantly analytical writings, presents here a sort of theoretical manifesto, in which the “semiotics of musical discourse” is once again put forward as a discipline well-suited for studying general questions.

The first part of the book examines a number of important perspectives on the problem of the semanticity of music that preceded the positions adopted by the above-mentioned scholars; these are compared using the assessment of Gluck’s aria *Che farà senza Euridice* as a touchstone, an example often correlated to the above mentioned issues. The starting point is a short description of some aspects of the choices adopted by the composer in writing this aria, considered mainly by examining which of its features were most appreciated by Rousseau, and providing a synthetic reconstruction of what the “emotional meaning” would have been for the listeners of its first performance (p. 30). Jacoviello then reconsiders some preliminary remarks from Hanslick’s writings on this aria, which he believes to be applicable to the present theoretical frame of structural semiotics (p. 57).

In a similar way, he reviews the theories developed by Boris De Schloezer from a semiotic perspective, focusing on their affinities with Hanslick. He then returns to Gluck, considering the reflections on *Che farà senza Euridice* written in 1947 by the Italian music critic Massimo Mila. Finally, the path leading the reader toward current debates in the semiotics of

music ends with an overview of Leonard B. Meyer's theories.

The second part of the volume investigates how the questions considered in the first part have been approached by four of the main protagonists of the semiotics/semiology of music, the above-mentioned Jakobson, Ruwet, Stefani and Nattiez, underlining the fact that only the latter two scholars practiced it as their main field of study.

The second part ends with a substantial and complex chapter in which the author presents his own conception of the semiotics of music, as an alternative to the present state of the art. First, semiotic inquiries must subdivide the "configurations of the expression plane" of a musical text (its perceivable surface) into "figures", which can be identified considering the contrasts emerging while examining it (p. 220). This idea is explicitly traced back to the theories on "semi-symbolism" and on the "plastic level" developed for the study of visual arts by Algirdas Greimas, Omar Calabrese and other semiologists. On this basis Jacoviello then sets out a proposal for a "model of the musical expression plane", with two levels:

- "plastic traits", which correspond to categories such as "low vs. high" for pitch, "piano vs. forte" for dynamics and "bright vs. dark" for timbre;
- "plastic configurations", which are combinations of traits, and can be described, for example, as "musical phrases", "rhythmic configurations", "synchronic harmonic configurations" or "diachronic harmonic configurations".

Another idea explicitly connected to Greimas' theories is that the semiotic analysis of a musical text, while using the "model of the musical expression plane", must try to describe how this text works as an outcome of a process through which a certain system has manifested itself.

In order to insert the expression plane of a certain musical text into a system of relations with a content plane - called "the figural level", once more following Greimasian theories - it is necessary to move from the general concept of "text" to the more specific concept of "discourse" (p. 227). In this book, "musical discourse" is defined as «the place where the genres and all the forms of musical culture of a community which produces it are established» (p. 228).¹ From this perspective, the identity of a musical culture can be understood in two ways: on a synchronic level, considering the dynamics of trans-

lation which highlight its relationships with “other” cultures, and on a diachronic level, taking into account this identity’s constant transformations over the course of time.

These conceptions are combined with the idea, developed in the studies of the Greimasian semiologist Jean-Marie Floch, on “syncretic texts” as “semiotic-objects”. Being objects constructed during the course of their analysis, they are provided with an inner organization: it is their very description that defines their structure (p. 231).

In order to carry out a semiotic analysis of musical texts – which very often belong to the sphere of “textual syncretism” (p. 239) – it is crucial to identify correlations between relations of categorical oppositions, in order to avoid the dead ends encountered by those who have searched for correspondences between single elements of the musical works and single “meanings”. Such sets of relations works as a device, pertinent to a certain text, which correlates configurations of the “plastic level” to their homologous configurations of the “figural level”; the relations between the categories and configurations revealed by this device can then be “axiologized” (i.e. connected to value judgments) and given “thematic and figurative values” (p. 233), thus assuming in music the role of what is called the “figurative level” in the visual arts.

Equally crucial is the need to identify the “enunciator” (responsible for the form of the plastic level) and the “enunciatee” (to whom the enunciator addresses itself) implied by the text. Once a certain structural textual norm has been analytically constituted, it can then pass through history and the forms of taste, becoming a tool for interpretation and a principle of falsification for criticism (p. 244).

The third and last part of the volume consists of a single chapter, shorter than the previous, where Jacoviello presents his positions on musical aesthetic experience, the judgments of value attached to it and the “judgment of authenticity”, which seems to be connected to the value of “truth” (p. 251). Gradually, argumentation is replaced by conjecture, taking as a starting point a reflection on the concept of “significance” as applied to music by Roland Barthes. Jacoviello does not follow the psychoanalytic path of the French scholar nor his

¹ The quotations from the book are translated by the author of the review.

concept of a «physically pervasive corporeality of the sentient subject in the work of art», but he believes that it is profitable to consider significance as «a result of a game of mirrors, always ready to reformulate the grid of reflexes in a dispersion which at last is compelled to become a syntagm» (p. 257). In this perspective, thanks to significance, music is fully able to establish a completely realized plane of discourse, while however not fully identifying itself with the latter: «perhaps in this continuous gap we can discover the secret of what is ineffable, of that ‘remainder’ which is left over in every description and which is considered by some thinkers as the value that founds the artisticity, the aesthetic value, the ‘beautiful’ which is eternal because it is constantly able to elude all attempts at analysis» (*ibid.*). According to Jacoviello, «the analytical act is by principle a critical act» (p. 259), but it «cannot avoid remaining on the threshold of the ineffable: we must content ourselves with finding the structural conditions of its presence, alongside those of each meaningful effect» (*ibid.*).

In expounding his positions in the last two chapters of the book, Jacoviello very rarely provides examples, limiting himself to references in a footnote to some of his essays as examples of how to apply the analytical model which he proposes. Including case studies to illustrate the various concepts proposed would undoubtedly have obliged the author to enlarge an already dense book; however, without exemplifications of his proposals, it is not possible to judge whether they can actually prove more effective than others in answering similar questions. One can only agree with Jacoviello when, considering the question of the relationship between semiotics and musicology, he states that «it is necessary to respond by demonstrating the efficiency of a method and of a way of seeing things, of a *savoir faire*, against the false impression that semiotics seems to close itself within an autistic metalanguage» (p. 249). But, in order to demonstrate this efficiency, general statements are not sufficient: it is necessary to show how they translate into examples more persuasive than the arguments of those who apply different theoretical foundations or limit themselves to analyzing and interpreting cultural objects without rendering their theoretical assumptions explicit.

The problem of identifying the enunciator and the enunciatee implied by a certain musical text still remains open; in this respect a practical

example of his approach would have been the most valuable addition to the book. Jacoviello rejects «the post-modern drifts which place the roots of musical sense in the practices of its social communication with absolute situational relativism» (p. 230), but from this position he seems to imply that the study of empirical practices is of no use in solving the above-mentioned problem. We could object that some textual analysis (for example those done by Umberto Eco, or inspired by his theories) show that inquiries on empirical practices do not necessarily lead to deconstructive relativism: by helping to understand what happens when human subjects approach a text, they can be useful in inferring a few principles which allow us to make a certain hypothesis on the enunciator and enunciatee more persuasive than others.

Perhaps, in order to identify the enunciator and the enunciatee implied by the texts of some musical genres which have already been sufficiently studied and long practiced by those who study them, it would be sufficient to analyze them accurately. In other genres and contexts (which have been less studied, such as in oral traditions or in popular music), conversely, a careful inquiry into the practices of composition and perception could help the analyst avoid inadequate hypotheses about the enunciator and enunciatee.

Even while exposing itself to these objections, this volume is undoubtedly a highly interesting contribution to the field of musical semiotics, particularly in the definition of its position in relation to other disciplines in music studies. As a general introduction to these issues, the first two parts of the book can be very useful, while for those wishing to deepen their knowledge the last two chapters (while not being easy going for readers without a basic knowledge of Greimasian semiotics) offer some notable suggestions, mostly concerning the relationship between semiotics of music and studies on the visual arts, until now scarcely considered. Moreover, Jacoviello's application of Greimasian theories to music, which widely differs from Eero Tarasti's (quoted in this book only in two short passages), results in a highly authoritative model for readers who intend on following similar directions. Also noteworthy is the author's contribution to reflections on the relationship between music and the concepts of "meaning" and "signification": in this case as well, the book may prove useful both for those who look for a preliminary introduction to the topic and for those seeking a deeper understanding.