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From Expectation to Concepts: Toward Multilevel Grounding in Music Semiotics

This paper proposes a theory of “multi-level grounded” musical semantics. Its central thesis is that musical meanings are neither indeterministic, appearing and disappearing in real time in endless circles of vague association, nor strongly dependent on a single and stable ontology, such as prebuilt information inherent to the musical form. Rather, the proposal is that linguistic descriptions of music are grounded in a hierarchical system of six contextual constraints, or “grounding boxes”, which motivate cross-domain correspondences between the musical material and extramusical referents by providing “important contextual assumptions [...which] influence the way that meaning construction proceeds” (Coulson and Oakley, 2005: 1517). To motivate the six proposed grounding levels, I provide a qualitative analysis based on the random sample of free-form descriptions of six programmatic musical pieces from my group’s recent experimental study (Antović, Stamenković & Figar, in press). While some musical scholars claim that any inherent musical meaning must be grounded in the physical resemblance between the musical structure and environmental sounds (variously labeled “imitation”, “iconic musical meaning”, “echoing”, or “musical onomatopoeia”), our data reveal only a negligible number, of additionally rather diversified, onomatopoeic musical descriptions. Rather than pursuing this line of thinking, I look for the basis of the semantics of music in the well psychologically corroborated notion of disappointment or satisfaction of structural musical expectancies. There, on level one, the first glimpse of meaning emerges from direct physiological reactions, as when a disappointed expectancy accelerates the heart beat, or a segment of music is described as “tense”. On level two, more explicitly cross-modal image-schematic structure begins to be constructed, e.g. a “forceful” chord, “hopping” staccato, or “the flutter of wings”. Level three builds on such embodied expectancies and image-schematic structure and provides the first glimpse of “connotation”, ascribing emotional qualities to the music, e.g. “resolution interspersed with despair”, while on level-four, the meaning becomes “conceptual”, relating the music to rich imagery, e.g. “a medieval battle”. On level five, conceptual meaning interacts with an “elaborated cultural context”, motivating blended descriptions at the intersection of two or more conceptual domains, e.g. when the “battle” is replaced by “gods coming down from Olympus”. Level six hosts associations grounded in personal experience. To support the proposal, a representative set of our participants’ verbal responses is analyzed, showing both the emergence of new conceptual content and the hierarchical nature of grounding. In doing so, the contribution attempts to formally capture the old paradox of musical semantics: that music is full of meaning, yet that this meaning is highly underspecified, manifested in a *potential* rather than definite form.

References:

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