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## Musical Semiosis: Active Form and Social Being

*Summary:* Unlike other works of art, music exists only in time – it is active form. If we apply semiotic terms to music, this temporality means that the signifier is not really a sign (a noun); it is more like a significant event or process (a verb). Similarly, the musical signified is not a concrete thing (noun), it is also a process. In the same way, people are not nouns – although we have corporeal bodies, it is what we *do* with them (verb) and *how* we do it (adverb) that distinguishes us as individuals and, in a larger sense, societies. *My* basic thesis is that music has a unique relationship with social being. Music, like living, is a dynamic art performed by granting stylistic quality to action over time. When we consider that music is also a social art, fully realized only when it is presented to others, we can begin to understand how musical semiosis works. By articulating active forms, absolute music will never tell us *what* to do, but it will always provide a compelling demonstration of *how*, in general, things are to be done, together.

*Zusammenfassung:* Anders als andere Kunstwerke existiert Musik nur in der Zeit – sie ist aktive Form. Bei der Anwendung semiotischer Begriffe auf die Musik bedingt diese Zeitlichkeit, daß der Signifikant nicht eigentlich ein Zeichen (Substantiv) ist, sondern eher ein bedeutsamer Vorgang, ein Prozeß (Verb). Ähnlich ist das musikalische Signifikat nicht ein konkretes Ding (Substantiv), sondern ebenfalls ein Prozeß. Genauso sind auch Menschen keine Substantiva – obwohl wir körperlich sind, unterscheidet uns als Individuen (und letztlich auch Gesellschaften), was wir mit dem Körper *tun* (Verb) und *wie* wir es tun (Adverb). Meine Grundthese ist, daß Musik einen einzigartigen Bezug zum sozialen Sein hat. Musik ist, wie das Leben selbst, eine dynamische Kunst, verwirklicht durch Zuweisung stilistischer Qualität an Handlungen in der Zeit. Erst wenn man Musik als gesellschaftliche Kunst betrachtet, d.h. als ganz verwirklicht nur in der Darbietung für andere, können wir anfangen zu verstehen, wie die musikalische Semiosis arbeitet. Durch Artikulation aktiver Formen will uns absolute Musik nicht sagen, *was* zu tun ist, sondern stets unwiderstehlich demonstrieren, *wie* alle Dinge *miteinander* zu tun sind.

Music is related to us by nature and can ennoble or corrupt the character.  
(Boethius 1986: 66)

This paper is organized around three broad areas of communication theory. *Semiotic* is first. In this section, I discuss the vocabulary we use to describe semiosis and the assumptions these terms can bring to critical analysis of music. Second, *Rhetoric* is introduced as a body of theory that stresses the social dimension of semiosis. By concerning itself with people signifying, rather than sign systems, rhetoric has avoided the noun-oriented vocabulary that limits semiotic. Finally, *Music* is defined as active form and its relation with social identity is explained.

### Semiotic

In his review of several books on music and semiotics, Denis Donoghue argues that the vocabulary we have developed to explain linguistic meaning cannot accurately describe musical experience. He finds that many researchers assume a codified relationship between signifier and signified when they write about musical meaning. His reaction is emphatic:

What am I saying? Only this: that there is no merit in treating a symphony as if it had a meaning or meanings. Symphonies do not mean anything, because notes are not signs; they do not participate in a code of signs. The problem is that we have a poor vocabulary for dealing with events. It is good enough for describing events if they can be thought of as objects but not if they must be construed as processes or actions. A performance of a symphony is an act, an event; it commands time by beginning with the present moment and, while it lasts, taking possession of the near future. [...] A symphony does not live by meaning but by taking possession of time, of our attention during this duration of time. Its instruments of possession are sounds, rhythms, cadences, suspensions. (Donoghue 1991: 3-4)

Donoghue is right, but there is more to the story. All language "fixes" meaning – by its very nature as a representation, any set of terminology must reify the actions, processes, and events it describes.<sup>1</sup> A progression from V to I, a common sonorous event, becomes a thing when described with language, a cadence. With most languages, we need nouns in order to make grammatical sense. This reification problem is compounded when we consider the visuo-spatial quality of written language. At least spoken words are still events. When written down on paper, our cadence has literally become a thing. There

is small wonder that Donoghue finds difficulties with semiotic descriptions of music.

If we can agree that all vocabularies will "nounify" music, the problem becomes one of finding the best possible vocabulary, a set of terms that will allow us to describe musical experience while minimizing the ossification that accompanies language. Within the codes of Semiotic as a discipline, some terms are able to retain the sense of process that music requires, while others deny temporality in favor of the precision an object-centered vocabulary affords.<sup>2</sup>

We see the noun bias most clearly in semiotic theories that are modeled on the physical sciences. However, it is important to remember that even the "hard" sciences do not limit themselves to studying objects. For instance, geologists examine more than rocks (objects), they are also interested in geologic processes, such as sedimentation, tectonic shifts, or volcanic eruptions. In fact, to say that Geology is "the study of rocks" is an obvious reduction of a diverse field.

In the same way, Semiotic is much more than a science of signs. By letting THE SIGN function as *synecdoche* for Semiotic as a whole, we limit ourselves to a vocabulary system with a noun as its key term. Heuristically, this means that the most relevant terms become related nouns and adjectives (classes and sub-classes), and that the verbs and adverbs, the sign-processes, are either slighted or simply defined as part of another discipline. In general, our Sign vocabulary is biased because it is based on formalism and structuralism. Our analytic heritage has left us with a focus on *langue* over *parole*, and even today we tend to stress the synchronic over the diachronic.

So, what terms can balance our fascination with The Sign and help us to more accurately describe musical expression? Regularly using existing process terms, such as semiosis, can help us to remember that we are not dealing with systems of objects. This may seem like an insignificant choice, but when we consider that a widely accepted name for the discipline is "Semiotics," a term easily read as a plural noun, there is a strong indication that we are dealing with sets of static things. Further, if we define semiosis as "the process by which someone interprets a sign" (Boiles 1982: 28), there is a strong sense in which we simply do not have direct access to signs. If signs can only be known through an interpretive process, then the most we can say is that we are studying that type of process, not the signs themselves.

Other possible choices for a process-oriented Semiotic vocabulary include predication, signifying, and practicing; all terms that can help us to focus on

the syntagmatic and diachronic dimensions of music. Specific terms are best determined by the project at hand, but the change from a simple “object” of study to a dynamic “process” of signification can cause a fundamental change in the researcher’s approach. In his discussion of genre studies, Vincent Leitch provides a good example of an active, process-oriented set of critical assumptions. He argues that poststructuralist critics do not write objective descriptions of deep structure because they are engaged scholars with an interest in exposing power relations and the pragmatic effects of communication.

[P]oststructuralism generally investigates such matters as the installation of defining binary oppositions, the arbitrariness and undecidability of boundaries, the deployments of power and authority, the points of transformation and breakage, the (de)construction of stabilities and metalangages, and the fissures wrought by the unconscious. In the area of genre studies this leads to interest in anomalous generic mechanisms and functions with an eye toward rules of formation and exclusion, impositions of hierarchies, fabrications of marginal forms, flights of meaning, contradictions and paradoxes, slippages of control, returns of repressed materials, and evidences of heterogeneity. (Leitch 1992: 73)

Genre studies typically focus on categorizing works of art, a noun focus. In Leitch’s frame, the question is not *what* or *what category*, it is *how*. In Leitch’s description, the language directs attention toward process at every turn – installation, deployment, transformation, exclusion, imposition, flights of meaning.

The general principle of the process-orientation is best seen in the contrast between linguistic and musical “signs.” In *On Interpretation*, Aristotle describes the relationship between thought and language:

Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. [...] As there are in the mind thoughts which do not involve truth or falsity, and also those which must be either true or false, so it is in speech. For truth and falsity imply combination and separation. Nouns and verbs, provided nothing is added, are like thoughts without combination or separation; ‘man’ and ‘white,’ as isolated terms, are not yet either true or false. (1984: 40 16a)

Linguistic signs, in combination, enable us to express propositions that are either true or false. By forming a sentence and predicating a subject, we make a claim that is subject to tests of fidelity and validity. Throughout the history of semiotic, most attention has been devoted to analysis of propositions and their truth value. The rest of Aristotle’s *Organon* is concerned with propositions, as is most of Peirce’s “Logic as Semiotic.”

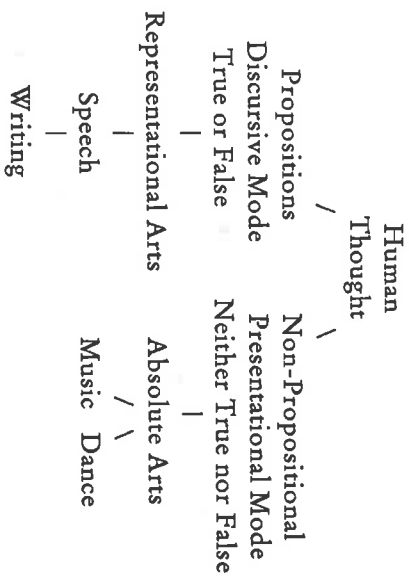


Fig. 1: Thought & Linguistic vs. Musical Signification

However, as Aristotle pointed out, not all of our ideas are of this same order of truth (see Fig. 1). Some of our thoughts simply are, and it is these thoughts that we express through non-discursive symbol systems, such as music. For Suzanne Langer, music can communicate these thoughts, but its mode of meaning is distinctly non-propositional:

[F]or music at its highest, though clearly a symbolic form, is an unconsummated symbol. Articulation is its life, but not assertion; expressiveness, not expression. The actual function of meaning, which calls for permanent contents, is not fulfilled; for the assignment of one rather than another possible meaning to each form is never explicitly made. Therefore music is “Significant Form,” [...] such significance is implicit, but not conventionally fixed. (1957: 240-241)

Langer’s “unconsummated symbol” is an accurate description of the musical sign. Because music lacks the denotative dimension that defines language, much semiotic theory, work done to explain combinations of linguistic signs, simply does not apply. Language and music are both significant forms, but they signify in different ways. While speaking is a “discursive form,” the arts are “presentational.” Rather than *re-present* a general class of concepts, as we do with discourse, a musical performance is a *presentation*, a sonorous event designed to engage our attention and interest as it unfolds.

In short, our traditional semiotic vocabulary, simply through its grammatical foundation upon the sign, encourages an atemporal approach to sem-

iosis. With music, we are not dealing with the same type of sign-process that semiotic was developed to explain.

## Rhetoric

In the first section, I noted that Semiotic has often left the social dimension of semiosis to other disciplines. In Morris' formulation, there are three divisions of Semiotic; syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic (1946: 217-219). In pursuit of propositional truth value, semiotic work to date has stressed syntax and referentiality over the pragmatic social uses of language. To find out about semiosis on the social level, we can turn to our second area of communication theory, Rhetoric.

Traditionally called the "art of persuasion," Rhetoric has a long and distinguished history. From the beginning of Western culture, rhetoricians have been concerned with the active and functional dimension of language. In *Rhetorica*, Aristotle defines rhetoric as a faculty, a sort of power. Rather than designate a specific object of study, such as arguments or texts, he stresses the architectonic quality of rhetorical scholarship:

[R]hetoric is not bound up with a single definite class of subjects, but is as universal as dialectic; it is clear, also, that it is useful. It is clear, further, that its function is not simply to succeed in persuading, but rather to discover the means of coming as near such success as the circumstances allow. In this it resembles all other arts. [...] Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. (1941: 1328-1329)

Rhetoric is not an objective science like geometry, it is a practical art that teaches sensitivity to audiences and an ability to participate in social exchange. Because all of the practical arts, including medicine and war, deal with real people in real life situations, there are no timeless laws – decisions about how to present an argument, help a patient, or plan a battle are all made on a case by case basis, depending upon informed observation of the particular circumstances at hand.

Modern definitions of rhetoric feature an even broader range of application. In *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture*, Barry Brummett (1991) argues that rhetoric does not have a specific set of communicative forms (oratory, poetics, etc.) as its subject matter. Instead, rhetoric is a *dimension of all*

social experience. The rhetorical dimension is "that part of an act or object that influences how social meanings are created, maintained, or opposed."<sup>3</sup> (1991: 38) Creation, maintenance, and opposition of meaning are highly processive approaches to semiosis. Where Aristotle had identified an individual power, a faculty of observing, Brummett's *influential dimension* applies to both individual and ideological levels of action.

Overall, Rhetoric complements Semiotic by studying the sign-processes of pragmatic communication.<sup>4</sup> One of the first principles of rhetoric is that popular audiences do not use or follow extended chains of logical propositions.

For [in rhetoric] the conclusion should not be drawn from far back, nor is it necessary to include everything. The former is unclear because of the length [of the argument], the latter tiresome because of stating what is obvious. This is the reason why the uneducated are more persuasive than the educated before a crowd, just as the poets say the uneducated are more "inspired by the Muses" in a crowd; for [the educated] reason with axioms and universals, [the uneducated] on the basis of what they know and instances near their experience. (Aristotle 1991: 186-187, 1395b)

When people communicate in everyday life, they do not attempt to precisely determine the truth-value of a given claim. Necessary conclusions are the province of dialectic, and only philosophers and semioticians spend their time discussing them. Most people communicate in order to conduct the business of everyday life. With Aristotle, this business is mostly limited to the business of governing the city-state (*Rhetorica* I-4), but in more recent formulations of rhetoric, such as Brummett's, the rhetorical dimension becomes a study of how relationships, from interpersonal to social, are negotiated via symbols.

When semiosis is approached in terms of relationship management, rather than propositions about reality, the transactive function of the sign becomes more important than its power of reference. This principle can even be pushed to account for the origins of language – people were probably telling each other how to act "Give me that now!" before they were commenting on reality "What a large rock." Because humans are social animals, most of our ideas, whether true, false, or "not yet either," are about dealing with other people.

Kenneth Burke, one of the premier rhetoricians of the twentieth century, operationalizes rhetoric by proposing two basic social processes, identification and division. Instead of persuasion, the traditional key term for rhetoric, Burke's dramatic approach to communication features identification. Identification is a term that includes oratory and all that we would usually consider

persuasive, but it goes further by including all ways of “dealing with other people” that tend to bring us together and establish unity.

To identify A with B is to make A “consubstantial” with B. [...] A doctrine of *consubstantiality*, either explicit or implicit, may be necessary to any way of life. For substance, in the old philosophers, was an *acti*; and a way of life is an *acting-together*; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*. (Burke 1950: 21)

This particular definition of identification is bound up with Burke’s notion of substance. Please note that within this frame, *substance*, something we would typically define as static and noun-based, is defined as a mode of activity. With this focus on action, Identification should be taken “literally,” as the perpetual human process of building an identity or developing a self. As we engage one another in communication, we are working at defining ourselves and each other as we manage our relationship.

Division is Burke’s second basic social process. Division is a process opposed to identification and it includes all activities that set us apart from one another.

Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity. (1950: 22)

Because we have physically distinct bodies, the human condition is grounded in a state of division. We communicate in order to overcome the physical and existential gulf that divides us. An important implication of Burke’s theory is that these two processes are inseparable – in joining one group, you necessarily set yourself apart from others; identification and division are two sides of the same coin.

In this context, Burke’s contribution is to make us aware of the basic temporal quality of social life. Who you are, your identity, is not a thing that you possess. Instead, your identity is your mode of life, your particular way of being and doing. Identification as basic human activity establishes that it is only through engaging others that we can manifest a self, and by adopting similar temporal patterns, similar “ways of life,” we become “substantially one” with each other.

Before turning to our final topic, music, it is important to summarize where we have been. In the somewhat blunt grammatical terms that have guided this

discussion so far, we can say that, traditionally, semiotics has had a static noun orientation that is most clearly demonstrated in the adoption of The Sign as primary object of study. Important work in this frame is based either on sub-nouns (establishing sign categories, such as Qualisign, Sinsign, and Legisign) or adjectives (distinguishing different types of signs, like Iconic, Indexical, or Symbolic). Semiotic can be given a more active verb-orientation through research on semiosis and the functional aspects of signification. This is a theoretical move that is required for research on presentational forms like music.

With the second point, Rhetoric, we learned about pragmatic communication in everyday life. Rhetoric has a tradition based on the art of persuading, a foundation that gives this discipline a verb orientation. Important theoretical work in this frame is based on process-terms that label social action, such as creation, maintenance, and opposition of meaning. Kenneth Burke identified two primal social processes, identification and division. In his view, people communicate either to bring themselves together or to set themselves apart. As we become part of particular social groups, as we spend our time interacting with “us” (as opposed to “them”), we come to adopt the patterns of behavior that characterize the group. This temporal process of character development through social participation constitutes identity.

## Music

It is easy to see how music can serve to enable group identification on a sociological level – musical activities such as playing in a band or orchestra are clear cases of coordinated social action. In fact, musical performance can serve as a paradigm case of identification; a successful performance is one where a set of individuals unites by working together toward a single goal, a cohesive presentation of the piece. But with sociology alone, there is not much that sets music apart from the other performative arts, Theater and Dance. Also, with only minor modifications this definition could apply to many other social activities, such as playing a team sport or working for a corporation.

Music differs from other social activities on the semiotic level. Earlier, Suzanne Langer’s definition of the musical sign as an “unconsummated symbol” was cited to establish that music is fundamentally different from language because it lacks denotative force. This distinction does not mean that music

cannot express ideas, it means that music expresses different kinds of ideas. These ideas are non-propositional because they make no claim to represent reality. Langer believes that music expresses ideas about human feeling. In her words, music is

formulation and representation of emotions, moods, mental tensions and resolutions – a “logical picture” of sentiment, responsive life [...] presented directly to our understanding, that we may grasp, realize, comprehend these feelings, without pretending to have them or attributing them to someone else. Just as words can describe events we have not witnessed [...] so music can present emotions and moods we have not felt. (1957: 222)

Langer’s perspective is important because she stresses the isomorphic relationship between the temporal development of an emotion and the temporal character of music. For her,

there are certain aspects of the so-called ‘inner life’ – physical or mental – which have formal properties similar to those of music – patterns of motion and rest, of tension and release, of agreement and disagreement, preparation, fulfillment, excitation, sudden change, etc. (1957: 228)

One limitation of Langer’s theory is that it is psychologistic; it tends to stress the mental and affective dimensions of music over the more muscular or public aspects.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, both Plato and Aristotle noted music’s ability to influence one’s general character through the temporal and active quality of its expression. In *Problems*, Aristotle points to the basic affinity between music and becoming:

[M]usic, even if it is unaccompanied by words, yet has character [...] Why do rhythms and tunes, which after all are only voice, resemble characters, whereas savours do not, nor yet colours and odours? Is it because they are movements, as actions also are? Now activity possesses and instills character, but savours and colours have no similar effect. (1984: 1434, XIX 27-29)

The significance of this quotation rests in Aristotle’s stress on the *performative* qualities of music, speech, and human life. Music offers a stylized presentation of activity that “possesses and instills” character because it both objectively “has” characteristic qualities and also, if fully attended to, requires participation and active thought from the listener. Collingwood, like Aristotle, stresses the analogous relation between speech, music:

Just as what we get out of [a] lecture is something other than the noises we hear proceeding from the lecturer’s mouth, so what we get out of [a] concert is something other than the noises made by the performers. In each case what we get out of it is something we have to reconstruct in our own minds, and by our own efforts; something which remains forever inaccessible to a person who cannot or will not make efforts of the right

kind, however completely he hears the sounds that fill the room in which he is sitting. (1938: 140-141)

“He who makes efforts of the right kind” is a vivid description of the relationship between music and social being. The person that actively engages a work of art becomes one who spends time working with, or expressing for himself, the characteristic (characterological?) ideas expressed within the piece.

It is only through doing that we can manifest and develop a self, and dynamic arts like music move and act as well, inviting participation in a pattern of development. By attending to a musical performance, we can learn about formal possibilities for action, and it is precisely this musical understanding of active modes that Plato sought to limit in his *Republic* (1946: 86-88, III. 398-400). The Mixed Lydian, Hyperlydian, Ionian, and Lydian scales are not banned because they are untruthful, but because they will familiarize the Guardians with personal qualities such as sorrow, softness, indolence, and effeminacy. Likewise, rhythms that express meanness, insolence, and fury are not to be allowed. A censor that focuses upon musical style has recognized that if people can be raised to have the “right” general attitude, or self-concept, then any specific subversive idea will hold little appeal because it runs contrary to an entire way of life.

In aesthetic terms, dynamic arts differ from plastic arts in their relation to human identity. Sculpture presents an image of essence, suggesting how someone or something looks and feels and structures space. Music, on the other hand, symbolizes a becoming – an active and conscious development of time. This has profound implications for what is considered as text or object available for rhetorical critique. Mary Louise Serafine, a cognitive musicologist, has done extensive work on the temporality of musical/textual experience. She points out that the object of criticism can never be the static artifact assumed by many aestheticians:

The object, if there can be said to be one, is a fluid, changing thing, or else there are multiple objects, each constituted from some human-subjective point of view. At best, the central artwork/object is an idealized, hypothetical piece – the area of overlap among all the individual performances and conceptions of the work. This artwork is not a fixed eternal object, but an abstract and fluid one that rests on human cognitive construction in all phases of its existence – composing, performing, listening. (1988: 67)

Serafine’s description applies far beyond music. If we accept people-as-actions, all objects become, at most, foci for participatory events. The critic in this frame studies a social enactment rather than any refined text or object.



The image shows a musical score for the song "Fight the Power" by Public Enemy. It consists of seven staves: Guitar, Synth, Noises, Bass, Cym/Sh (Cymbals and Shakers), Snare, and Kick. The score is written in 4/4 time. The Guitar staff shows a complex melodic line with many sixteenth notes. The Synth staff has a few notes with a wavy line underneath. The Noises staff has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Bass staff has a simple line of eighth notes. The Cym/Sh staff has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Snare staff has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with dynamic markings like "center" and "right". The Kick staff has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with dynamic markings like "center" and "right".

Fig. 2: "Fight the Power"  
(Walser 1995: 201)

## Conclusion

To complete this discussion of musical semiosis, I have selected two critical studies from the recent work on musical communication which look at the bond between musical style and social identity. They will both serve as examples of work that brings semiotic, rhetorical, and musical dimensions together to explain how songs work to manage meaning and relationships. The first article is from the Spring 1995 issue of *Ethnomusicology* – "Rhythm, Rhyme,

and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy" by Robert Walser. Public Enemy's hit song from 1989, "Fight The Power," is an excellent example of how music expresses ideas about human action and its qualities. Fig. 2 notates the first two bars. As with many hip-hop tunes, these two core bars are repeated throughout most of the song and together, they constitute the basic groove for the entire performance. Following Walser's analysis, we can see that the way this particular groove orders time is isomorphic with a characteristic way of being human. The terms we use to describe this pattern of life should be adverbs; Walser's word is "urgently," and I would add powerfully and tensely, as if there is a force that is held back, that cannot fully or smoothly exercise its abilities.

After an invitation to listen and an introductory sample from the band Funk Power, we can hear this pattern enacted on both rhythmic and harmonic levels. In terms of rhythm, the kick drum part, the foundation of the beat that structures the entire song, does not (or cannot) fully establish an even metrical pulse. The eighth-notes at the beginning of each measure clearly define the beat, and the pick-up to the second bar helps articulate the two bar pattern. But in the middle of each measure, what might have been a literal repetition of the eighth-note pattern is set with the first note placed on sixteenth-note notch ahead of the beat. Within every bar, the metric pattern is established and then pushed against, creating a dynamic tension even within the line of a single instrument. (Walser 1995: 200)

The other rhythm instruments both reinforce and balance the disturbed bass drum groove. The snare drum backbeats play with the stereo image and timbre, while the cymbals and shakers work to "steady the groove." (*ibid.* 202)

Harmonically, "Fight The Power's" tonality is also tension filled. The bass guitar sets up a strong D, while the synthesizer tries to hold it's tone, a sustained B.

The synthesizer note is one of only two sustaining, non-percussive sounds in the groove, and its drawn-out B clashes with the D established by the bass. It can be heard as pulling at the tonal orientation, redefining the D as its own third degree, but its fade in each measure weakens this tendency, and the B ends up perched uneasily above, as the unresolved sixth of D. (*ibid.*)

People identify with this song because it presents a mode of human being that effectively expresses the frustrated energy of oppressed groups, in this case America's urban minorities.

The second critical study also deals with minority identity. "Free Jazz and Black Nationalism: A Rhetoric of Musical Style," by Robert Francesconi, ex-



plains how artists within the Free Jazz movement explicitly set out to develop a sense of black identity that stands in dialectical opposition to European standards of melody, harmony, and timbre.

Free jazz, with its emphatic self-description as legitimate artistic expression outside of European musical tradition[s], sought a jarring confrontation with [the] European musical tradition by playing "wrong" in that context. Ornette Coleman's music, [...] was an example of this attempt to "prove" that non-European music and, hence, cultural systems have their own criteria, value, and legitimacy. [...] Free jazz asked that its music and the cultural background creating it be taken seriously as an expression of the true identity of black Americans. (Francesconi 1986: 47)

The title-track from Coleman's 1986 collaboration with Pat Metheny, *Song X*, is an excellent example of how the Free Jazz movement can deny European conventions. The structure of the song is not unusual, a repeated "head" alternating with solos, but the way that this pattern is played quickly sets it apart from Western music. The melody of the head is played in unison, but there is no specific beat to give it any sense of pulse or measure. Instead, each player races through the line, as if to see who can finish first. This is a "wrong" move that every music teacher in the Western hemisphere labors to abolish from day 1. For the solo section, everyone (Charlie Haden on bass, Jack DeJohnette on drums) begins their solo simultaneously, making harmony irrelevant, or at least as "out" as possible. When we also consider the haunting pseudo-horn timbre of Metheny's synth-guitar, this song firmly establishes itself as non-European, yet it still retains a jazz identity that is loud, chaotic, and defiant.

Free jazz is a clear example of musical identification through division. By deliberately playing against the rules of the Western tradition, black artists established themselves as a significant social force.

Our invocation states that "[m]usic is related to us by nature and can enoble or corrupt the character" (Boethius 1986: 66). In conclusion, Boethius' highly evaluative verbs, enoble or corrupt, may be overstating the case, but they do point to the role music can play in identity formation. Music has a unique relationship with social being because music, like life, is a dynamic art performed by granting stylistic quality to action over time. By engaging with music we can learn about formal possibilities for action within our communities; about *how* to deal with one another. These patterns of action both enable coordinated effort and set us apart from other groups of people. In short, ideas about identification and division, Kenneth Burke's two poles of social being,

are embodied within the active forms of musical performance. The process of actively attending to these patterns, of working with these ideas for ourselves, is called Musical Semiosis.

## Notes

- 1 "The transformation which facts undergo when they are rendered as propositions is that the relations in them are turned into something like objects" (Langer 1957: 80).
- 2 A clear example of a semiotic theory of music with a noun focus is Lehtdahl & Jackendoff's Generative Theory of Tonal Music. Note the atemporal quality of the following passage: "By *hierarchy* we mean an organization composed of discrete elements (or regions) related in such a way that one element may subsume or contain other elements. The elements cannot overlap; at any given hierarchical level the elements must be adjacent; and the relation of subsuming or containing can continue recursively from level to level" (1983-4: 231). This description could easily apply to a static art, such as architecture or sculpture. This paper argues for a verb-oriented approach to music, one that stresses its similarities to other *performative* arts, such as dance or theater. I do *not* mean to say that noun-oriented theory is wrong, only that it has dominated semiotic and that it should be complemented with a verb-oriented approach to semiosis.
- 3 In his second book, *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*, Brunmet uses a more traditional semiotic definition: "Rhetoric means [...] the ways in which signs influence people" (1994: 4).
- 4 Of course, Rhetoric as a discipline has its own set of biases. When applied to music, Rhetoric's foundation in Oratory tends to encourage lyrical analyses instead of musical analyses. See Rein/Springer 1986.
- 5 Theories that stress the relationship between music and dance can work to balance Langer's mentalism. This approach has been explored within music education, see Aronoff's *Music and Young Children* (1969) for a good example.

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