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## *Existential semiotic analysis of the temporal and subjective dimensions of art music performance*

**ABSTRACT:** For the philosophers, aesthetics and musicologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the topic of subjectivity in art music was a controversial issue. According to them the musical art work had to be objective. However since the subjectivity of the performer has an important influence on aspects such as sound, rhythm, tempo and emotional input, her presence was considered an obstacle for achieving objective musical works. Most of the theoretic approaches to art music supported such an idea and showed a negative perspective on performance and, even though few scholars argued about the value of performance, the main trend pointed at the performer's subjectivity as an endangerment of music as an objective art.

This article conceives art music as a sonic and temporal phenomenon and, from this perspective considers that the performer's subjectivity is an important and active element that plays a key role in the creation of musical art works. From an existential semiotic perspective this article analyses distinct aspects of the performer's subjectivity and develops an adaptation of this theory created by Eero Tarasti to the study of subjectivity in performance and its relation with temporality. The existential semiotic theory claims that signs are created by subjects in their act of existing. In this manner subjectivity is located as a central element deeply involved in semiosis processes that creates a rich universe of signs and meaning. This article attempts to show that the sonic dimension of art music can be enriched by the presence of the performer's subjectivity rather than being an endangerment for it.

**KEYWORDS:** subjectivity, objectivity, temporality, existential semiotics, music performance, subject.

### 1. Introduction

The object of study of this article is art music performance as a temporal art. Music is composed by spatial, sonic and temporal dimensions which are created by a performer. Therefore this article considers that the performer's subjectivity plays a crucial role in art music. This article analyses the relationship between the performer's subjectivity and temporality in the context of art music from the perspective of the existential semiotic theory created by Eero Tarasti<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eero Tarasti, *Existential Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

and it introduces an adaptation of the existential semiotic theory to the study of art music performance.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of subject applied in this article is the one proposed by the existential *semiotics* theory: The subject is not a passive receiver of messages and signs that he decodes according to social agreement only, rather the subject creates the signs and plays a key role in the process of semiosis. The creation of signs, according to Tarasti<sup>3</sup> implies the act of existing by the subject.

Music as well as other performing art manifests in time, therefore my investigation approaches music performance as a temporal art. Some of the former research on the topic of musical time and temporality in music has been made by Jonathan D. Kramer and Barbara R. Barry, among others. In the field of semiotics Eero Tarasti and Thomas Reiner have approached the topic of musical time in their books.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Precedents on the study of the subjectivity in art music: objectivity vs. subjectivity

Some scholars such as Naomi Cumming<sup>5</sup> have shown that the range of action of the performer's subjectivity reaches a large scope of elements of art music such as sound, rhythm, emotive input, etc. However most of musicologists, music philosophers and aesthetics of the nineteenth and twenty century had an opposite view of subjectivity. Rather for these scholars subjectivity was considered as a negative element for art music, and it took some time before started to appear opposite views of that. My perspective on subjectivity in performance is closer to Cumming's theories, but I consider important to introduce in the following paragraphs a general view on the theoretical approach to subjectivity developed in the previous two centuries in its historic and philosophic contexts, and to compare it with a distinct perspective on the topic. The aim of that is to show some the theoretical bases that were behind the idea of subjectivity as a problematic aspect of music. These ideas were the origin of a battle at the theoretical and practical levels between the objectivity of the work vs. the performer's subjectivity. But also this situation opened further discussion on the role and importance of subjectivity in art music. These discussions are important basis for understanding the role of subjectivity in art music.

Nineteenth century's aesthetics schools defined the concept of art work as created in its totality by one author. This feature gave to the art work's concept its

<sup>2</sup> This article is based on my M.A. thesis *An Existential Semiotic Approach to Music Performance* (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Tarasti, *Existential Semiotics*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Eero Tarasti, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), Thomas Reiner, *Semiotics of Musical Time* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Naomi Cumming, *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

character of objective and musical compositions were also defined in similar terms. However, for some twenty century's scholars, such as Gisèle Brelet<sup>6</sup> these ideas did not match with the intrinsic aspects of music. Brelet claimed that music could not be defined in terms of objectivity. In her view music has distinct features to art objects (such as paint and sculpture) that are created and finished by its author. Rather Brelet<sup>7</sup> argued that music is an art of the time which has a fugacious and ephemeral character unable to keep the forms. Brelet<sup>8</sup> argued that music was not an objective art, in terms of a finished works, because even though the musical work was written in a score by a composer, the performer is not able to reproduce an exact copy of it, therefore art music could not be considered objective. Furthermore Brelet<sup>9</sup> emphasized that a musical work is not completed until it is actualized by a performer. During the twenty century these perspectives on music performance created controversy among the musicology's and music philosophy's circles, however, they defended the idea that musical works were objective and attempted to diminish the importance of the subjectivity of the performer, for them it endangered the objectivity of the musical works.<sup>10</sup> This idea however from the perspective of art music as a human art is far away from its reality. Musical sounds are created by humans therefore their subjectivity is an active and an intrinsic aspect of music as sound, which cannot be removed from it. In the following paragraphs I present an analysis of subjectivity art music performance. But first I introduce some of the *existential semiotic* tools applied in this study.

### 3. Existential Semiotics" theoretical framework

The concepts *Moi* and *Soi* (created by Ricoeur) are interpreted by Tarasti's model as follows: *Moi* represents the individual aspects of the subject and encompasses two dimensions of her subjectivity: the body (*M1*) and psyche (*M2*). *Soi* refers to the subject's social sphere in which the symbolic level, and communication processes are part of it. *Soi* is composed by *S1* that represents the norms, ideas and values of the social context that are virtual and potentialities of a subject; and *S2* represents the norms, ideas and values of the social context actualized by the society. *Moi* and *Soi* are embraced by the Uexkül's concept: *Ich-tone*. In this manner in *Moi* and *Soi* are represented some aspects of subjectivity:

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<sup>6</sup> Gisèle Brelet, *L'Interprétation Créatrice: L'exécution et L'œuvre* : Vol. 1 & 2 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 2–5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> It was until the end of the twenty century that started to appear new approaches that started to reconsider the possibility that the performance was important in art music.

M1: 'Being in myself: Represents our bodily ego, which appears as kinetic energy, chora, desire, gestures, intonations, Peirce's "First".' [...] '(WILL)'

M2: 'Being for myself: Corresponds to Kierkegaard's attitude of an 'observer.'" [...] "The ego discovers its identity, it reaches certain kind of stability and permanent corporeality via habit' [...] (CAN)'

S1: 'Being in itself is a transcendental category. It refers to norms ideas and values which are purely conceptual and virtual, they are potentialities of a subject, which he or she may or may not actualize.'" [...] '(MUST)."

S2: 'Being for itself: means the afore mentioned norms, ideas and values as realized by the conduct of a subject in his Dasein. Those abstract entities appear here as "distinctions", applied values, choices, realizations that will be far from original transcendental entities. [...] (KNOW)."<sup>11</sup>

My application<sup>12</sup> of this four dimensional model in the context of music performance follows most of the original aspects developed by Tarasti's theory: *M1* refers to the performer's individual features of the body, *chora* and emotions ; *M2* embraces the performer's individual choices triggered by conscious processes and artistic needs. *S2* refers to the instrumental and interpretative techniques as well as to the instrumental school.

The main distinction between Tarasti's model and the one I present is that *S1* represents the concept *Werktreue* defined by Roger W.H. Savage<sup>13</sup> as "fidelity to the work and faithful reproduction of an original intent [by a composer]". I consider that *Werktreue* is a concrete concept that represents the aesthetic and artistic values of art music from the nineteenth century to our days. The essence of *Werktreue* has strong presence in most of aspects related to the creation and perception of art music; it regulates musical institutions, as well as the performer's interpretations in a great manner.

## 4. The Existential Signs Theory

The "existential signs" are those created by the subject in *Dasein*.<sup>14</sup> As Tarasti<sup>15</sup> explains the subject moves from one *Dasein* to another in search for transcendence: "My model is based upon the idea that the subject living in his world glimpses and strives for transcendence since he or she experiences the world

<sup>11</sup> Eero Tarasti, *Semiotics of Classical Music: How Mozart, Brahms and Wagner Talk to Us* (Walter de Gruyter: Berlin – Boston, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Macdonel, *An Existential Semiotic Approach*, 81.

<sup>13</sup> Roger W.H. Savage, 'Social *Werktreue* and the musical work's independent afterlife', *The European Legacy* 9 (2004), no. 4, 515–524.

<sup>14</sup> Tarasti, *Existential Semiotics*, 30–31.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

of mere *Dasein* as insufficient. “The trigger of the subject’s actions, according to Tarasti is what Sartre called *néantisation*:

There is a subject dwelling in the *Dasein*, who feels it somehow deficient, not satisfactory, and so negates it. This is what Jean-Paul Sartre called *néantisation*<sup>16</sup>, the lack of the existence which forces the subject to search for something else and more.

This situation in which a subject searches for transcendence is the origin of the creation of signs. In the context of art music (and any other kind of music), the musicians are dealing constantly with a search for something else in their interpretations, and often this situation emerges in a similar way than what Sartre called *néantisation*.

#### 4.1. *Pre-sign, Act-sign and Post-sign*

The *existential signs* theory is composed by twelve categories of signs, but in this article I apply only three of them: the *pre-sign*, *act-sign* and *post-sign*. Tarasti’s<sup>17</sup> investigations attempt “to discover the life of signs from within.” He developed a dynamic view of signs as a process of becoming:<sup>18</sup>

Existential semiotics aims for discovering the life of signs from “within.” It studies unique phenomena – unlike most previous semiotics which investigates the conditions of such particular meanings. It studies signs in movement and flux signs becoming i.e. as pre-signs, act-signs and post-signs [...].

According to the *existential semiotic* approach the whole process in which a sign is created matters, therefore the moments of before and after the signs appear are meaningful and the study of this process provides a wide understanding of them.

Tarasti<sup>19</sup> analyzes the creative process involved in musical composition. In his analysis he presents distinct moments of the creation of a musical work in distinct states: The moment of its creation; its appearance as musical sounds created by the performer, and the moment in which the listener receives it. Tarasti defines each one of these stages of a musical work as *pre-sign*, *act-sign* and *post sign* respectively, and he defines them as follows: the *pre-signs* are “the musical ideas of a composer which have not yet become concrete signs in the score of performance. Such signs are virtual.” The *pre-signs* are “signs in process of forming and shap-

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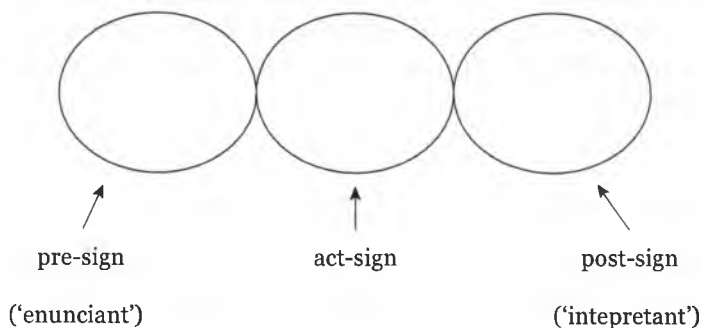
<sup>16</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness. An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956).

<sup>17</sup> Eero Tarasti, Unpublished article, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Eero Tarasti, “Existential and Transcendental Analysis of Music”, *Studi Musicali* 34 (2005), no 2, 223–266, Eero Tarasti, *A Theory of Subject: Subject Reconsidered*, unpublished.

ing themselves”.<sup>20</sup> The *act-sign* is the *pre-sign* when is “actualized in the world of *Dasein*.” In other words, the composer’s *act-signs* are the “[...] *pre-signs* that become manifest as notation or as performance or when the music is listened”.<sup>21</sup> Tarasti explains that signs are in flux, therefore the composer’s *pre-sign* does not stop after a concert has finished. Rather it becomes a *post-sign*. The *post-sign* is defined as “the impact upon the listeners after hearing and experiencing a musical performance”.<sup>22</sup>



Tarasti, *Existential Semiotics*, 33

This model shows the three “existential signs” in their process of becoming. This process implies temporal dimensions to which they belong: the *pre-sign* is the past, *act-sign* is the present; and *post-sign* is the future of the sign. The question now is: how musical performance can be analyzed from the perspective of the “existential signs” theory? In the following paragraphs I introduce an application of the *existential signs* theory in the context of art music performance.

#### 4.2. *Existential signs* and temporality in musical performance

Musical time is created via the musical performance, but also the performer experiences temporality. The performer’s experience of temporality can be similar to the one described by Augustine in his *Confessions*.<sup>23</sup> Sartre thought that the past, the present and the future were not separated moments in time rather he considers that they affect each other and that modify themselves:

<sup>20</sup> Tarasti, *Existential Semiotics*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> M. Charles Sherover, ed., *The Human Experience of Time: The Development of Its Philosophical Meaning* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1975), 81.

The phenomenon of temporal becoming is a global modification since a Past which would be the Past *of* nothing would no longer be a Past and since a Present must be necessarily the Present of this Past. This metamorphosis, moreover, affects not only the pure Present; the former Past and Future are equally affected.<sup>24</sup>

The creation of sonic musical works involves a process in which the past, present and future are present. These moments in performance can be described as follows: The present is the moment in which the performer is creating the work via musical sounds. The past can be described as the musical ideas that a performer had before he approaches a musical work or the preparation of it. The past also can be defined as the sound that after the moment of being played becomes a memory. And the future — from the perspective of the Now — is all the potential musical ideas and sounds which happen not yet.

### 4.3. *Being* and temporality

Sartre's model of temporality presents an ontological view of the self which is divided in the concepts of *Being-in-itself* and *Being-for-itself*. The former is the object of consciousness and the latter is the consciousness itself. Sartre defined the characteristics of the *in-itself* as solid and *for-itself* as non-self identical and dynamic:

Being-for-itself is free, refers to the consciousness: *Being For-itself* is mainly on the conscious experience. [And] It is the realm of the human being.

Being-in-itself is the non-conscious being and *in-itself* exist without justification. In Sartre's theory the existence of *Being-for-itself* depends on the *negation* of the *Being-in-itself*.<sup>25</sup>

Sartre conceived that both structures are bounded through temporality. In other words, the temporal dimensions of past, present and future create a link between the mind and body and in performance this link manifests in musical sounds he creates. As the existential signs theory shows the signs created by a subject pass through distinct phases in distinct moments of time. In the case of performance, the musician creates those signs but as a sonic phenomenon. According to this idea the existential signs in the context of performance appear as follows.<sup>26</sup>

**Music Performance's pre-signs** is the performer's virtual idea of interpretation of a musical object.

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<sup>24</sup> I interpret Sartre's idea of the relationship between the past, present and future as influencing only at certain extent one each other and in this manner there is a relationship between them. However I do not stand for the idea of the future as absolutely determined by its past.

<sup>25</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 629.

<sup>26</sup> Macdonel, *An Existential Semiotic Approach*, 157.

**Music Performance's *act-signs*** in performance are the musical sounds created by the performer on the stage in real time during the performance.

**Music Performance's *post-signs*** of performance is similar to the original *post-sign* created by Tarasti, which is "the impact upon the listeners after hearing and experiencing a musical performance." The *post-sign* of the performance is also sonic memory that arouses an emotional state in the listener and the performer after a concert.

#### 4.4. Is the Performance's *Pre-sign* a Sign of the Future?

From the perspective of a linear time dimension, the *pre-sign* (a mental image) exists previous to the *act-sign*. The *pre-sign* in the performer mind is a point of reference for creating a possible interpretation of a work in the future. However, the *pre-sign* could not be achieved exactly as the performer did imagine. The main reason for that is that certain situations that occur during the actual performance could affect the *pre-sign* in its process of becoming an *act-sign*. These situations could be either aspects related with the performer's subjectivity such as choice, unconscious reactions or aspects that are out of control from the performer. For some scholars such as Brelet (1951), Sloboda (1985), Clark (1985), Cumming (2000), and Tarasti (2000) choice is something more than a metaphor for describing an aspect of subjectivity, rather the performer choice is an element in music performance able to affect the future. For instance, during a performance in real time the musician can experience distinct mental states and even though he planned previously how to interpret a musical piece, he can eventually during the concert to change his mind and to interpret the work in distinct way to what she had was planned. In other cases, the performer's subconscious (*MI*) can manifests taking her for surprise, and this would change her original interpretative idea. Therefore in performance there is always uncertainty that the original *pre-sign* would become in its totality an *act-sign*.

Thus the *pre-sign* can be a virtual idea which may or may not be achieved. This situation is one of the main reasons why the aspirations of nineteenth century aestheticians about objective musical works as exact copies of the written score fail, because the performer's subjectivity and choice are able to affect the *act-sign* of a musical work. This shows also that the temporal dimension of the existential signs are interrelated, this relation depends mainly of the performer's subjectivity.

#### 4.5. The *Post-sign*

From the perspective of linear time the *post-sign* is the future of a *pre-sign*. The *post-sign* is an emotional state experimented by the listener after a concert that becomes a listener's sonic memory that appears after the performance.

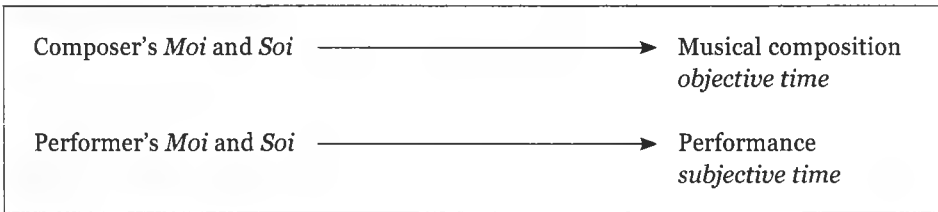


## 5. The *Temporal act-sign*

As a result of my theoretic explorations on music performance with the *existential semiotic* theory, I created an existential sign that I call temporal act-sign<sup>27</sup>. The temporal act-sign can be applied in the context of music performance<sup>28</sup>, and encompasses its phenomenological and temporal aspects. As it was previously shown the musical sounds, rhythm and other aspects of music are impregnated of the *Moi* and *Soi* of the performer. Consequently one of the main features of the temporal act-sign is that includes aspects of the subjectivity of the performer and its relation with temporality. In the following paragraphs I explain some features of the temporal–act sign.

### 5.1. The *Temporal act-sign* and the *subjective* and the *objective* time

Brelet's theories included an ontological view of musical time and in her perspective the time dimension of musical works was composed by an objective and a subjective time. The composer's work time is the objective time; and the subjective time was created by the performer's interpretation. My analysis concentrates on the subjective time created by the performer and explores the way in which it interrelates with the objective time of the work.

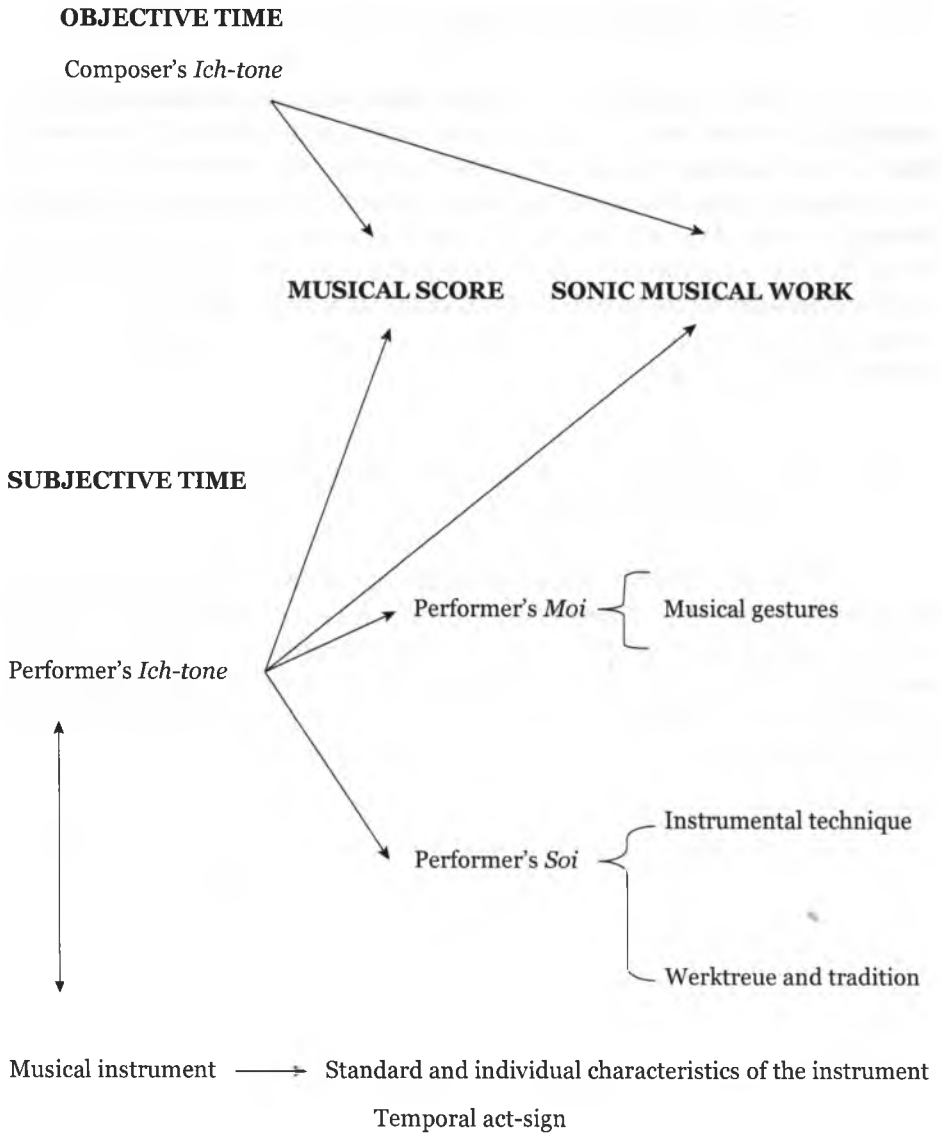


#### Objective and Subjective Times in the *Temporal act-sign*

The temporal act-sign embraces the whole phenomenon of the performance created by the performer's subjectivity via his musical instrument. The following diagram shows these elements of the temporal act-sign:

<sup>27</sup> Macdonel, *An Existential Semiotic Approach*, 173.

<sup>28</sup> The *temporal act-sign* can also be applied for studying other performance arts.



### 6. Conclusions

The presence of the objective and subjective times eventually creates a sort of tension which is also generated by the confrontation between the performer's *Moi* and *Werktreue*. The existential semiotic analysis shows that in the moment in which a score (*act-sign*) is actualized by the temporal-act sign the

performer's subjectivity has an effect upon the musical works. Therefore art music cannot be considered as mere objective. However some aspects of the musical works cannot be absolutely transformed. Rather as it was explained *Werktreue* regulates many aspects of the performance practices, and in this manner the objective and the subjective elements interrelate and struggle in the *temporal act-sign*. The subjective presence of the performers cannot be hidden from their musical interpretations. Rather the subjectivity of the performer gives richness to art music and one of the main results of her interaction with the objective time there is an immeasurable number of unique sonic and temporal versions of musical works.

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