The Enterprise of Music Semiotics: Narratological Approaches to Franz Liszt's Symphonic Poems

Annie Yen-Ling Liu
Soochow University, China

Abstract

The semiotics of music involves an interdisciplinary dialogue between linguistics and musicology. The discipline raises questions about whether sounds can be studied as signs and whether music can function as a symbol. If language provides a useful model for musical analysis, music theorists and analysts must demonstrate the way music represents a system of communication and how this communication system functions. Because communication is so closely tied to the status of language as an interpreting system, music analysis based on language has become more and more complex.

Semiotics has had a wide influence on music in the twentieth century. Music semioticians have been concerned with defining the "sign" in music, the most basic semiotic term with the least stable meaning. Kofi Agawu has argued that it "falsifies the semiotic enterprise" if one pursues a single and stable definition. Among all of the definitions of signs, the notion of "topic" has proved to be the most useful, allowing analysts to produce a fruitful set of tools in understanding eighteenth and nineteenth-century music. With the aid of the notion of "topic," a reading of the surface of classical music as a historically and socioculturally specific area of expression is made possible.

In some cases, the combination of topical sequences allows analysts to construct a simple, preliminary plot for a work. "Plot" in a work refers to a coherent narrative that is offered as an analogy or metaphor. According to Agawu, topical identification enables a comparison of the "content" of different works, and the discovery of works that may have similar plots or narratives. Agawu's account offers a model to illuminate some aspects of Franz Liszt's symphonic poems. My research in this area demonstrates that Liszt generated a unique musical narrative in each work by establishing both a correlation and tension among musical topics, literary programs, and innovative formal structures. It is the correlation and tension among these three layers—topical allusions, supporting texts, and musical form, which constitutes

music's ability to narrate a story analogous to the experience of literary narrative.

The semiotics of music involves an interdisciplinary dialogue between linguistics and musicology. The discipline raises questions about whether sounds can be studied as signs and whether music can function as a symbol. The answers, which deal with meaning and communication in music, are often controversial. Since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, music theorists have used language or language-based disciplines to describe music. In this period, rhetoric provided a useful model in terms of concepts and terminology. Johann Mattheson for instance employed rhetorical terms in characterizing the process of composing a piece of music. In his *Vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739), Mattheson suggested a six-stage model for composition: *exordium* (introduction), *narratio* (report), *propositio* (proposal), *confirmatio* (corroboration), *confutatio* (refutation), and *peroratio* (conclusion) (Mattheson, 1981).[1] Later in the eighteenth century, celebrated theorists such as Heinrich Koch continued to borrow from rhetoric and further shifted from rhetoric to linguistics and the use of grammatical terms. These trends have continued to shape present-day scholarship in music theory, music analysis, and musicology (Agawu, 1991, p. 7).

If language provides a useful model for musical analysis, music theorists and analysts must demonstrate the way music represents a system of communication and how this communication system functions. Because communication is so closely tied to the status of language as an interpreting system, music analysis based on language has become more and more complex.

As one of the most significant developments in twentieth-century intellectual history, semiotics has had a wide influence on music research (Agawu, 1991, p. 10).[2] Music semioticians have been interested in defining the "sign" in music. In forming a definition, they ask the following questions: Where do musical signs come from? How many types and kinds of musical signs are there? What is the basis for their classification? What is the relationship among them? What are their various uses (Agawu, 1991, p. 11)? According to Kofi Agawu, although music semioticians have sharpened the formulation of these questions, it is not the first discipline to point to them. The prehistory of musical semiotics dates back to the study of musical rhetoric in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Agawu, 1991, p. 11). In other words, music theory and aesthetics have implicitly raised semiotic questions about meaning and communication in music, but an explicitly semiotic theory of music was not developed until the early 1970s.

Agawu has categorized two distinct schools of music semioticians. One is the *taxonomic-empiricists*. The primary taxonomic-empiricist is Jean-Jacques Nattiez (b. 1945). In his comprehensive survey of musical semiotics, Nattiez has emphasized that "the goal of a musical semiotics is to inventory the types and modalities of symbolic references

to which the music gives rise, and to elaborate an appropriate methodology to describe their symbolic functioning" (Agawu, 1991, p. 12). Nattiez distinguishes two branches within the semiotics of music. The first and major branch studies music as an acoustic system of signs. The second branch studies systems of musical notation, which consist of graphic signs denoting acoustic signs. Borrowing from the linguist Jean Molino, Nattiez provides an analytical paradigm consisting of the poietic-esthesic-neutral tripartition. The poietic describes the processes of a work's production, whereas the esthesic describes its processes of perception. The neutral level refers to a score, in which an analyst could develop an objective and scientific analysis of music.

The other school in Agawu's categorization is the *semanticists*. For semanticists, the business of semiotics is the linguistic sign, whereas that of semantics is discourse. "Semantics," in other words, refers to meanings as differential functions generated by and within a discourse. A composition is like a discourse whose sound elements are interrelated to form a coherent whole. Music semioticians need both *taxonomic-empiricist* and *semanticist* approaches in order to gain the richest understanding of (classical) music.

The most basic semiotic term with the least stable meaning is the sign. There cannot be a single definition for the "sign" in music. Agawu has argued that it falsifies the semiotic enterprise if one pursues a single and stable definition (Agawu, 1991, p. 16). Signs may indicate tempo or expressive effect through language (such as short phrases or words). Signs may also denote "structural melody," which is understood within a specified theory of diminution and displayed graphically (as in Schenkerian analysis). Signs may also denote topics which are significant within a cultural context (Agawu, 1991, p. 16). Those signs involve the conventional associations of certain kinds of musical material. Among all of the definitions of signs, the notion of "topic" has proved to be the most useful, and it allows analysts to produce the most fruitful set of tools in understanding eighteenth and nineteenth-century music. With the notion of "topic," a reading of the surface of classical music within its historical and sociocultural context is first developed. One crucial aspect of a topical analysis is the listener's competence, which allows the composer to communicate with his audience using a common language.

What are topics? Topics are musical signs; they are characters and subjects of musical discourse. They "consist of a signifier and a signified": "signifiers are identified as a relational unit within the dimensions of melody, harmony, meter, rhythm…while the signified is designated by conventional labels drawn mostly from eighteenth-century historiography" (Agawu, 1991, p. 49). They may refer to dance types such as the bourrée, march, minuet, gavotte, and sarabande. They also may refer to musical gestures such as sigh motifs, cadenzas, and Mannheim rockets. They could also refer to numerous styles including the brilliant style, sensibility (*Empfindsamkeit*), fanfare, fantasy, French overture, hunt style, learned style, ombra, opera buffa, pastoral, recitative, singing style, Sturm und Drang, and Turkish music.[3]

According to Agawu, music theorists and analysts who adopt "topic" theory have been engaged with the following questions: How are topics perceived? Does every piece

of Classic music have a topic? How many topics can a single work sustain? How are topics presented: do they unfold singly or can they unfold simultaneously (Agawu, 1991, p. 26)?

Leonard Ratner's *Classic Music* is the first study which fully engages with these questions (Ratner, 1980). Ratner argues that all eighteenth-century music is essentially referential. He offers a classification of "topics," which may be grouped under two broad categories: the first consists of musical types and includes various dances such as minuet, passepied, sarabande, polonaise, bourrée, contredanse, gavotte, gigue, siciliano, and march. Music from the classical era inherited these stylized dances from the earlier part of the eighteenth century (Agawu, 1991, p. 32). Composers not only used them as individual musical types but also incorporated them into other works. The second broad category consists of styles of music: Ratner lists a collection of references from military style, hunt music, fanfares, horn-calls, singing style, brilliant style, French overture, musette/pastorale, Turkish music, *Sturm und Drang*, sensibility or *Empfindsamkeit*, the strict or learned style, to fantasia (Agawu, 1991, p. 32). Although topics can provide clues to what is being "told" in a piece of music and make themselves semiotic objects, they are not able to sustain an independent account of a piece. In other words, they point to the expressive domain without syntax. Topics reflect certain expressive stances; however, they never assume the role of structuring music.

Two central concepts therefore are important in the enterprise of music semioticians: expression and structure. A sequence of topics forms expressions on surface; however, it requires an engagement with the relational pitch structure, which leads to the involvement of a formal plan. In creating semantic meanings or syntax, the referential surface in music works against the apparently nonreferential tonal and formal structure. Only through a combination of expression and structure may one gain musical syntax, semantic meanings, and discourse in music.

In understanding how the expression of the surface may be integrated into the structure, Agawu has suggested that we need to know two more critical terms proposed by Roman Jakobson. According to Agawu, Jakobson makes the distinction between "introversive semiotics" and "extroversive semiotics." By introversive semiosis, Jakobson means "the reference of each sonic element to the other elements to come," whereas "extroversive semiosis" denotes "the referential link with the exterior world" (Agawu, 1991, p. 23). Topical signs represent the world of extroversive semiosis, whereas intramusical signs, such as tonal or formal syntax, depict the world of introversive semiosis. The point of a semiotic analysis is to provide an account of a piece, in which extroversive semiosis is integrated with introversive semiosis. The dialectical interplay between these two aspects guides the analysis.

In some cases, the combination of topical sequences allows analysts to construct a simple, preliminary plot for a work. "Plot" in a work refers to a coherent narrative that is offered as an analogy or metaphor. A narrative may be based on specific historical events, it may be related to interesting analogies with social situations, or it may be suggestive

of a more generalized discourse (Agawu, 1991, p. 33). According to Agawu, topical identification enables a comparison of the "content" of different works, and different works may have similar plots or narratives (Agawu, 1991, p. 34).

Agawu's account offers a model to illuminate some aspects of Franz Liszt's symphonic poems. As representative works of avant-garde music in the mid-nineteenth century, Liszt's instrumental symphonic poems were given textual programs. Two of Liszt's symphonic poems, *Prometheus* and *Tasso*, depict mythological or historical heroes. Three common traits bring these two works together. First, a *Sturm und Drang* topic is followed by a lyrical expression (singing style), leading towards an apotheosis (triumph). Second, the transformation of the lyrical theme constitutes the apotheosis. Last, the tonal arch, the minor-to-major movement, accompanies the thematic trajectory, suggesting a hero's struggle-to-victory. Because of the shared use of the topics, the expressions on the surface do not make a significant distinction between these two characters. This lack of differentiation in fact has provoked negative reactions in the reception of Liszt's symphonic works. Liszt's tendency to end his symphonic works with triumphant gestures in particular has been considered as bombastic noise and banal rhetoric. Such endings embody what Alexander Rehding has characterized as "showy monumentality" (Rehding, 2009, p. 52). Underlying these critiques is a concern that the lack of distinction among "apotheoses"—the recurrence of similar triumphant gestures in different works—is not only formulaic and trite but potentially unmotivated by the very programs that are meant to establish their structure.

The similar sequences of topics generate a similar plot or narrative. Nevertheless, it is the narrative structure, involving a tonal or formal syntax, which differentiates *Prometheus* from *Tasso*. In other words, when we consider integrating expression with structure, "extroversive semiotics" with "introversive semiotics," *taxonomic-empiricist* with *semanticist* paradigms, we may gain a unique narrative for each work. Liszt's symphonic poems furthermore present another layer of generating musical meanings: textual programs. My work examines the role of narrativity in Liszt's symphonic poems by considering it as a fusion of multiple means or parameters. My central claim is that Liszt generated a unique musical narrative in each work by establishing both a correlation and tension among musical topics, literary programs, and innovative formal structures. It is the correlation and tension among these three layers—topical allusions, supporting texts, and musical form, which constitutes music's ability to narrate a story analogous to the experience of literary narrative.

Musical narrativity has been a subject of significant scholarly activity since at least the 1980s. The fundamental question addressed in this literature is whether music has the ability to narrate independently of language. If the answer is positive, in which ways does music meet the basic requirements for narrative? If the answer is negative, what then are the precise limitations that prevent music from achieving narrativity? Furthermore, if the latter is the case, may music nonetheless operate as "narrative" at a metaphorical level? In other words, does music only resemble the outward appearance of a literary narrative?

The literature on the issue is extensive; in this brief review, I want to highlight

several themes that I see as critical to the case of narrativity in Liszt. Anthony Newcomb has introduced the concept of an archetypal plot in a series of writings on narrativity in Robert Schumann and Gustav Mahler (see Newcomb, 1987, 1992). Márta Grabócz has analyzed the narrative structures in Liszt's piano music by adopting a semiotic approach (see Grabócz, 2002). These studies, despite their different approaches, argue for self-generating narrativity within musical works.

Other scholars have raised doubts about this kind of musical narrativity. Nattiez has admitted the existence of a "narrative impulse" in musical discourse but has questioned music's semantic referentiality; in particular, he has argued that the causal relationships between actions and emotions cannot be specified through music (see Nattiez, 1990). Similarly, Carolyn Abbate has argued that music resists narrativity because of its lack of a narrating voice. Among these parameters is the purported lack of a past tense in music (see Abbate, 1991). Nattiez and Abbate both argue that musical narrativity operates only at a metaphorical level: it is the listeners' mental "narrative activity" which generates musical narrative. This rejection of musical narrativity has been challenged by other scholars. Vera Micznick, for instance, has argued that the view of narrative as a process in the listener's mind should not disqualify music's potential to recount stories, especially as so-called pure musical analysis is also imbued with rich metaphors (see Micznick, 2001).

In comparison with other genres, instrumental, wordless music has attracted more attention in the study of musical narrativity than program music. This situation might be related to the often abstract and non-referential quality of instrumental music, which may not only lead to the most fruitful and rich interpretations but also offer the greatest challenge to the idea of narrativity. In comparison with pure instrumental music, program music, which involves multiple communicative media, is rarely explored through the lens of narrativity.

The issue of narrativity in Liszt's symphonic poems is complicated by the debate concerning the "intrinsic" quality of musical narrativity, which is rendered more acute through the use of programs. If the program is an integral part of the symphonic poems, as Liszt emphasized, we should consider the relationship between program and music in terms of narrativity. We should also consider the narrative discourse suggested in the program and its relationship with musical form, which usually deflects conventional musical forms and therefore brings another layer to the narrative structure suggested in the program.

As Ratner argued, topics never assume the role of structuring music. Music only presents its narrative structure through integrating tonal and formal syntax into topical expressions on the surface. This is how discourse and semantic meanings are generated. In short, an understanding of musical narrativity must involve both expression and structure. Nineteenth-century composers such as Liszt, Berlioz, Schumann, and Chopin believed that music has the power to "speak" and narrate. This is also the period when composers explored the possibility of creating complex formal designs by deviating from conventional forms. The complex forms they created contribute to generating semantic meanings, musical discourses, and narrativity along with topical expressions. The enterprise of music semioticians (in analyzing nineteenth-century music) is to explore musical meanings by

examining how topics collaborate or conflict with textual programs and formal structures.

Notes

1 Mattheson's model is based on Joachim Burmeister's three-stage model (*exordium, confirmatio*, and *conclusio*).

2 Agawu also has mentioned that semiotics also has had a wide influence on other disciplines such as linguistics, anthropology, literature, music, and others.

3 Mozart's letter to his father introduced the concept of topic—"Turkish music". "Now comes the rub. The first act was finished more than three weeks ago, as was also one aria in Act II and the drunken duet (per I signori viennesi) which consists entirely of my Turkish tattoo" (Anderson, 1989, p. 770). The work Mozart in the letter is referring to is his opera *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*.

References

Abbate, C. (1991). *Unsung voices: Opera and musical narrative in the nineteenth century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Agawu, K. (1991). *Playing with signs: A semiotic interpretation of classic music*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Agawu, K. (2009). *Music as discourse: Semiotic adventures in romantic music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Anderson, E. (1989). *The letters of Mozart* (3rd ed.). NY: W. W. Norton & Co.

Grabócz, M. (2002). Common narrative structures in music and literature: A semio-stylistic investigation in the arts of the nineteenth century (Liszt and Goethe). In J. Samson & B. Zon (Eds.), *Nineteenth-Century Music Selected Proceedings of the Tenth International Conference*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Kaplan, R. (1984). Sonata form in the orchestral works of Liszt: The revolutionary reconsidered. *19th-Century Music, 8*(2), 142-152.

Liszt, F. (1853). Essay on Wagner's *Tannhäuser* (J. S. Dwight, Trans.). In *Dwight's Journal of Music: A Paper of Art and Literature, 6*(8).

Liszt, F. (1978). Berlioz und seine *Harold Symphonie*. In L. Ramann (Ed.), *Gesammelte Schriften* (Vol. 4) (facsimile ed.). Hildesheim: Breitkopf & Härtel. (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1897)

Liszt, F. (1978). Robert Schumann [1855]. In *Gesammelte Schriften* (Vol. 4). Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel.

Liszt, F. (2000). *Sämtliche Schriften* (Vol. 1) (R. Kleinertz, Ed.). Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel.

Mattheson, J. (1981). *Der vollkommene Capellmeister: A revised translation with critical commentary* (E. C. Hariss., Trans.). Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press.

Mattheson, J. (2008). *Der Vollkommene Capellmeister*. Bärenreiter Verlag.

Maus, F. E. (1988). Music as drama. *Music Theory Spectrum, 10*, 55-73.

Micznick, V. (2001). Music and narrative revisited: Degrees of narrativity in Beethoven and Mahler. *Journal of the Royal Musical Association, 126*(2), 193-249.

Nattiez, J.-J. (1990). Can one speak of narrativity in music? *Journal of the Royal Musical Association,*

115(2), 240-257.

Newcomb, A. (1984). Once more "between absolute and program music": Schumann's Second Symphony. *19th-Century Music, 7*(3), 233-250.

Newcomb, A. (1987). Schumann and late eighteenth-century narrative strategies. *19th-Century Music, 11*(2), 164-174.

Newcomb, A. (1992). Narrative archetypes and Mahler's Ninth Symphony. In S. P. Scher (Ed.), *Music and text: Critical inquiries* (pp. 118-136). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ratner, L. (1980). *Classic music: Expression, form, and style*. NY: Schirmer Books.

Rehding, A. (2002). Liszt's musical monuments. *19th-Century Music, 26*(1), 52-72.

Rehding, A. (2009). *Music and monumentality: Commemoration and wonderment in nineteenth-century Germany*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

About the author

Annie Yen-Ling Liu (ylliuannie@suda.edu.cn) is Associate Professor of Music History in the School of Music at Soochow University, China. She earned her PhD in Music History from Stanford University, USA with a dissertation on Liszt's symphonic poems, investigating the cultural meaning of the works, their relation to the Beethovenian monumental style, and their function as musical monuments. Her current research and teaching interests include the symphony in the nineteenth century, the New German School, German Romanticism, and aesthetics across the visual arts and literature. She has published articles on these and related topics in *Arts and Terror*, *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, *Sun Yat-sen Journal of Humanities*, *NTU Humanitas Taiwanica*, *Journal of CCOM*, *Estetica: Studi e Ricerche*, and *Journal of Music History Pedagogy*.