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An analysis of the music symbols in Pascal Quignard's *Tous les matins du monde*

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Abstract: This research paper delves into the intricate role of music as a symbolic form in Pascal Quignard's novel *Tous les matins du monde*, exploring its capacity to convey profound human emotions and experiences. Set against the backdrop of 17th-century France, the narrative follows the lives of Monsieur de Sainte Colombe and Marin Marais, renowned viola da gamba players, to contemplate the essence of music and its representation of human sentiment. The paper examines the semiotic nature of music, its relationship with memory and emotion, and the philosophical inquiry into music's intrinsic value as an art form. It also discusses the novel's adaptation into a film and its impact on the revival of Baroque music. Furthermore, the paper draws parallels between the myth of Orpheus and the characters' personal journeys, highlighting the transformative power of music and its ability to transcend reality. The analysis is grounded in the works of various scholars, including Ferdinand de Saussure, Suzanne Langer, and Charles Sanders Peirce, to provide a comprehensive understanding of music's symbolic essence in Quignard's literary creation.

Keywords: music semiotics; Pascal Quignard; *Tous les matins du monde*; orphic mythology; musical aesthetics

1 Introduction

Pascal Quignard (1948) stands as one of the most influential and innovative novelists in contemporary France. Since the publication of his debut work in 1969, he has continued to write prolifically, with over 90 works to his name to date, garnering various literary awards. Notable among these accolades are the Prix France Culture for his work *Vie secrète* (*Secret Life*), the Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française for *Terrasse à Rome* (*A Terrace in Rome*), and the Prix Goncourt for *Les ombres errantes* (*The Roving Shadows*). Quignard's creative writing, which merges historical

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imagination, literary fiction, aesthetic appreciation of art, and philosophical inquiry (Wei 2015, p. 99), prominently features music as a means to convey his reflections on art, self, and the world. In 1991, Quignard published *Tous les matins du monde* (*All the World's Mornings*), a novel that focuses on the 17th-century French composer and viola da gamba player Monsieur de Sainte Colombe and his student, the fellow viola da gamba player Marin Marais. Through the narrative of these two musicians, the novel contemplates the essence of music and explores how music expresses human emotional concepts. The rich music symbols embedded within the text make *Tous les matins du monde* one of Quignard's most representative works of musical aesthetics.

2 *Tous les matins du monde* and music symbols

The discussion and debate surrounding music have long been a topic of contention, with one of the most intense debates revolving around the semiotic nature of music. On this point, the most endorsed view identifies music as a signifier without a signified (Fisette 1997, p. 85). Yet, if this is the case, then music is only a purely formal system that can only express itself. Similarly, Émile Benveniste, the renowned contemporary French linguist and semiotician, contends that “if music is considered a language, (...) it is a language with syntax but no signs” (Benveniste 1974, p. 56).¹ To varying degrees, these views or perspectives fail to capture in full the semiotic essence of music.

According to the doctrines of Ferdinand de Saussure, on the one hand, the sign combines the concept (signified) and the sound image (signifier) (Saussure 1995, p. 99), thus existing only via the association built between the signifier and the signified (ibid., p. 144). Therefore, in the Saussurean sense, the signifier and the signified are in an interdependent relationship, i.e., there is no signifier without a signified, and vice versa. On the other hand, the signifier, the sound image, is considered a “psychological imprint” (ibid., p. 98), serving as the “repository” of a chain of sounds in memory. Regardless of whether the sound chain is melodic or rhythmic, it can always be heard, interpreted, and even evoke imagination as harmonics, thereby bringing the past or memory to life. Semiotic discussions of music are also found in musicological studies, where the study of traditional rules such as harmony and counterpoint, as well as modern rules, also consider the sound chain as a plastic material to be employed for different semiotic processes. However, these codes have never reduced sound chains to the pure signifiers defined by linguistics.

¹ All quotations from French sources in this paper, unless otherwise indicated, are translated by the author.

In other words, any form of music – be it a simple melodious hum in daily life or a grand symphony in a concert hall – can represent an object, evoke the most intrinsic memories of individuals, or embody shared values of a community. In any case, the semiotic essence of music is indisputable. Although music may not serve as an object of individual learning like language and may not ensure the stability of reference within a community, its foundation lies in strong emotions or beliefs. Audiences (subjects) firmly believe in the meaningfulness of music, as Vladimir Jankélévitch put it, music is like the “oracle of Delphi,” neither affirming nor denying but merely alluding (Jankélévitch 1983, p. 60). Music does not emphasize truth; rather, it implies, reflects, or enables subjects to construct symbols based on auditory immediacy, thereby reproducing the world through sound.

Suzanne Langer, a representative figure in semiotic aesthetics, considers music as an “unconsummated symbol” (Langer 1967, p. 240). The meaning of “unconsummated” implies first that the meaning is to be completed, i.e., that it needs to be interpreted to be completed or realized. Within Charles Sanders Peirce’s framework of sign, the “unconsummated” encompasses all signs, particularly applicable to musical representation (Peirce 1931–35 and 1958). Langer not only integrates symbols with the meanings they convey but also distinguishes between “articulation” and “assertion,” as well as between “expressiveness” and “expression” (Fisette 1997, p. 89). Langer believes that only fiction enables music to assert, as fictional texts fundamentally differ from theoretical discourse, critical discourse, and descriptive discourse in that they can infinitely express the intentions and meanings of the discourse subject. In this sense, music and literature share a high affinity, as various attempts have been made to bridge the two fields. He (2017) examined the influence of French Symbolism in China in the early 20th century and modern Chinese writers’ practices in mediating the relationship between music and literature. In a case analysis, He (2020) interpreted the meaning of folk music in the marginalization of ethnic Miao culture. Likewise, a semiotic perspective has been adopted in the analysis of poetry (Bullock 2015; Liu 2016; Siregar 2022), drama (Elam 2003; Issacharoff 1981; Zhu 2020), fiction (Ribó 2019), and other literary genres, which validates the relevance of semiotics in literary analysis and interpretation. The current study focuses on Quignard and his masterful exploration of the wonder of music in texts.

Quignard is a contemporary French writer who writes most frequently about music (Brami 2012, p. 2). In his writing, the text speaks of the sound of music, constructs its temporal value, and allows it to go beyond simple potentialities to express objects, sensations, emotions, impulses, and changes. The novel *Tous les matins du monde* encompasses all necessary conditions to demonstrate the completion or realization of music symbols. The novel constructs a complete chain of music symbols. First, it reproduces the prevalent Baroque music played by viola da gamba during the mid-17th-century in France, with the two main characters, Sainte

Colombe and Marin Marais, being masters of the viola da gamba. Second, it serves as a literary text documenting music, musical works, song titles, and musician biographies. It is worth noting that in the year of its publication, the renowned French director Alain Corneau adapted the novel into a film of the same name, visually reproducing music from over three centuries ago, supplementing the auditory experience that the literary text alone cannot provide. Finally, the film's soundtrack, predominantly featuring solo performances by the bass viol player Jordi Savall (mostly from the musical works of Sainte Colombe and Marin Marais), piqued the interest of classical music enthusiasts. The Baroque music of the 17th-century benefited from the novel and film, being rediscovered and reexamined by modern audiences. In summary, in the narrative of *Tous les matins du monde*, music serves as both the starting point and the end point. Moreover, music is imbued with new meanings by Quignard and gains the generation of meaning. To borrow Langer's terminology, music completes the entire process from articulation to assertion and from expressiveness to expression. Furthermore, according to Peirce's strict definition of signs, a sign results from the interaction of three constituent parts – representamen, object, and interpretant (Peirce 1931–35 and 1958). Following this symbolic trichotomy, music can be analyzed as the representamen corresponding to the sound chain, performing a foundational function; the emotions or experiences evoked by sound form some form of world object or cultural object (i.e., presymbolized object); the interpretant ensures the cohesion of the two preceding parts of the sign and propels the overall sign to generate new signs. In Quignard's literary creation, music is endowed with new objects and new interpretants, leading to the completion of music symbols, or at least promoting the development of music symbols.

3 From loss to music

"In the spring of 1,650, Madame de Sainte Colombe passed away." (Quignard 1991, p. 7) At the opening of *Tous les matins du monde*, Sainte Colombe is plunged into inconsolable grief at the loss of his wife, unable to bear the regret of not being by her side when she passed away. In the text, Sainte Colombe "lives in a house with a garden with his two daughters" (Quignard 1991, p. 7). Although the daughters resemble Sainte Colombe more than their mother in appearance, memories of their mother remain intact in Sainte Colombe's heart, "her image always floating before his eyes," "her voice always whispering in his ears" (Quignard 1991, p. 8). Sainte Colombe tells his daughters, "I miss your mother. Every memory I have of my wife is a joy that can never be found again" (Quignard 1991, p. 12). Sainte Colombe reminisces about his wife, longing for the past, immersing himself in the ghosts of past

life. He tries to rediscover at least the joy of prolonging past life – the pleasure of blending music, peach jam, honeycomb cakes, and wine – the specific symbols of memory. Sainte Colombe locks himself at home, immersing himself entirely in music. He composes “Le Tombeau des Regrets.” In France, a “tombeau” refers to music or literary works created to commemorate the deceased, carrying rich semiotic significance.

Another protagonist in *Tous les matins du monde*, Marin Marais, displayed exceptional musical talent from a young age. At the age of six, due to his good voice, he was recruited into the choir of the Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois church outside the Louvre castle, where he spent nine joyful years. “He (Marin Marais) always wore a white wide-sleeved surplice, a red robe, and a black square cap, sleeping in the monastery dormitory, studying culture, learning notation, musical recognition, and playing the viol.” (Quignard 1991, p. 28) However, Marais’s voice began to change, and according to the contract, he had to leave the choir after his voice broke. Marais was “kicked onto the street” (Quignard 1991, p. 29). Such an experience is also encountered by the narrator of *Vie secrète*: “Since the terrible voice change, I have been unable to pronounce smoothly and accurately, which is why I have earned a reputation as the two choirs that bring joy to me. The voice change not only prevented me from singing but also from humming.” (Quignard 1998a, p. 71) When the voice change suddenly arrives at the age of thirteen or fourteen, boys permanently lose their childhood voices brought from the womb, changing from thin, childlike voices to deep, melancholic ones. Men after the voice change yearn for their lost childhood voices, trying to do something to regain or reclaim the “tiny, thin childish voice” before the voice change. Music became Marin Marais’s ultimate choice after being expelled from the royal choir. Marais wants to “avenge the voice that has abandoned him” (Quignard 1991, p. 30). He decides to become a musician, using music to mend the unhealable wound caused by the voice change, to mend the betrayal of his own voice, “turning the voice change itself into a sound, shaking the voice change itself. Studying a voice that will not betray itself” (Quignard 1987, p. 34). At the age of seventeen, Marin Marais became a student of Sainte Colombe, learning to play the viola da gamba and compose. The viola da gamba, a precursor to the cello, is considered the instrument closest to the human voice, mainly used in the performance of Baroque music. The viola da gamba can imitate the myriad changes of human voices, achieving transformations from deep to thin that are impossible in the physical body. Thus, Marais, with the power of music performance and creation, constructs new symbolic expressions, allowing his voice to resound once again.

As an expressive symbol, music truly expressing the impulses and changes of emotions is no easy task. In the novel, Sainte Colombe tells Marin Marais, who came to be his student and learn to play the viola da gamba and compose from him: “I don’t think I’ll take you as my student.” “You know music, sir, but you are not a musician.”

(Quignard 1991, p. 32) Although Marais “understands body posture, and the performance is not lacking in emotion” “the embellishments are wonderful, sometimes even charming” (Quignard 1991, p. 35), but this is not true music, true music requires a lot. It is worth noting that the narrative background of *Tous les matins du monde* is set in the 17th-century, when Jansenism was popular in France. Jansenism pursues essence, which exists beyond the shell of things, qualities, and perceptions, emphasizing purity, which denies artistic expression and aesthetic principles (in Greek, aesthetics means “sensory ability”), and is impractical (Fisette 1997, p. 90). As a Jansenist musician, Sainte Colombe values the purity of music. In order to better study the viola da gamba, he had a hut built in the branches and leaves of a mulberry tree in the garden, isolating himself from the outside world. He enters the sound in this enclosed, sacred space, reminiscing about the past, transforming the pain of loss into music. Music brings Sainte Colombe back to a mysterious, real past, turning sound into the whole world, turning the sound world into the absolute. In the novel, Quignard also describes the scene of Marin Marais and Sainte Colombe’s daughter Madelaine eavesdropping on the teacher playing music under the hut. At that moment, both Sainte Colombe in the hut and Marin Marais under the hut enter into the sound, into the music. At such a moment, music is endowed with all symbolic values: narrow, enclosed space; the world of pure sound; the fusion of senses; the disappearance of identity ... Music gradually becomes the narrative subject, occupying the entire symbolic space.

4 Music as expression of values

Music has the power to evoke the values of a particular group. In a sense, Sainte Colombe and Marin Marais belong to two completely different, or even “opposite” worlds (Brulotte 1995). On one hand, Sainte Colombe lives in the countryside and harbors a deep hatred for Paris, avoiding social interactions, and disliking the aristocratic lifestyle. He repeatedly refuses invitations from the royal court, unwilling to publish his compositions or subject them to public judgment, which partly explains why his works have not been preserved, and why he remains largely unknown. Sainte Colombe’s name does not appear in dictionaries like “Petit Robert” nor in any music history books or encyclopedias like the *Oxford Dictionary of Music* (Wang 2017, p. 124). The only brief account of Sainte Colombe is found in *Le Parnasse François* (Quignard 1987, p. 24) by Évrard Titon du Tillet, a military officer and provincial commissioner during the reign of Louis XIV. In *Tous les matins du monde*, Sainte Colombe describes himself as “a thorough savage, belonging only to himself.” He tells Mr. Cagnet, who invites him to perform at the court and join the royal musicians, “I have given my life to the gray boards among the mulberry leaves, to the

seven strings of the viola da gamba, to my two daughters. My friends are memories of the past. My palace is the willow tree by the river. It is the stream of the river, the carp and roach in the river, and the elderflowers” (Quignard 1991, p. 18). He lives in seclusion, avoiding the present, the grand history, sometimes “diving into the dark water, dwelling within it” (Quignard 1991, p. 35) residing in dreams. On the other hand, Marin Marais refuses to follow in his father’s footsteps as a blacksmith; he studies music for power, money, and glory. As the “king’s court musician” and “Mr. Lully’s orchestra conductor” (Quignard 1991, p. 59), Marin Marais lives in “a magnificent stone palace with a hundred halls” (Quignard 1991, p. 49), enjoying a decent income, associated with wigs, fashion, brightness, and luxury. Marais has social status, values societal meaning, and pursues established values; he is rational, knowledgeable about social norms, and worldly wisdom. However, these symbols signify sociality, politics, and power, which are irrelevant to art.

Quignard indirectly contrasts the music played on the viola da gamba (Sainte Colombe) and the music of the court orchestra (Marin Marais, Caignet, Lully, etc.) to highlight the differences in simplicity and intimacy unique to the viola da gamba. Indeed, in terms of timbre and intensity, the viola da gamba as a solo instrument cannot compete with the orchestral ensemble. However, the viola da gamba excels in its wide range, especially after Sainte Colombe adds a seventh string, allowing it to produce deeper tones and melancholic melodies. While an orchestral ensemble can create various combinations through multiple technical means, the solo performance on the viola da gamba is more intimate in its musical effect. It is worth noting that the viola da gamba was invented in the early 15th-century (the era of the birth of lyrical poetry). The inventors intended to create an instrument that approximated the human voice. Additionally, the player holds the viola da gamba between the legs, not against the belly. Thus, any variation produced on the viola da gamba resonates throughout the body. The viola da gamba and the player’s body together constitute a resonance box and a tightly structured sound combination. Therefore, despite its limited means of expression, the viola da gamba has strong expressive capabilities, especially in terms of intimacy and emotional closeness, far exceeding those of the orchestral ensemble. Thus, in the novel, when Sainte Colombe claims to have given his life to “the seven strings of the viola da gamba,” the viola da gamba becomes his own voice. The difference in expression between the solo viola da gamba and the orchestral ensemble of Sainte Colombe and Marin Marais also mirrors the worldview of the two symbols. Along the Bièvre River, all symbols converge and blend together, heading toward a black hole. In the Palace of Versailles, music symbols accumulate and expand, representing social symbols that occupy all space, continuously proliferating.

In *Tous les matins du monde*, Marin Marais eventually separates paths from Sainte Colombe due to their starkly different views on music. After being expelled

from the master's home, Marais loses his voice, loses his identity, and drifts away from true music. He regrets not having heard some of his teacher's pieces. "The thought that these pieces will disappear forever after Sainte Colombe's death pains Marais deeply." (Quignard 1991, p. 74) Almost every night, he leaves the Palace of Versailles, hides under Sainte Colombe's hut, ears against the planks, secretly listening to his teacher play the viola da gamba, trying to regain his voice, love, to meet music again, and to return to the meaning expressed by music and music symbols.

5 Reconstructing ancient Greek mythology

Ancient Greek mythology serves as a crucial source of material for Quignard's work, even constituting "the most intrinsic and secretive aspect" (Quignard 1998b, p. 191) of his creative endeavors. Quignard also attempts to internalize the archetypal Greek myths through artistic symbols such as music and painting. In *Tous les matins du monde*, Quignard names the compositions of Sainte Colombe as "The Tomb of Regrets" ("Le Tombeau des Regrets") "Weeping" ("Les Pleurs"), "Charon's Boat" ("La Barque de Charon"), and "Return" ("Le Retour"), clearly emphasizing several important stages of the mysterious adventures of Orpheus (Fisette 1997, 93), the music god in Greek mythology: Orpheus's wife, Eurydice, dies accidentally; Orpheus, upon learning of the tragedy, is overwhelmed with grief and ventures into the underworld to find Eurydice, even risking his own life; Orpheus encounters Charon, the ferryman of the underworld, and crosses the river Styx aboard his boat; in the underworld, Hades and Persephone agree to Orpheus's plea to bring Eurydice back; on the way back, Orpheus forgets Hades's warning and turns to embrace his wife, but the god of death pulls Eurydice back into the underworld. Consumed by regret over losing Eurydice, Orpheus avoids crowds, living in silence and solitude, with only the image of Eurydice in his mind. In his longing, Orpheus plays the seven-stringed lyre and sings poignant songs of sorrow, thus giving birth to music.

Throughout history, the myth of Orpheus or the primordial myth of music has inspired many artists. As early as the 17th-century, during the narrative period of *Tous les matins du monde*, Italian composer and court musician Claudio Monteverdi based his opera "L'Orfeo" on this myth; German composer Christoph Willibald von Gluck created his most popular opera "Orpheus and Eurydice"; and Russian-American composer and pianist Igor Stravinsky composed music for the ballet "Orpheus."

In *Tous les matins du monde*, Quignard reconstructs or rewrites with imagination the myth of Orpheus around Sainte Colombe and his music: Sainte Colombe creates the "Le Tombeau des Regrets" after his wife's death, and he repeatedly dives into the dark river in his dreams, with the black water symbolizing the dim

underworld. The return of Sainte Colombe's wife to visit him echoes the reunion of Orpheus and Eurydice in the myth, with both musicians unable to bring their lost loved ones back from the realm of death. However, in Greek mythology, Orpheus is forbidden to look back at Eurydice in the underworld. In *Tous les matins du monde*, the prohibition of looking becomes a prohibition of touching (Fisette 1997, 94). When Sainte Colombe's wife returns to his hut for the ninth time, Sainte Colombe tells her, "I am suffering, madam, from not being able to touch you." (Quignard 1991, p. 61). His wife replies, "Sir, except for the gentle wind, nothing can touch." (Quignard 1991, p. 61) In other words, Eurydice and Sainte Colombe's wife are only ghosts, spirits, or illusions. Before constructing symbolic value, Eurydice and Sainte Colombe's wife exist only as representations or potentialities; they are merely images or illusions created by the self-contained Orpheus and Sainte Colombe, existing only for them. Orpheus and Sainte Colombe, in their respective realms of illusion, find that "looking" or "touching" would shatter their illusions. The prohibition of looking and touching is related to the symbolic value of the two figures (Eurydice and Sainte Colombe's wife). Eurydice and Sainte Colombe's wife exist between the real and the unreal; they belong to dreams or illusions, but they are more real than traces, symbols, "in the gaze of the mind," they "contain more possibilities" (Fisette 1996, p. 277).

According to Pierce's logic, Eurydice and Sainte Colombe's wife are objectified subjects; if there were no prohibition ("looking" or "touching"), they would no longer be products of music, no longer connecting reality and dreams. Eurydice and Sainte Colombe's wife only exist in music, or even they are music itself; they are the visual manifestation, the nostalgic side of music, pure images or representations. In this sense, they are the most real existence; they occupy all space. To "look (at)" Eurydice or to "touch" Sainte Colombe is to break the illusion, which entails denying the music (Fisette 1997, p. 93). Yet neither Orpheus nor Sainte Colombe could resist the temptation to recapture the illusion, music was the only solace, and they had to start again, to compose and to play.

Quignard in *Tous les matins du monde* rewrites the myth of Orpheus, discussing the essence of music. The myth of Orpheus is well-known, and all music lovers or all subjects, in a sense, are Orpheus or Sainte Colombe, seeking in illusions, trying to regain sound image or "psychological imprint," which are more real than reality itself. At the end of the novel, Sainte Colombe and Marin Marais discuss the essence or meaning of music; Marais's response is not a definition of music but an object of music. Music is no longer a certain entity or form but becomes an explanatory item. Marais believes that music exists for the king, for gold, for rival musicians, or for love, the regret of love (Quignard 1991, p. 78), but these belong to the Palace, to public life. But music is "a small pond, for those abandoned by words. For the spirits of children. For the shoemaker's hammer strike. For the state before childhood. When people have no breath. When people have no light" (Quignard 1991, pp. 78–79). Music

represents the elements closest to the ancient and primitive dimensions of human being. It exists only in mysterious time and space, where no one lives, and cannot be reached. This is the domain that the myth of Orpheus explores, and it is also the distant, original time that the musician represented by Sainte Colombe or the “literati” (Wei 2015) represented by Quignard wants to reach through music, the “mystery here” (Argand 1998, p. 89). As Taine points out in *Philosophy of Art*, “Music is built on the relationship between various sounds, and these sounds do not imitate any living things, but are like dreams experienced by a formless mind, especially in instrumental music; so music is more suitable than other arts for expressing floating thoughts, shapeless dreams, and endless desires.” (Taine 1996, p. 63).

6 Conclusions

A musician from a musical family, Quignard received a rigorous and systematic musical education from an early age. He can play a variety of instruments and has served as president of several international festivals and international concerts in Versailles. Quignard once said in an interview that he would have been a good musician if he had not become a writer. In his opinion, “composing music is like writing a silent book” (Argand 1998, p. 89). Perhaps it is the likeness between music – a unique symbolic form that expresses universal human emotions – and writing that prompted Quignard to think about and explore music through literature. For him, music is fluid, because it is full of meaning. Meaning, in turn, as illustrated in *Tous les matins du monde* or other literary works, makes music symbols a prerequisite for seeking, communicating, understanding, and arriving at universal human emotions.

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