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IN THE DEFENCE OF MUSICAL MEANING

ABSTRACT

This paper is about the musical meaning and its relation to verbal meaning. My aim is to show that musical meaning should be sharply differentiated from the verbal one, that it should not be understood as a subspecies of verbal meaning, or as a meaning of a verbal sort whatsoever. I will address this issue starting with the sounds of music and language, and working my way up from those: by comparing these sounds and the way they relate to their meanings, I will show that musical sounds are strongly connected with musical meanings, that they have token-like qualities. Resulting from this is a suggestion to redefine the way we use the concepts of meaning and articulation, so that they would allow for the concept of non-verbal, musical meaning. Additionally, my suggestion is that musical meaning *per se* should be differentiated from the non-musical meanings music can communicate and convey – one does not exclude the other.

KEYWORDS

musical meaning,
verbal meaning, sound,
type/token,
articulation.

Introduction

The main problem I will address in this paper is the problem of musical meaning. The problem is well formulated in the words of Leonard Meyer:

The controversy has stemmed largely from disagreements as to what music communicates, while the confusion has resulted for the most part from a lack of clarity as to the nature and definition of meaning itself (Meyer 1956: 32).

To this I would like to add that there is further confusion, namely concerning the meaning of the concepts ‘musical semantics’ and ‘musical semiotics’ (Ross 2017: 5-6). Jean-Jacques Nattiez’s words show it clearly:

we will call “*semantic*” any sort of *extrinsic* association with music, and we will call *musical semantics* the discipline that deals with explicit verbalizations of these associations, associations that (in current experience) most often remain in the state of latent impressions. (Nattiez 1990: 104)

In my view, the problem of musical meaning – that ancient and venerable conundrum in the philosophy of music – should once again be queried, and in a very low key. Namely, a large corpus of philosophical material addressing this subject and many debates around it – for example, between Peter Kivy and Stephen Davies, between formalists and anti-formalists, etc. – have lead us to the point where

some issues are taken for granted in view of more minute and refined concerns. The most important of those, I believe, is that of the linguistic nature of musical meaning, which is tied to implications of concepts like ‘semantics’, ‘semiotics’, and ‘meaning’. Although some scholars have advocated a similar point to what I would like to express here, namely that the concept of musical meaning implies a broader, non-linguistic and non-discursive understanding of meaning, I believe that their arguments are still very much under the shadow of the language meaning paradigm. As such, in this paper I would like to place the question of musical meaning in a context that would avoid such suppositions, and hopefully to show the legitimacy of musical meaning from a more aesthetical than linguistic perspective.

So-called musical semiotics or semantics obviously connects music with the domain of language: namely, when we speak about music in terms of its meaning, the very choice of words is suggestive of the way in which we usually think of language and thoughts. Words have meanings, as well as thoughts do. Moreover, it is a commonly held notion that words have meanings only because they express thoughts, that it is the thoughts that are truly meaningful, while words merely convey the mental meanings, as some sort of vehicles (information model) for them; a string of sounds we recognize as words does not have meaning *per se*. One may follow a similar line of reasoning to say that music can have meaning: instead of words, there are musical sounds – just as words, musical sounds could convey mental meanings, that is, they could express thoughts (Kühl 2007: 23). Just as words, musical sounds can be heard and they progress in temporal fashion; just as words, musical sounds can be written and visually symbolized, crossing the boundary between the audible and the visual domains of experience. Just as words, once written, musical sounds can be repeated, in the same order, over and over again.

However, the basic intuition concerning the difference between words and musical sounds in this respect is that words have particular, specific meanings, that they are able to convey definite and concrete thoughts. In contrast to that, musical sounds do not convey any meaning that could be defined in a verbally articulated manner (Raffman 1993: 61). Even when we use words in trying to express or describe the sounds of music, there is a strong feeling that such descriptions, no matter how articulate or eloquent, always leave out something – that they cannot do justice to the actual experience of music (Kramer 2002: 12). In the context of musico-theoretical descriptions of music, there is what Seeger calls *the bias of speech* (Seeger 1977: 50), and Nattiez *metalanguage* or *metamusical discourse* (Nattiez 1990: 150, 153). As Ole Kühl puts it:

While it is possible to speak about musical syntax in a manner comparable to language (as music will always be organized according to some principle), the case for semantics is different. In language, words have highly specified meanings: we say that a word denotes something; whereas in music, the meaning of a musical event is less specified, more vague or maybe even transient. (Kühl 2007: 37)

In my view, this problem is not to be solved by any further development or refinement of such verbal descriptions of the experience of music, since the source of the problem lies elsewhere – it springs from the difference in the experience we have while listening to music and while listening to the verbally articulated speech, grasping its meaning.

My point is, thus, to focus on the experiences of music and of verbally articulated speech, and further on the problem of musical meaning, as much as it can be analyzed from this perspective.¹ Consequently, I here equate music with what can be heard and recognized as a musical piece – as a song, symphony, etude etc. For example, I believe that we would not encounter the same problem if we were to question whether it is possible to verbally articulate musical scores, written signs of music, because ‘notational systems are a mixture of discursive and non-discursive symbol systems; that is to say, of verbal and non-verbal “instructions”’ (Howard 1971: 216). In this case, I believe, one could easily verbally describe the shapes of graphic signs for music, their order, the meaning a sign like # or *ff* has, and so on. Such description could take some time and space, if put on paper, but I believe it could in principle be done without anything important for musical scores being lost. My example is, of course, a trivial one, but it nevertheless makes a good point: there is a significant difference between *reading* music from music sheets and *listening* to music. Moreover, spontaneously, we are more inclined to consider music heard than music written as music *strictu sensu*.

Of course, the equation of music heard – the aural experience of music – with music in the proper sense of the word is hardly a satisfactory solution to the ontological problems music raises; it merely ignites a series of further questions. As is shown in many recent debates, music heard implies a single event, which we understand as an instantiation of some musical piece, say Kalinnikov’s *Symphony no.1*. The problem is often addressed in terms of a type/token distinction: „a musical work is a type whose tokens are sound-sequence-events” (Dodd 2007: 8). Tokens constitute such musical events as particular performances of Kalinnikov’s *Symphony no.1* – as the one given by the Russian Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Veronika Dudarova, in 1992, for example, while Kalinnikov’s *Symphony no.1* ‘as such’ would itself be a type – that which can be performed in several occasions, by several different orchestras, and under the baton of different conductors. What should count as this music ‘as such’, as Kalinnikov’s *Symphony no.1* ‘as such’, and what kind of relations are adequate for describing the type/token matrix is, of course, a question still open for debate. Still, it is the central question in the ontology of music. In this paper, however, I would like to address another problem – namely, that of musical meaning, and I would like to start with the above mentioned idea that the aural experience of music is our genuine starting point, allowing us to think and speak about music. In other words, the content of the aural experience of music is what should be taken as music *strictu sensu*, whatever the true description of musical pieces’ ontology turns out to be.

My point here is a rather modest one. I wish to show that there is musical meaning in a certain acception of the term, and that it can be the subject of philosophical

1 “What is the meaning of a piece of music? It is whatever it is that we understand when we (can be said by others to) understand a musical work aesthetically; it is what interests us and what we value in musical works. On the phenomenological level, a typical understanding response to music is the experience of hearing the way one series of notes gives rise to another. It is to recognize that a musical continuation makes ‘sense’ (or does not make ‘sense’) as a consequence of what preceded it, even where the continuation might not have been predicted on hearing the antecedent passage.” (Davies 2003: 121)

debate – not merely a matter of personal and subjective articulation of music heard (here follow Zangwill’s argument against the privacy of aesthetic properties; see Zangwill 2015). In this respect, I believe it is important to address two issues: firstly, the very concept of meaning, in this case, as it applies to music. Namely, the concept of meaning has pervaded the debate on music from the vantage point of the linguistic domain, be it the science of linguistics or the philosophy of language. In my view, this is something to be questioned, for it may well lead philosophical analysis of musical meaning through paths more appropriate to non-musical, language meaning structures. Which brings me to my second point: the other issue that should be addressed here is the idea that musical meaning is essentially different from the meaning we ascribe to words in language (Ross 2018: 7). In this respect, I believe that, if there is anything like musical meaning at all, it must be shown to be essentially musical – it should not turn out to be some kind of indefinable verbal meaning or a verbal meaning in lesser degree.

To summarize, I think there is, in fact, a musical meaning that relates music to extra-musical reality, that music can be meaningful in the sense of being able to be about things (to have contents) other than music itself. However things turn out to be, though, I believe that musical meaning differs essentially from verbal meaning. Quoting Meyer again: ‘Both designative and non-designative meaning rise out of musical experience, just as they do in other types of aesthetic experience’ (Meyer 1956: 33). In what follows I shall attempt to make that view as plausible as I can.

2. Is There a Musical Meaning at All?

In addressing previously stressed points, I would like to start from the mentioned problems about verbally articulating the aural experience of music. Suppose we would like to express or describe some musical experience, say, the experience of listening to Kalinnikov’s *Symphony no.1*: surely, we don’t intend by that to use sounds of words in order to repeat or mimic musical sounds previously heard. If anything, by that we intend to use the meanings of words to express or describe what was experienced while listening to this particular musical piece. Thus, whatever is grasped while listening to music, it should, with this translation into language, find its expression in the meanings of words, not in their bare sounds. The problem is thus shown in its full measure: the translation should not follow the musical-audible/verbal-audible line but rather transform the musically audible into the verbally meaningful, that is, to convert something that can be heard and grasped in music, into something that can be captured and expressed, clearly and distinctly, through words in a language.

The basic implication of such analysis is that musical sounds, the musically audible, are bearers of something that could in fact be translated in that manner – that there is in music an analogue of verbal meanings, something of the same sort as them. Consequently, we speak of musical meanings - and we do it in the terms presented above: as with language, musical meanings somehow transcend the sounds of music and are, at the same time, instantiated in them. As with language, they can be expressed in written form - that is, they can be transposed from their instantiation in sounds into their symbolization in visual graphic signs. Nevertheless,

even if one accepts such a picture of musical meaning, with no further theorizing on its nature, the problem of translation would still remain: even if we are given something meaningful in music to be translated into verbal meanings, why is it that those verbal expressions and descriptions of our musical experience still strike us as imprecise and inadequate with respect to our intentions?

The solution seems to be rather simple: if there is verbal meaning on the one side, and musical meaning on the other, the problem of translation lies in their difference – words and verbal meanings cannot fully convey musical meanings, because those two meanings are of a different kind, although meanings to start with. To be more precise: it seems that words cannot convey the musical meanings supposedly encapsulated in musical sounds, because musical meanings are just too particular and too specific to be expressed by words that, in principle, have meanings of a more general sort. In other words, it seems that musical meanings differ from verbal ones as much as the medium of words and the medium of musical sounds differ from each other: words are in principle to be used repeatedly, as a sort of common currency, while musical sounds are always part of some particular musical performance, and therefore tokens in the above described sense.

However, if we take a closer look at the medium of language, we'll see that it does not differ so much from the medium of musical sounds, that 'the semantic content of spoken utterances can be affected by pitch, rhythm, tempo, accent, phrasing, attack, and decay' (Davies 1994: 2). Namely, if the words are spoken, we can listen to them in much the same manner we listen to the musical sounds. As I have mentioned before, the same goes for the written versions of words and music – both are translations of initially aural experience into the domain of spatial relations of graphic symbols. Moreover, given the graphic expression, we can repeat both the order of words and the order of sounds over and over again, creating the sound sequences that will be almost identical.

Now, the difference is to be noticed: two separate readings of some alignment of words could prove to be 'almost identical' – but not completely identical – because they would, for example, differ in tempo of the speech, or in its tonality. In such case, we would consider the differences between two readings to be less important: what is important in the case of words is that no word is missing and that they are aligned in the exact same order in which they are written and graphically presented (Kutschera 2012: 7). If these conditions are met, we would say that we are listening to the same text being read, that we grasp the same meaning being conveyed. However, in the case of music it is not so: even if the same conditions are met, we would still find the difference in tempo or in tonality of sounds to be of much greater importance. In fact, we would not consider the two 'almost identical' sequences of sounds to be identical at all. Perhaps we would finally decide that they are very similar; but even in that case we would speak about two different, although similar interpretations, two different, but similar performances of the same musical piece. The fact is that even the slightest changes in these purely audible qualities of musical sound sequences would present the sufficient reason to assign them specific identities – as if we are defining them as specific entities.

Again, the same does not apply to the sound sequences we recognize as verbal ones. Although it is well known that the changes in tempo or tonality or dynamics

or accentuation of words will in fact produce some changes in their meaning, still there is a strong inclination to disregard those in most of the cases and to behave as if nothing was actually changed (Ebersole 2002: 114–115). For example, if I was to whisper ‘Don’t do that’, I would express a different meaning than if I was to scream the same sentence in a very high tone. In the first case I would express my disagreement and merely suggest that something should not be done; in latter case I would express a demand for it not to be done – and the difference between those two cases is to be easily understood by anyone who is familiar with the common usage of language.

Now, the case described is rather extreme one; usually, the differences in dynamics and other more ‘musical’ aspects of the ordinary speech are not that intensified and they are not perceived as causing the change in the verbal meaning (for a different example see Ebersole 2002: 121). To be more precise, we can confirm at least some cases in which such difference in more ‘musical’ aspects of the word sequence uttered would not cause the difference in its meaning. In the case of music, however, any such difference noticed would amount to the difference in musical meaning, to the difference of the entities of musical sound sequences in the sense described above.

The fact that in most cases we are ready to dismiss the changes in these ‘musical’ aspects of speech as irrelevant with regard to the meaning the word sequences are to convey hangs upon the way we understand language: we do not consider its aural and written/visual side as defining its meaning (Kutschera 2012: 20–21). What defines the meaning of spoken words lies elsewhere – in our thoughts, traditionally speaking. In other words: we only recognize and perceive certain sounds as words, if we connect those with certain thoughts – certain meanings (Jespersen 2013: 85–86). Stripped from those, the sounds of words and word sequences may well be grasped as musical *stricto sensu* – as having their own rhythm, melody, tonality and dynamics. Stripped from meanings, words and word sequences could well be listened to in the same manner we are used to listen to the music.

Now, it is easy to see that this cannot apply to the music and musical meanings. If there is such a thing as musical meaning, it is surely not to be found in some realm divorced from the musical sounds. This is not to state any kind of formalism or the prominence of the medium of the arts yet; this is merely to confirm that in the case of music one cannot simply differentiate between the musical meaning (if there even is one) and musical sounding. Since Eduard Hanslick (and Konrad Fiedler in the case of visual arts), formalism implied that we should not search for the meaning of music (or any other art) in any other domain than the one which defines that specific art. Therefore, if there is to be any musical meaning at all, it should not be defined in terms of musical sounds denoting outer physical objects or inner emotional and/or propositional mental states (Zangwill 2015: 60–61); not even in terms of external reference that is strictly musical, referring to another musical piece. According to this position, musical meaning should be inherent in music – that is, inherent in the relations between the sounds, a sort of Clive Bell’s *significant form*, a form that has meaning inherently (Caroll 2010: 38–39; Caroll 2003: 35, 45). Any referential relation here should be connecting different aspects of the same domain, one sound with the other. According to formalists, musical

meaning is thus created by the inner relations between musical sounds, and to create those means to create music.

Both referential models that are discarded in formalism – the one relating sound to a physical object and the one relating sound to a mental state – seem to be adequate descriptions of the relation between words (articulated verbal sounds) and their meanings. Namely, words do in fact designate – and they designate either some objects in reality, or some inner mental states, which they may or may not properly express. Of course, words can also follow the self-referential pattern of music, as proposed by formalists; words can designate words. However, it seems that such self-reference could not be the proper and primary referential function of language, but only its derived and special case: the meanings we convey in ordinary language-usage situations are mostly not about the words themselves, but about our mental states or objects in reality. We can conclude that formalistic philosophers are, at least partially, led by the intention to make a clear distinction between the musical and the verbal meaning – or to point out to their differences, since ‘formalism suggests that representational content is strictly irrelevant for appreciating artworks *qua* artworks’ (Carroll 2003: 45).

Now, if we accept that there is a strong connection between musical sounds and musical meaning, as described above, we are not yet bound to the formalistic solutions concerning the musical meaning. That is, the strong connection does not necessarily imply the self-referential model of musical meaning, typical to formalism (Zangwill 2018: 73–74). Depending on how we chose to understand this musical meaning, it is possible to conceive other solutions; strictly inner tonal relations are merely one of candidates for it. Despite that, our previous conclusion obliges us to the other formalistic thesis, the one concerning the fundamental difference between verbal and musical meanings. In other words, if there is such a thing as musical meaning at all, we should not think of it in terms of verbal meaning, or interpret it as a subspecies of the verbal meaning.

To be more precise: if we accept the possibility that music can express or convey some special kind of meaning, then we should not define it with regard to the models of reference adequate to the language. Musical meaning should not be considered as a sort of undefined verbal meaning, a sort of ‘rough’ meaning ‘material’ with no proper shape or form – as a sort of inarticulate sounding. However, ‘the emancipation of music from language’ doesn’t have to be its ‘alienation from meaning’ (Kramer 2002: 12). Music is not inarticulate sounding: although the sounds of music do not convey verbal meanings, they are not inarticulate, because they do convey some other kind of meaning:

Music, like language, is an articulate form. Its parts not only fuse together to yield a greater entity, but in so doing they maintain some degree of separate existence, and the sensuous character of each element is affected by its function in the complex whole. This means that the greater entity we call a composition is not merely produced by mixture, like a new color made by mixing paints, but is *articulated*, i.e. its internal structure is given to our perception’. (Langer 1953: 31)

Moreover, these sounds could not be inarticulate if that means that they are undefined, since they are in fact rather strictly defined in their own musical domain: as we have seen, even the slightest change in sounding could amount to the

change of musical meaning, and to the impression that we are listening to ‘something else’. Of course, musical sounds cannot have any verbal definition; this is the problem from which we’ve started in the first place. However, the fact that the musical sounds could not have proper and comprehensive verbal definitions does not necessarily imply that they are undefined completely, or that they lack meaning. As Lawrence Kramer puts it, it is wrong to suppose that ‘because the elements of musical expression lack the capacity of words to form propositions and make specific references, musical compositions cannot have meaning in the same way that verbal ones do’ (Kramer 2002: 14).

Namely, if we relate the concept of articulation primarily with words and verbal meanings, as well as oppose it to the non-verbal sounds, the case of music does not belong in such scheme. We cannot simply say that music is inarticulate and equate the musical sounds with other non-musical and non-verbal sounds in this respect, for then any non-verbal sound would be perceived as a melody - or neither one of non-verbal sounds would be perceived as music, which is not the case. The difference between the sounds that we would describe as inarticulate and the sounds of music could rather be found in the fact that inarticulate sounds do not convey any meaning, although they may suggest that there is a meaning to be articulated, while the sounds of music do convey meaning, even if the meaning in question is not the verbal one.

Rather than to the language as such, the concept of articulation is related to the concept of meaning - so the difference between articulate and inarticulate sounds is to be made with regard to the presence or the absence of the intention to convey meaning using sounds. Therefore, any sound conveying any kind of meaning is to be interpreted as an articulate sound; however, this does not imply that there should be only one mode of articulation, only one possible articulation/meaning model. Consequently, the concept of meaning should be understood as broader than the concept of verbal meaning; apart from verbal meaning, we can now also accept the musical one.

3. Verbal and Musical Meaning

The concept of musical meaning, as used above, presents us with another problem – namely, with the problem of differentiating between two kinds of meaning, verbal and musical ones. I’ve already mentioned that the concept of meaning has sprung out of the theory of language and that it relates to the mental states; by introducing the concept of musical meaning I wish to propose a change in understanding of this more general concept, so that it would a) encompass more than just verbal meanings and b) not necessarily imply the expression of any mental states whatsoever. My suggestion is the following: if we accept the concept of meaning to designate whatever is conveyed during the experience of listening to the music, then a) we are not obliged to accept that such meaning is of a verbal kind and b) we are not yet obliged to identify this musical meaning with any mental states *per se*.

My first suggestion was already presented to some extent, but it should now be further developed. Formalistic approach could prove to be useful here: musical meaning is not an undefined, opaque, unfinished, incomplete verbal meaning - it

should not be defined with regard to the verbal meaning at all. Namely, if we try to define musical meaning with regard to the verbal one, we could reach the conclusion that the meaning expressed or conveyed by musical sounds is less clear, less distinct and less precise than the meaning expressed or conveyed by the sounds of words. Such conclusion would rest heavily on the fact that what is heard in music cannot be fully put into words, without something being lost in the translation. In Kramer's words, 'Underlying this anxiety, perhaps, is a desire to create hermeneutic security by keeping meaning in constant touch with consensual, preestablished, "intersubjective" understanding' (Kramer 2011: 22).

Since the difference between the two kinds of meaning is thus confirmed, the question of their relationship arises. If this question is to be resolved in terms of hierarchical ordering, and if the language is accepted as the true domain of meaning and articulation, then music can only be evaluated as less meaningful and less articulate. In this scenario, musical meaning is the meaning that cannot find its proper word, cannot be defined properly; therefore, it is merely an undergrown meaning.

However, the true question here is why should the language be a primary domain of articulation and meaningfulness? Why should we accept the hierarchical ordering of different types of meaning, verbal and musical ones? Is it possible to think of musical meaning outside of language perspective, not counting on already existing and defined models of meaning and reference, at the same time avoiding the formalistic idea of self-referential model of musical meaning? Is it possible to speak of musical meaning as different from the verbal one, and not define this difference with regard to the verbal meaning?

I've already spoken about the reasons for the primacy of the verbal meaning, often implied in philosophy of music, even in cases when not openly advocated: in opposition to musical meanings, verbal meanings can be clearly defined, distinctly differentiated and fully articulated. In comparison to verbal ones, musical meanings always imply some kind of ambiguity, some lack of proper criterion for discerning what is it that was actually 'said' with particular musical piece; this is what Kühl calls *the fluidity of musical meaning* (Kühl 2007: 37). Of course, such description is easily revealed as hanging upon the very point it was supposed to prove, since there is no reason to suppose that there is anything 'said' with music – here, as in other examples mentioned before, the perspective of language is influencing our interpretation of music and musical meaning. Therefore, if music is not supposed to say anything, then there is no ground for the comparison between two 'utterances', verbal and musical ones; consequently, there is also no ground for hierarchical ordering of musical meaning as less clear or less articulated than the verbal one.

However, if that is so, is there a common ground here at all, a common ground allowing us to compare language and music and speak of meaning in both cases, however different those two kinds of meaning may be? I believe that such possibility is justified; the problem is not to misinterpret it for the primacy of language in this respect. In my view, the question should be posed out of more aesthetical than linguistic perspective, starting with sounds. In other words, we should ask what is it that differentiates sounds we perceive as musical and the sounds we perceive as words. Similar goes to the problem of their common ground, but that one I've already explained: in this case the question is what is it that differentiates the

sounds we perceive as words and music from those we perceive as inarticulate, mere sounds. As we have seen, what is common for the sounds of music and the sounds of words is the fact that we find them articulating some meaning, conveying something; the same does not apply to just any sound.

The concept of articulation here is to be taken in a broader sense, I've presented before, similar to the concept of meaning. To be more precise, by articulation I mean the following: if we perceive sounds as more than mere sounds, as conveying something that cannot be reduced to tones, then we can designate the concept of meaning to that 'something' which is conveyed and which cannot be reduced to mere tones, and the concept of articulation to the relation between that 'something' and sounds through which it was grasped. The concepts of meaning and articulation are, therefore, applicable to both language and music, without the implication that the articulation of musical meaning is of linguistic character. Working with this terminology, we could equally state that every verbal articulation is essentially musical in its nature.² However, my point is another one: I do not wish to inverse the primacy of language for the primacy of music, but to account for the concepts that would allow for the musical meaning to be analyzed without reference to the verbal meaning.

The primacy of verbal meaning is also depending on another trivial issue. Namely, if the clarity of the verbal meaning, which is what gives it the primacy over a musical meaning, is to be found in the fact that verbal meanings can be defined verbally – by pointing out to other words, then it is clear that musical meanings would be considered less definable and therefore less clear, since they do not belong to the realm of words. To put it differently, to define a verbal meaning, one does not have to leave its verbal domain; to define a musical meaning, one has to make a translation from musical to verbal domain, which always leaves something unsaid and undefined. Therefore, the clarity of verbal meaning is just a consequence of the fact that the primacy of verbal meaning over the musical one was accepted in advance, that it is not the objective criterion of their evaluation.

Verbal meanings can be defined and consequently differentiated and articulated through words themselves, which presents us with an almost self-sufficient model of language. Such idea of language also presents us with another view on the clarity: in an ideal case, every word should have a precise meaning, defined by relations with other words – by definitions. Actually, in an ideal case, every word should have only one meaning which, once grasped and learned, allows us to recognize the sense expressed by it, to differentiate it from other words and meanings and to avoid misunderstandings. To put it differently, although this is almost never the case, the idea of verbal meaning's clarity rests upon the simplicity of imagined one-on-one model of verbal reference: one word – one meaning. In this context,

2 Such conclusion, which I do not advocate, can also lead to thesis that 'structures of our felt musical experience underlie our conceptual systems and thus shape the language we use to describe and theorize about music' (Johnson 1997–1998: 95). However, I would be more receptive for the Jonson's idea that 'dimensions of aesthetic experience (such as we see in patterns of musical meaning) are the very heart and soul of meaning general' (Jonson 1997–1998: 100), although I do not endorse his implicit claim that latter implies the former.

the clarity is guaranteed by the fact that there is one and only one proper meaning of the word, and that the word in question is to be used with the strong reference to exactly that particular meaning. Of course, such ideal of ‘pure word essences’, pure meanings like Platonic forms, is never to be found in the reality of language and its usage. In the real language – the one which is not artificially constrained by the so called technical terminology of sciences – words have more than one meaning; not only being is said in many ways.

However, the relation of words and their verbal meanings - and the variability of such relation - is rather different than the one belonging to the musical meaning and the sounds of music. In the case of music, meaning is strongly connected with its sound – the slightest change in sound amounts to the change in musical meaning. In the case of music, the referential link is so strong, that it cannot be loosened or broken without the loss of musical meaning. In the case of words, the multiplicity of meanings connected to a word clearly shows that their connection is of a different sort. To put it plainly – musical sound has one and only one meaning, it cannot be ‘said’ in many ways. In an ironical twist, it seems that only music can fulfill the task once imagined for the words: to be univocal.

Of course, one could argue that the proper musical meaning is not to be primarily related to the musical tokens – particular performances of Kalinnikov’s *Symphony no.1* for example, but rather to their type. In this respect, that I will not further address here, we would have to consider the Platonic issue of ideal meanings of musical character in relation to their particular instances, relying much on the ontological type/token debate. However, no matter how should this particular question be solved, I believe that it has to be solved starting with the particular cases, that is with tokens - with music heard (Raffman 1993: 55). In my opinion, if there is something like a type of musical meaning (not simply of musical piece), it is only to be found through its tokens, through particular musical meanings of particular performances, as instantiated in them – because there could be no music which was never to be listened to, nor is there a possibility to grasp a musical meaning, type or token one, without listening to music. Since my focus is on defending the autonomy of musical meaning against the verbal one, I will leave this debate aside; for my purposes, it is enough to point out to the differences between token musical meaning and the verbal meaning as such. Whether there is a type musical meaning or not is not relevant here since, even if there is one, it would also be a musical – and surely not a verbal meaning, and consequently it would have to differ from the verbal one in much the same manner the token musical meanings do.

The obvious difference between words and musical sounds with regard to the problem of articulation - to the problem of relations between the sounds and the meaning they convey, is the ‘propositional’ nature of musical meaning, ‘the intimate connection of syntax and semantics’ (Lippman 1981: 184). By this ‘propositional’ nature I mean the following: while the relation between the word and its verbal meaning is actualized on monadic level – meaning that one single word and its sound can have one concrete meaning – in the case of music one sound is deprived of musical meaning, it has no musical sense. One sound is still merely a tone, audible sense datum which can, but does not have to become a part of a musical melody, which can but does not have to become music.

Music emerges from the auditory stream. What exists at the level of the auditory stream is not music, it is humanly structured sound, which only becomes music through the perception of a human perceptual system,

as Ole Kühl says (Kühl 2007: 25). It seems that the music implies some structure, even if it is the most simple one – interconnection between at least two tones, which ‘adds’ something transgressing and surpassing the fact that we hear two tones in succession or simultaneously. The connection between the tones is what counts as music and in this respect we could say that the ‘logic’ of music is the propositional one.

Of course, stating this does not imply that musical structures do in fact have a propositional character in the sense that the relation between two tones represents something like subject/predicate relation (Davies 2003: 123–125; Nattiez 1990: 127–128). Nevertheless, this ‘propositional’ nature of music can explain formalistic idea of self-referential character of musical meaning, as well as reveal it in its dependence from the language paradigm. Namely, although particular words and their meanings can be analyzed as specific functions, as specific parts of larger structures – namely the propositions, it is nevertheless the fact that they can also be analyzed as monadic entities, as separate meaning-wholes that are combined in various ways. The same can be said of tones, but not of musical sounds. In those terms, to speak of self-referential meaning of music means to try to compress the basic structural character of musical meaning to a non structural, monadic point, more adequate to the verbal meaning. In this scenario, the basic structure of musical meaning is a) presented as relational/referential and b) is reduced to a non structural model of mathematical points. The only possible solution for such an impossible task is to explain the musical meaning in the form of identity – that is, in the idea of self-reference as the expression of the identity. Therefore, formalists allow only for the reference between the tones and musical sounds, the reference within the musical piece.

My point here is the following: the monadic model of meaning, exemplified in vocabularies as well as in definitions and so called ‘pure meanings’ of traditional logic and metaphysics, presents us with the idea of meaning as a semantical ‘content’. Given its ‘purity’ and the ideal of univocality, such verbal meaning always has the upper hand of being applied to various less pure cases, concrete instances – it functions as something general and common to many. The musical meaning is, however, of another sort; it has no ‘purity’, it cannot be applied to many, and it cannot be common. The meaning we hear while listening to a musical piece is radically particular meaning – meaning that persists in exact and given constellation of sounds, like the one produced by Symphony Orchestra of Russia playing Kalinikov’s *Symphony no.1* under the baton of Veronika Dudarova in 1992.

If that is so, then we can explain the missing pieces that are shown in verbal descriptions of music and musical meaning. Namely, if that is so, then such verbal description is never really a description, but a transformation of one kind of meaning into another (we are to avoid the word ‘translation’ here, because it would impose the linguistic structure to the music and musical meaning). Since musical meaning is fundamentally different from the verbal one what is actually the case is just the transformation of one kind of meaning into another; however, musical meaning

cannot actually be transformed into a verbal one, and therefore there could be no proper translation. There is a gap between the two kinds of meaning, and there could be no isomorphism between a musical meaning heard and the verbal articulation of it. There could be no isomorphism, because musical meaning is of structural ('propositional') and highly individual character, while verbal meaning has a monadic character and is applicable to many.

4. Concluding Remarks: Concerning the 'Content' of Musical Meaning

In this paper I tried to offer an analysis that would not go beyond what is actually given within any encounter with music and what can be proven by anyone's personal experience with music. Therefore, I spoke only about the inner structure of musical meaning, about the difference between sounds and what is conveyed by sounds, about the fact that the sounds of music are strongly connected with musical meanings. What could it be that constitutes the inner nature of musical meaning is a different question, but still one that relates to my previous findings.

Namely, it is well known that both traditional idea of art as the imitation (*mimesis*) of world objects and events and romanticistic idea of art as an expression of inner emotional and mental states are criticized from formalistic positions. Claiming formality of music, Hanslick also proclaimed the absence of its contents: the contents of music were to become its very musical forms, and therefore formalism accepted self-referential model of musical meaning. Now, the question to be posed is whether the musical meaning is referential at all, whether we should think of musical meaning as if it was some kind of content of musical forms? To put it differently, following the formalistic critique: if it is wrong to suppose that music is a sign for some designated world object or inner emotion, then it is also wrong to suppose that the meaning of music consists of this referential relation - that music gets its meaning out of such relation (Meyer 1956: 33). Formalists decline such possibility, but they do accept the link between meaning and reference. In formalistic approach, the self-reference of musical tones, the referential relation within the musical piece as such is what amounts to the meaning of music, instead of emotions being expressed.

I already tried to show that the musical meaning is of structural and individual character. By its structural character I mean the mentioned fact that one tone does not make up for music - the phenomenon of music demands for more than one tone. The relations between two or more tones is what is perceived as music, and since we've defined musical meaning as that what is conveyed by musical sounds, but cannot be reduced to mere tones, then musical meaning is to be found exactly in these relations of tones; thus, the musical meaning is always structural. Musical meaning is, however, also completely individual - it is bound to the exact sounds that convey it.

I would like to avoid here the usual ideas of non-linguistic, musical meaning being interpreted as information or as a symbol. That is, I would like to remain critical with regard to these possibilities as much as with regard to the possibility to identify musical meaning with emotions. In the first case, I believe, the problem is still solved with reference to linguistic meaning model: both information and

symbol are primarily understood in terms of language, although they were conceived as models of meaning differing from it (Howard 1971: 218; Lippman 1981: 183–184; Ross 2018: 8–9). In the second case, I believe that anti-formalism is too hasty to accept emotions as ‘content’ of musical meaning; to deny that musical meaning is strictly bound to sounds and their relations does not necessarily imply that it is about expressing emotions. I wanted to analyze musical meaning starting with musical sounds and comparing those with other sounds we experience; also, I’ve wanted to exclude any suppositions that would lead my understanding of meaning and therefore of musical meaning in advance.

In my opinion, meaning could be defined in relatively formal terms, as I tried to do by saying that the concept of meaning is referring to the ‘surplus’ we detect and experience as transcending plane sense data, the tones or sounds *per se*. Such definition still does not imply any thesis concerning the nature of meaning and musical meaning, but it does allow for the concept of meaning to be applied to both musical sounds and the sounds we comprehend as words and language. Such definition also allows for my further thesis, namely that musical meaning is closely bound to musical sounds and their progression (which would amount for a formalist or ‘absolutist’ position), at the same time being able to convey other kinds of meaning, like those we connect with emotions or other mental states (which would reflect position of ‘referentialists’).³ In other words, such definition would allow for a complex understanding of musical meaning, encompassing both the idea that musical meaning is strictly musical in character and the idea that musical meaning can be experienced as conveying some non-musical meaningful content.

Such complexity of musical meaning could be explained as follows: in its strict sense, musical meaning is exclusively musical – it can be detected in audible experience of music, in relations of sounds and tones, as a ‘surplus’ instantiated in those, but not reducible to them. Therefore it has structural and individual character, it cannot be repeated exactly, it differs from one musical token/performance to the other. However, since music is not an entity divorced from human consciousness, it can also appear as conveying some other kind of meaning – non musical one, like emotions of joy or sadness; in this respect musical meaning can be designative or referential.⁴ Such non-musical meaning would then supervene on the musical meaning, but not define it: even if a composer or a musician playing some musical piece actually intended to convey a particular emotion, there is no causal relation that would guarantee that some person listening to music would in fact experience the same emotion.⁵ It is well known that two different people can in

3 Terminology of ‘absolutists’ and ‘referentialists’ is Meyer’s (Meyer 1956: 1).

4 Similar propositions are already given by number of scholars. For example, Meyer speaks about *designative* and *embodied* meaning, Jean-Jaques Nattiez about *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* referring, etc. Koopman and Davies are arguing in favour of the difference between *formal* musical meaning and *experiential formal* (nondiscursive) musical meaning, stressing that formal meaning of a musical piece is not to be taken as linguistic or semiotic in a linguistic sense: ‘The relationships between parts of a musical work are relationships of implication that should not be conflated with the linguistic or semiological notions of reference, denotation, or signification’ (Koopman and Davies 2001: 262).

5 To secure such causal relationship one would need to rely on language and verbal meanings, as shown in Raffman 1993: 45.

fact experience the same music as conveying different emotions, even to the degree that one would find it cheerful, and another one not.

However, the supervenience thesis does claim that causal link is present in the relation of musical and non-musical meaning. Namely, given that musical meaning is highly individual, it can convey non-musical meanings only in such highly individual manner. Therefore, music will not convey the emotion of joy as such, but it will convey some specific quality of being joyous. This is true even in the cases of one and the same musical piece: for example, I find the opening chords of the first movement of Kalinnikov's *Symphony no. 1* joyful, but rather different from the chords of its third movement, which I also find to be joyful.

In my opinion, this is what explains the fact that we are, both philosophically and in ordinary life, usually relating music with emotions, since the emotions we experience are always very specific. In words of Stephen Davies: 'Musical reference to emotions is natural rather than conventional. Music does not constitute a symbol system; the means by which music is expressive are importantly unique to each piece. There are conventions in music, but they are formal and stylistic rather than semantic' (Davies 2003: 128). In those terms, it is likely that we would consider music to be more adequate expression of emotions than words and language in their ordinary use (not, for example, as used in poetry). The vocabulary we use to designate emotions is much more restricted and less rich than the actual variety of emotions experienced, and the reason for that is exactly the fact that verbal meaning is, in its nature, monadic and applicable to many. Verbal meaning intensifies the meaning conveyed, to use Baumgartenian terminology; its model is one-on-one.

By stressing the connection of emotions and musical meaning I do not want to claim that emotions are the only possible non-musical meaning supervening on musical meaning *per se*. On the contrary, I would rather claim that all sorts of non-musical meanings can be conveyed in this way. In fact, I believe that the 'proper' non-musical meaning conveyed by the musical one is to be found in the way we relate to the world and in our experience of the world, which is always meaningful – perhaps, showing patches of the absence of meaning only in details. The verbal or highly verbal articulation of such world understanding, of such world-meaning (to be found in theoretical thinking, for example in philosophy), presents us with only one way of making it more comprehensible. Musical meaning, or the meaning conveyed by any other art, would in my opinion present another such possibility, not less important or less informative than the former one. And to finish with Sussane Langer's words: 'Music has *import*, and this import is the pattern of sentience—the pattern of life itself, as it is felt and directly known' (Langer 1953: 31).

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Una Popović

U odbranu muzičkog značenja

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad posvećen je muzičkom značenju i njegovom odnosu prema verbalnom značenju. Cilj nam je da pokažemo da muzičko značenje treba strogo razlikovati od verbalnog, da ga ne treba razumeti kao podvrstu verbalnog značenja, niti kao značenje verbalnog tipa u bilo kom smislu. Obradu ovog pitanja započemo polazeći od zvukova muzike i jezika, a dalju argumentaciju izgrađićemo na tom osnovu: poredeći ove zvukove i način na koji se oni odnose prema svojim značenjima, pokazaćemo da su muzički zvukovi bitno povezani sa muzičkim značenjima, da imaju svojstva poput tokena. Shodno tome, tvrdićemo da je potrebno redefinisati način na koji upotrebljavamo pojmove značenja i artikulacije, tako da oni mogu obuhvatiti i pojam neverbalnog, muzičkog značenja. Konačno, smatramo da bi muzička značenja kao takva trebalo razlikovati od nemuzičkih značenja koje muzika može da komunicira i prenese – jedno ne isključuje drugo.

Cljučne reči: muzičko značenje, verbalno značenje, zvuk, tip/token, artikulacija.