Musica Academica
Volume 3. Issue 1 (2026): 122-130
DOI: 10.61215/MA.2026.vol.3.iss.1.06

BEYOND THE LINGUISTIC MODEL: MUSIC, METAPHOR, AND INTERSEMIOTICITY

FRANCESCO BRAZIOLI

PhD Student in Musical Semiotics,
Conservatorio G.B. Martini, Bologna[1]
francesco.brazioli@stud.consbo.it

Abstract
If music is not a language, how can it nevertheless participate in processes of signification, interpretation, and communication with other semiotic systems? This article addresses this question by reconsidering the linguistic model that has shaped much of musical semiotics. Rather than asking whether music can be understood as a language, it examines how music interacts with other sign systems without being reduced to them. This shift leads to a consideration of metaphor as a mechanism through which heterogeneous systems can become commensurable. Drawing on Rousseau, Saussure, Hjelmslev, Eco, Mithen, and Paolucci, the article approaches metaphor not merely as a rhetorical device, but as a cognitive and semiotic operation that precedes and enables linguistic articulation. The relationship between music and language is then reconsidered through Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, and Ruwet, highlighting the limits of approaches that interpret music primarily through linguistic categories. The argument ultimately reverses the traditional direction of analysis: rather than translating the musical into the linguistic, it proposes that linguistic articulation can itself be understood as emerging from a more fundamental semiotic condition in which the metaphorical and the musical play a constitutive role. Musical semiotics can therefore take the musical as a starting point for investigating processes of signification across different semiotic systems.

Keywords
Musical semiotics, Intersemioticity, Metaphor, Transemiotics, Music and language, Signification, Semiotic systems

[1] P.za Rossini, 2, 40126 Bologna BO

0. Introduction

The semiotics of music is not strictly a multidisciplinary field, since it can constitute an extremely specific discipline even when considered in its own right. However, the recent perspectives that have emerged over the past few decades make it possible to adopt an approach that moves beyond semiotic theories and the musical domain, drawing on different paradigms with which to engage in the hope of identifying points of departure for rearticulating systems that have by now grown rusty. It is for these reasons that I have chosen to orient my research not so much towards the semiotics of music as towards transemiotic musical manifestations. The first section of this article aims to introduce and contextualize this subject for the reader through a number of suggestions that may stimulate curiosity about a field rich in potential yet still far too underrepresented. The content of this section corresponds, almost in its entirety, to what I had the opportunity to discuss at the conference "Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Music Research," held by the Doctoral School of Interdisciplinary Studies of the University of Oradea on 25 April 2026. On that occasion, and likewise in this section, the primary concern was to provide as general an overview as possible of my area of research, so as to stimulate discussion and receive suggestions also from those working on subjects only tangentially related to it. I hope that this contribution may likewise serve the same purpose. The second section develops the contents of that presentation in greater depth, offering a more specialized analysis of metaphor as a crucial tool for intersemiotic correlations.

1. Musical semiotics

Semiotics originated as a discipline concerned with the study of signs. Signs are all those phenomena that necessarily derive from some other phenomenon, much like symptoms are signs of an illness (Eco 1997). This example is not accidental: one of the earliest fields of application of semiotics was Hippocratic medicine, and even today "medical semiotics" is a fundamental discipline for physicians' education. Carlo Ginzburg, in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, associated Hippocratic medical reasoning with a series of cognitive practices that run parallel to, and sometimes diverge from, those underlying scientific deductive reasoning. The aim of semiotics is in fact not to produce universally valid conclusions, but rather to formulate plausible hypotheses. The root of semiotics as a heuristic device therefore lies in its ability to navigate the world effectively, approximating the truth value of what surrounds us. It is hardly surprising that music, which has never been expected to formulate truths, was for a long time excluded from the scope of semiotic inquiry. Nor have the more recent developments of the discipline tended towards incorporating the

musical, since they have become increasingly specialized in addressing linguistic issues (Fabbri 1998), whose relationship to musical ones is far from immediately evident.

The linguistic tendency is partly due to the fact that many of the major semioticians, such as Saussure and Hjelmslev, were themselves linguists. More broadly, as Paolo Fabbri has observed, the humanities have recently tended to reduce their objects of study to the linguistic or the literary dimension, and Semiotics had an important precursor in St. Augustin, who first systematically connected the theory of signs to the theory of language in his *The Magistro*.

What happened, therefore, is that musical semiotics, from its very beginnings, has been strongly influenced by linguistic models: just think about Bernstein's famous *The Unanswered Question*, where music was analysed and divided in morphological, syntactical and semantic aspects, or the seminal work for musical semiotics that is Ruwet's *Langage, musique, poesie* (1983). When, twenty years later, *The sense in music* (1987), a volume collecting seventeen essays by different authors on the early stages of musical semiotics, was published, almost none of these contributions were still entirely free from a linguistic bias, although an awareness of the need for greater autonomy from verbal language indeed occasionally emerged, as in the essays by Jiránek and, somewhat paradoxically, by Lerdahl and Jackendoff. Most of these studies still turned to language in order to establish parallels with music. One example is Otto Laske's article "From Psycholinguistics to Psychomusicology," which proposed drawing on psycholinguistic methods to investigate modes of musical listening. And even if we went twenty additional years forward in time, consulting the collection *Parole nell'aria*, the acts of the 2008 AISS conference, we can see how strong the influence of verbal systems in the analysis of music, as the scope of the collection was to investigate parallels between music and other sign systems and a large number of the contributions delved into music and verbal texts.

Now, these perspectives should not be dismissed simply because they involve the notion of language—on the contrary. Comparing different sign systems of any kind can be extremely productive, as we'll see in the next paragraphs. However, if we expected music to "speak" in the same way language does, i.e. idealizing an equation in which expression stands to musical sounds as content does to emotions or even concepts, we are simply on the wrong path. If we used music to speak, then music would be language, and there would be no fundamental difference between the two.

And yet, today, no one really expects music to actually function as a language. This attitude is, on the one hand, limiting, because it turns many interesting questions about musical meaning into taboos, dismissing them as naïve. On the other hand, it is precisely this impasse that pushes us

toward a change of perspective, one that is also very much needed within semiotics itself.

As mentioned earlier, in fact, semiotics became overly focused on language during the twentieth century. In *The Semiotic Turn*, Paolo Fabbri suggested that we move beyond treating signs as if they were only words, and begin instead to consider other sign systems, and, crucially, the ways in which they interact. Applied to music, this shift allows for two important developments. First, it enables us to consider music as an autonomous system of signs, rich in interpretative dynamics. A musical performance, for instance, can be understood as an interpretation of graphic signs by the performer, and in turn as an interpretation of sonic signs by the listener. Second, it allows us to think of music as a system, or even a multisystem, while recognizing that different systems can interpenetrate without losing their autonomy.

From such perspectives, a new and less illusory way of understanding how music may relate to reality begins to emerge. And from a semiotic point of view, this also opens a path toward what Paolo Fabbri called *intersemiotic transduction*, and helps us avoid falling back into a reduction to the linguistic—by taking as our starting point a different kind of sign system, namely music.

2. From Music to Language through Metaphor

There are two reasons for beginning this second section with some reflections on metaphor. First, it is a rhetorical figure generally associated with language; as we shall see, however, it can be understood in a broader sense as a suprasystemic or asystemic cognitive device responsible for bringing different sign systems into communication with one another, thereby playing a fundamental role in explaining the transemiotic dynamics whose importance we emphasized in the previous section. Second, this initial exploration of metaphor will allow us, in a subsequent step, to move towards a reconsideration of the relationship between poetry and music, which has marked the history of music semiotics, establishing itself as a point of reference for a depolarization of the role played by language in mediating approaches to the semiotics of music.

2.1. The foundational role of metaphor

The metaphorical and the musical are both starting points and endpoints of the cognitive and communicative movement of human beings. Both of these moments arise from, and at the same time entail, a dimension of encounter between incommensurables, which is precisely the dimension of the metaphorical and the musical. Rousseau describes the generative moment of language as follows:

> A savage man, upon encountering others, would at first be frightened. His fear would make these men appear to him larger and stronger than himself; and he would therefore give them the name of giants. After many experiences, he would realize that these supposed "giants" are neither larger nor stronger than he is, and that their stature therefore in no way corresponds to the idea he had initially associated with the word giant. He would then invent another name that could be applied equally to them and to himself, such as, for instance, the name man, and would retain giant to designate the false object that had struck him in his delusion. This is how figurative language comes to precede literal language, when passion blinds us and the first idea it presents to us does not correspond to the truth. What I have said of words and names applies without difficulty to syntactic expressions as well. Since the illusory image suggested by passion manifested itself first, the corresponding language was likewise the first to emerge; only later did it become metaphorical, when the enlightened mind, recognizing the original error, used those expressions only for the very passions that had given rise to them.[2]

The primordial encounter with the Other cannot be reduced to the discrete domain of compositional language, but rather belongs to the continuous and emotional experience of relationality, which only subsequently comes to be carved up into the discrete units that constitute the terms of language. This same line of thought is taken up, if not necessarily from a chronological perspective, then certainly from a conceptual one, by later authors such as Saussure (the differential logic of value), Hjelmslev (form applied to the substance of expression and content), Eco (semantics as the carving up of the Encyclopedia), and Mithen (the emergence of compositional language through the segmentation of holistic communication).

What interests us is to see how all of this relates to music. The point is that, at a prelinguistic stage, there could logically be no form of communication other than the figurative or metaphorical kind that, for Rousseau, governs the generative moment of meaning: there would be no "man" definable as "non-giant," or in relation to any other entity; there would only be the fright experienced by a man that makes the other appear threatening, and nothing with which to express it other than the sonic "sign" (in the logical-Stoic sense) of our emotion. We would therefore find ourselves at a level closer to the musical, precisely because communication, already sonic at this stage, would be impossible to divide into a grid of signifiers corresponding to a grid of contents. And it will

---

[2] Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Essai sur l'origine des langues, où il est parlé de la mélodie et de l'imitation musicale*. Genève: DuPeyrou, 1781, my translation.

come as no surprise to discover that Rousseau and Mithen in fact associate their similar views of protolanguage with music.

Apparently, then, the introduction of compositional language would have represented an articulation of the cognitive and the sonic domains: articulation rather than segmentation, since it would have left the interstices, the joints, immersed in a void that cannot be grasped in terms of signification. This observation finds support in Eco's (1984) identification of the limitations of Aristotelian, dictionary-based semantics, which would claim to be able to establish equivalences between terms and definitions without taking into account the overlaps and displacements that the articulation of a continuum inevitably entails. The assignment of meanings to terms, as well as the selection of their different senses, cannot dispense with continual "jumps backward," returns to the dimension of comparison and encounter with the Other, which enable us to confer meaning upon every expression we handle. Each of us, in fact, speaks (and listens) by selecting a specific portion of the Encyclopedia (which we understand here as the general body of cultural knowledge); that is, the standpoint that allows us to formulate hypotheses, predictions, and abductions about how what we say will be interpreted and about where what is being said to us is leading.

Claudio Paolucci (2012) describes this localization of meaning in terms of condensations of minimal units of meaning around isotopies (dense points within the rhizomatic network of the Encyclopedia). The entire structure of signification would therefore operate according to the same mechanism as analogy, which, following Enzo Melandri, we can understand as a hyponym of metaphor. To interpret would then be to perform the work of the *interpres*: one who knows how to establish a correspondence of value between two elements belonging to different registers, thereby creating commensurability between different systems. That is, one who operates metaphorically.

And at this point we can therefore close the circle: with the realization that our capacity to communicate arises from an encounter with an Other that enables us to discretize meanings and handle a compositional language; to descend from the Musical into a specific lexicon through the metaphor. And then, by handling this discrete, specific, and compositional lexicon, we realize that it is never sufficient in itself, and that, in order to understand anything, as well as to create new meanings and new ways of reading the world, we are compelled to start again from the specific lexicon and climb once more back up there through

metaphoric jumps, into the boundless field of encounters, which is that of the Musical[3].

3. Conclusion: Moving Away from the Linguistic System

Over the course of these few pages, we have seen that semiotics does not necessarily have to do with language, and that what music lacks in terms of articulation can instead be understood as a gain in its flexibility with respect to the metaphorical. This does not mean, however, that this contribution should conclude, on the basis of this flexibility, by idealizing music and portraying it as a universal and original mechanism of communication. The Musical we have described should rather be understood as the dimension that precedes and exceeds the fragile rigidity of an expressive articulation carrying with it the expectation of a correspondence at the level of content. It functions, as a stipulated term, precisely in relation to language and from a Rousseauian perspective: the continuum as that which is not linguistic, and therefore as the musical. Traditional music, understood as the sonic, must instead be acknowledged as already being, to some extent, subject to a process of segmentation of the original continuum, which has led to the emergence of forms of musical expression and, to a greater or lesser extent, of actual semantic contents.

Nevertheless, for the study of musical semiotics, it is a useful starting point to idealize an entirely flexible Musical, capable of entering into communication with, and filling the interstices of, all other systems of meaning. From this perspective, it becomes interesting to consider what constitutes musical interpretation, focusing not so much on the listener as on the interpreter, that is, the person who interprets musical signs. At this point, the argument shifts from the idealistic to the thoroughly pragmatic, allowing us to examine engagement with musical signs from a stable and disenchanted standpoint, without presupposing a dependence on language. Notation, timbres, and tempi become bearers of relative, encyclopedically contextualized meanings, in diagrammatic relation to elements that may simultaneously belong to what expresses (the indication addressed to the interpreter) and to what is expressed (what the interpreter intends to communicate). Interpretive choices thus become amenable to the tools of cognitive semiotics, through the study of the relationship between musical performance, narrativity, and the bodies of performer and instrument. From here, space opens up for the minor senses, endosemiotics, and theories concerning the “micro” level, such as vibroacoustic medicine. The interpreter is no longer merely a performer

[3] We use this understanding of the Musical in reference to what Rousseau and Mithen have already been shown to express, as well as to the relationship with the verbal described by Daniele Barbieri in *Parole nell’aria*, op. cit., pp. 29–42.

but becomes an explorer, a detective who, following the evidential paradigm, can draw on visual sources and metaphorical connections to establish diagrammatic relationships between sounds.

To establish that the semiotics of music need not necessarily be analogous to the semiotics of language does not at all mean denying the semantic or communicative possibilities of the musical. Indeed, as we have seen, it is from the musical that the linguistic emerges, and not the other way around.

Bibliography

Bernstein, Leonard. *The Unanswered Question: Six Talks at Harvard.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976.

Eco, Umberto. *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio*. Torino: Einaudi, 1984.

Fabbri, Paolo. *La svolta semiotica*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1998.

Ginzburg, Carlo*. Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*. Translated by John and Anne C. Tedeschi. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

Hjelmslev, Louis. *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*. Translated by Francis J. Whitfield. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961.

Jakobson, Roman. *Six leçons sur le son et le sens*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1976.

Laske, Otto E. "Musicology and Psychomusicology: Two Sciences of Music." Psychology of Music 5, no. 2 (1977): 10–22.

Jakobson, Roman, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. *La linguistica e le scienze dell'uomo: Sei lezioni sul suono e sul senso; Mito e significato: Cinque conversazioni radiofoniche*. Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2011.

Melandri, Enzo. *La linea e il circolo: Studio logico-filosofico sull'analogia*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1968.

Mithen, Steven. *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005.

Monelle, Raymond. *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Paolucci, Claudio. *Strutturalismo e interpretazione: La semiotica di Umberto Eco*. Milano: Bompiani, 2012.

Pozzato, Maria Pia, and Lucio Spaziante, eds. *Parole nell'aria: Sincretismi fra musica e altri linguaggi*. Atti del Congresso AISS, San Marino, 2008.

Reybrouck, Mark. *Musical Sense-Making: Enaction, Experience, and Computation*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021.

Ruwet, Nicolas. *Linguaggio, musica, poesia*. Translated by Mario Bortolotto, Luisa Geroldi, and Elena De Angeli. Torino: Einaudi, 1983.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques*. Essai sur l'origine des langues, où il est parlé de la mélodie et de l'imitation musicale*. Genève: DuPeyrou, 1781.

Saussure, Ferdinand de*. Course in General Linguistics*. Translated by Wade Baskin. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

© 2026 Francesco Brazioli. This is an Open Access article published in the journal Musica Academica by the University of Oradea Publishing House and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). The full terms of this license are available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0.