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*An Introduction to Theories and Practice of Musical Signification and Narratology*

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In a first stage, the key notions of “signification and narrativity in music” will be described.

### I. Musical Signification

Simply put, *musical signification* (in works written between the seventeenth and twentieth century) can be defined as the verbal reconstruction of a lost musical competence, a kind of musical knowledge quasi forgotten through ages, yet perpetuated in musical practice by interpreters and transmitted from generation to generation by various instrumental and vocal schools. The notion of signification covers the various *expressive types* within each musical style, types of expression linked to a given *musical formula* from technical perspective, and referring to the same ‘cultural units’ recognized by members of the given culture or society.

This knowledge or competence transmitted for centuries through practice and oral culture, and partly through ancient treatises, was the object of ‘musicological’ descriptions by two entirely independent schools operating on two different continents at roughly the same time (i.e. in the 1970s and 1980s).

1. In the United States, Charles Rosen was the first in 1971 to study ‘the classical style’ (Rosen 1971) based on analyses of the expressive and stylistic types or conventions found in the themes of classical music. (See, for example, the chapters on the Haydn symphonies, in which Charles Rosen examines forms based on elements of style, or *stylemes*, such as opera buffa, the contrapuntal style, potpourri, the popular style or popular songs in symphonies, etc.).

In 1980, Leonard Ratner also made an important contribution to musicological research by introducing the notion of ‘topic’ -- from the term *topos* (pl. *topoi*) used in classical rhetoric, meaning common place. It was not an altogether new notion but a concept borrowed and redefined from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century treatises by Marpurg, Mattheson,

Koch, and others. Ratner identified twenty-seven types of musical expression and genres, each with a reference to human life: the affects, the extramusical world or the ‘cultural units’ of the baroque/classical period.

**Table N°1**

Leonard Ratner's 1980 presentation of musical topics, later taken up by Hatten, Agawu, Allenbrook, Monelle and other musicologists:

- 1) Dance types: minuet, passe-pied, saraband, allemand, polonaise, bourrée, contredance, gavotte, *siciliano*, gigue.
- 2) Marches
- 3) Different styles: alla breve, alla zoppa, amoroso, aria, brilliant style (virtuoso style), cadenza, Empfindsamkeit (sensitivity), fanfare, French overture, the hunt, learned style, ombra, Mannheim rocket, musette, opera buffa, pastoral, recitativo, sigh motive, singing style, Sturm und Drang, alla turca (about 32 topoi intonations).

The following generation of American musicologists – the real or spiritual students of Rosen and Ratner--continued the tradition initiated by their masters. We think about the nature of the main publications of musicologists such as Kofi Agawu, Robert Hatten, David Lidov, John S. Ellis, Fred E. Maus, and others.

2. At roughly the same time, and beginning in the 1960s and 1970s in Eastern and Central Europe, Russian, Czech and Hungarian musicologists were heavily influenced by Russian ‘formalism’ (i.e. the ‘first structuralism’ of the 1920s and 1930s) and by the ‘materialist’ tradition of musical aesthetics (itself marked by the influence of Enlightenment thinkers and Marxist philosophers, and subsequently Boris Asafiev, among others<sup>1</sup>). Aesthetician-musicologists such as B. Asafiev, Jaroslav Jiránek, Vladimir Karbusicky, Ujfalussy, János Maróthy and, to some extent, Bence Szabolcsi examined classical and romantic works and twentieth-century pieces based on the *expressive types* of each musical style. These types (called ‘intonations’, partly as a result of the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Enlightenment dictionaries) were primarily defined based on *musical genres* that connected with the past by establishing the *function of music* in the life of a particular stratum of society (for example: *berceuse*, lament, *caccia* i.e. hunting or chase, *alla turca* as imitation of the orchestra of the Turkish Janissaries, French overture, military march, funeral march, religious or ceremonial music, festive dance, popular dance, nocturne, serenade, etc.).

Musicologists in this tradition studied the works of Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Janáček, Berg, Bartók and others by focusing on the ‘expressive types’ and ‘intonations’ found in the style of a particular composer (for the different definitions of the term ‘intonation’, see Grabócz 2010). For example, Jaroslav Jiránek classified the *initial (or archetypal) semantic units* based on four sources. According to Jiránek (1985), their origin can be found: (1) in nature, the surrounding acoustical environment, etc.; (2) in the anthropological dimension; (3) in the social activity of man; and (4) in the *phylogenesis* of music.

In 1972 and 1973, while Bence Szabolcsi in Hungary was working on completing his ‘*Musica Mundana*’, which presented approximately twenty musical types of Western musical history covering the period 1600-1950 (and illustrated by three hundred examples, published by Hungaroton [Budapest] in 1975), Charles Rosen and Leonard Ratner in the United States were also completing their studies of classical music and its types. However, the two ‘schools’ knew nothing of each other until the end of the 1980s.

## Table N°2

Szabolcsi’s classification (with 300 recorded examples, in “Musica Mundana”, a set of six LPs, Hungaroton, Budapest, 1975):

- 1) Rhythm and magic (the sounds of Nature; primitive rhythms)
- 2) Dance rhythms (*gagliarda; polonica, polonaise, polka; minuet, Ländler, waltz; verbunkos; alla turca*)
- 3) Street sounds
- 4) Melodic proliferation
- 5) The “*Marseillaise*” motive; Mozart’s *formula*; the “*Eroica*” motive
- 6) Two types of Psalms
- 7) Vaudeville-*chiusetta*
- 8) *Estampida*-refrain-rondeau
- 9) Incantation, magical songs
- 10) The hunt (*caccia, galop, etc.*)
- 11) *Lamento*
- 12) Songs of liberty
- 13) Leitmotive (Mozart, Beethoven, Verdi)

3. In the 1980s, the Finnish musicologist Eero Tarasti (who belonged to another generation of musicologists, those born in the 1940s and 1950s) made possible the encounter between the various musicological schools and movements which shared an interest in ‘rediscovering’ musical signification. In 1978 Tarasti published the first modern ‘treatise’ of

nineteenth-century musical topics (Tarasti 1978). A student of Algirdas Julien Greimas at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in the 1970s, Tarasti was able to integrate the two new musicological approaches (which derived from the above mentioned two different sources) within the methodological framework of Greimas' literary narrative semiotics, a field itself inspired by the Russian formalists, and in particular Vladimir Propp, Boris Asafiev's collaborator.

In 1984, the first international meeting on 'musical signification' was held in Paris at the initiative of Daniel Charles and Eero Tarasti. Some of the major musicologists attending the event included Costin Miereanu, Gino Stefani, Ivanka Stoianova, and Marcello Castellana. The new research project and the plans to hold biennial events at the International Congresses on Musical Signification (ICMS) were thus born. Since the first congress held in 1986 at the University of Helsinki, the project has continued to expand and develop, notably through conference proceedings from the many events held in various European universities – eleven volumes have so far been published.

Since then, scholarly discussions of questions surrounding musical signification have found their own forum – a forum that currently includes in 2014 roughly 600 musicologists from different continents, a figure that is increasing every year.

Based on this historical-geographical foundation, I would argue that the gradual rediscovery of the ancient musical knowledge that is *musical signification*, which finds its source in musical practice and in the profound knowledge of different musical styles, has become a permanent and on-going research process involving an important number of scholars from all over the world: each musicologist making his or her own modest contribution to what remains presently a work-in-progress<sup>2</sup>.

## II. Musical Narratology

*The notions of 'narratology' and 'narrativity'* are closely related to the idea of musical signification in the sense that their definition would require an extensive and complex presentation (for an initial attempt of this kind by a musicologist, see Grabocz 2007b).

Narratology is the science of narrative (Tzvetan Todorov 1966), and narrativity can be defined as a component of certain narrative genres – the narrative mode of '*mise en texte*' or enunciation (Jean-Michel Adam); this narrative mode has key functions such as action and event; transformation; tripartite (or quadripartite or even quinary) concatenation of

sequences, etc. Generalized narrativity is considered to be the organizing principle of all discourse (A. J. Greimas, 1979), and the narrative logic is the displaying principle of narrative and discourse (Jacques Fontanille). In other definitions, an object is narrative if it is ‘the logically consistent representation of at least two asynchronous events that do not presuppose or imply each other’ (Gerald Prince quoted in Richardson 2011). Other theorists underline the role of the transforming act, based for example on the notion of narrative mediation (T. Todorov, 1969; A. J. Greimas- 1966) or a tripartite or quinary (or sometimes quadripartite) chain of sequences, but also the dual ‘sequential and configurational’ dimension of narrative (P. Ricœur). The ‘narrative’ analysis of storytelling and discourse should take into account all of these dimensions. It is important to note that these definitions are derived from the branch of narratological research known as ‘classical narratology’, since my approach is rooted in the methodological and analytical framework that emerged between the 1960s and 1980s. By contrast, ‘post-classical narratologies’ (in other words, narratologies that emerged after the ‘classical’ theory, i.e. since 1990) imply an almost unlimited openness to new interdisciplinary approaches and definitions.

Narratology has also found its own forums and international centers since the 1990s. Examples<sup>3</sup> of such forms include the Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology (ICN) at the University of Hamburg, ‘Narratologies Contemporaines’ (the CRAL seminar and research group based at the EHESS in Paris), the Centre de Narratologie Appliquée at the University of Nice, and the European Narratology Network (ENN), founded in 2008. The Nordic Network of Narrative Studies and Project Narrative at Ohio State University, both founded in 2007, have also played a major part in this movement, while the ‘*Narratologia*’ series published by Walter de Gruyter (Berlin, New York) and edited by representatives of the major centers for narratological research (Fotis Jannidis, John Pier, Wolf Schmid - The fifteenth volume in the series was published in 2008) aims to provide a voice for research in this area.

On these bases, I will use the terms ‘*musical narrativity*’ or ‘*musical narratology*’ to refer to the mode of expressive organization of an instrumental piece. Narrative analysis in music aims to understand how musical discourse operates from the point of view of the construction of expressive units (structure of the succession of topics or intonations, etc.). This approach will always be combined with traditional analysis drawing on the theories of musical structure (i.e. thematic and motivic analysis, harmony, and orchestration).

If we try to link the notion of signification to the notion of musical narrativity, we may note that by using the typical expressive units of a particular style, the dynamic process or the expressive thymic [affective] curve<sup>4</sup> of a piece of music is easier to follow and to understand. This dynamic and expressive process has its own sequential and cohesive logic: it has a beginning, middle, and an end (i.e. a teleological ending or a retroactive palindrome ending) and its curve is formed by the juxtaposition of euphoric and dysphoric units, themselves often setting up a positive (or in some cases negative) culminating point.

Anyone listening to a great work of music is aware that ‘something happens’ in the piece or in a particular movement. To grasp in a logical way the core of this moment, would be precisely the purpose of a narrative analysis of music.

Since 1966 (the year of publication of *Sémantique Structurale* by Greimas), we know that meaning and signification are revealed through structure. ‘Signification presupposes the existence of the relationship: it is the appearance of the relationship between the terms that is the necessary condition of signification’ (Greimas 1983).

The common feature of literary narratology and musical narratology is the search for laws and rules in the construction of expressive content. The key focus in the narrative analysis of music is not the ‘occasional’ or ‘accidental’ verbal definition of a given affective character or of the extra-musical or ‘cultural’ reference of a specific expressive unit, but our *ability to define the relationships between them, to determine the balance of power between them, their action, the resolution of their plot, and their cathartic end (if there is one)*.

### III. Semiotic and Narrative Models used for describe the Organization of Signifieds in Music

The linguistic, literary, and other models used to describe the organization of the signified are also varied. Jean-Jacques Nattiez (1975) has employed the three-part structure of Jean Molino, although he is still cautious to employ the term, “signified”. Eero Tarasti\*\* has referred to the models of Greimas: the *generative trajectory* with its three levels; *narrative programs*; system of modalities, etc. (Tarasti 1994). He is currently elaborating and applying his theory of *existential semiotics* (2000). Raymond Monelle has drawn inspiration from Greimas, Peirce, and ideas on narratology from Tzvetan Todorov, Michael Riffaterre and Graham Daldry (2000). Robert Hatten has applied the markedness theories of Michael Shapiro and Roman Jakobson, and developed a theory of “expressive genres” (1994, 2004). He has also conceived the notion of “troping” (the creation of a trope is akin to a metaphor in

that it is the result of an *interaction* of known topics). Vladimir Karbusicky has created a theory of historical musical forms<sup>5</sup> and employed Peirce's theories (1986, 1990). Nicolas Meeùs (1998) and Jean-Pierre Bartoli (2000) have taken advantage of Hjelmslev's system in their theories; Bernard Vecchione (2007) has drawn inspiration from the rhetorical systems of Paul Ricœur and Greimas. I, for my part, have applied the elements of structural semantics, notably the narrative grammar of Greimas, including the narrative program, the elementary structure of signification, narrative syntax, etc. (Grabócz, 2009b).

Without pretending to have undertaken an exhaustive investigation, I present here the most frequently used schemas by the authors cited above, in the chronological order of their references:

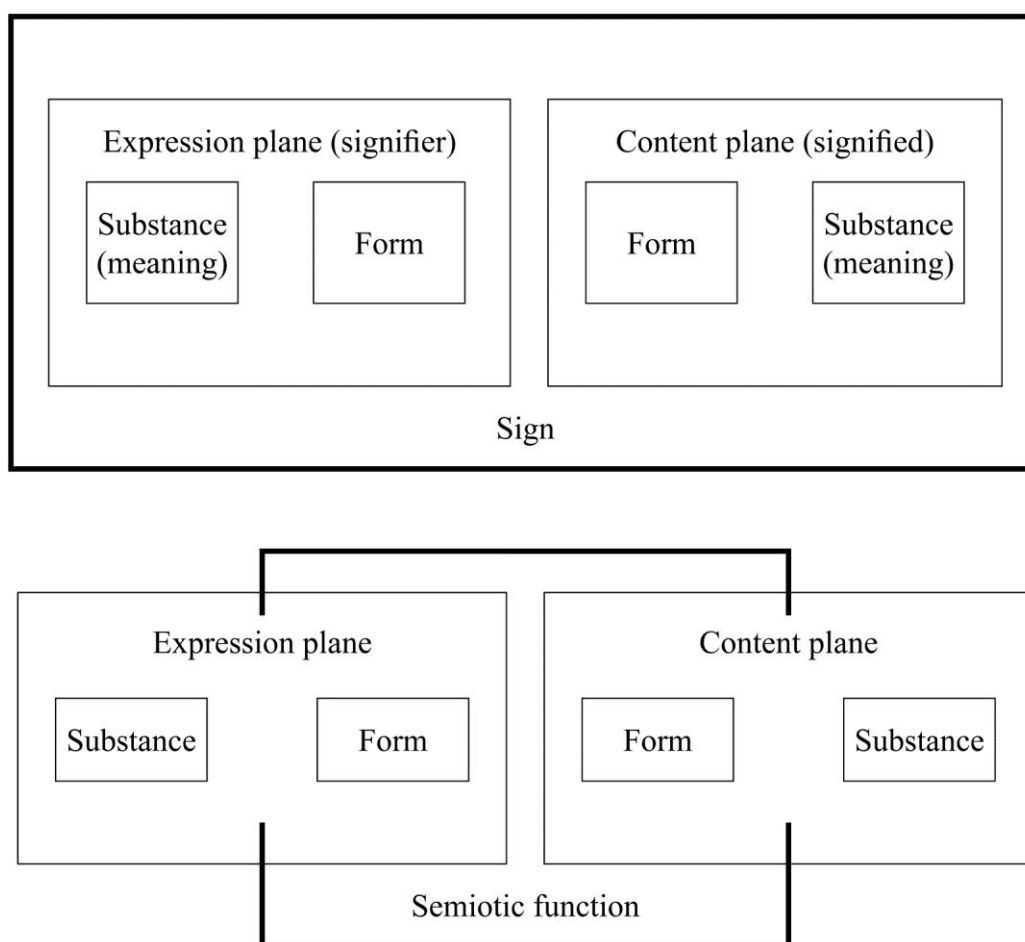


Figure 1a and 1b: Hjelmslev's 1943 quadripartition (plan of expression and plan of content) and the use of the diagram to introduce the function of the "external paradigm" in musical analysis (see N. Meeùs, 1998: 18 and 1994).

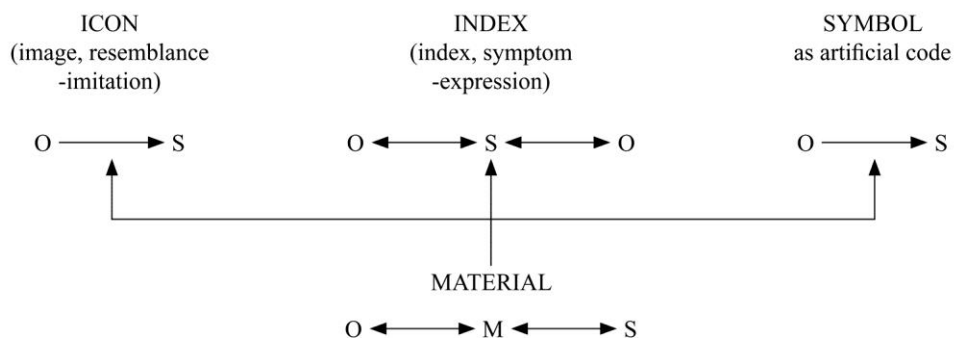


Figure 2: V. Karbusicky (1987: 432): the use of the “Peircean semiotic triangle”. Characteristics of the sign in the domain of interaction between Subject (S), Object (O) and Material (M).

	Syntactic component		Semantic component
Semiotic and narrative struct.	Deep level	FUNDAMENTAL SYNTAX	FUNDAMENTAL SEMANTICS
	Surface level	SURFACE NARRATIVE SYNTAX	NARRATIVE SEMANTICS
Discursive structures	DISCURSIVE SYNTAX Discursivisation actorialisation temporalisation spatialisation		DISCURSIVE SEMANTICS Thematisation Figurativisation

Figure 3: Greimas’ generative trajectory cited by E. Tarasti (1994: 78).

$PN = F [S1 \rightarrow (S2 \cap Ov)]$
$PN = F [S1 \rightarrow (S2 \cup Ov)]$
F = function
S1 = subject of doing
S2 = subject of state
O = object (which can undergo a semantic investment in the form of $v$ : value)
[ ] = utterance of doing
( ) = utterance of state
$\rightarrow$ = function of doing
$\cap \cup$ = conjunction - disjunction

Figure 4: Greimas’ narrative program (Greimas, 1993/1979: 297) used by Tarasti (1994) and Grabócz (1996, 2007)



What connects all the applications of these models is not the will to see a “story related in music”, as Nattiez takes for granted (1990, 2001) but to find the rules, the organizing strategies of the signified: strategies which vary from one historical epoch to another, from one style to another, from the entire oeuvre of one composer to that of another, etc.

There is a musical reality which is predominant in almost all the musicologists’ analyses cited above: it is to *view the organization of the signified as binary oppositions*: opposition according to asymmetrical marking in Hatten; opposition and rhetorical rules in Kofi Agawu; opposition of elements within the “archetypal” diagrams corresponding to different stages in the history of music in Karbusicky; “connection of coupled contradictory terms” in Greimas’ heirs (a semantic universe articulated around an axis according to four different signifieds); diverse oppositions placed within Hjelmslev’s diagram in Meeùs and Bartoli.

Obviously, the initial analysis of oppositions is only a point of departure in the observation of the narrative structures, of the logic found in the sequence of the signifying units, a sequence peculiar to each historical or individual style. The “third generation” of books on musical signification – those published from about 2000 – contains, in an almost obligatory fashion, a chapter of reflection on the way in which signifieds are organized. Thus, these works initiate a more elevated theoretical inquiry into the concatenation of topics – the level I consider to be “musical narrativity”.

Different definitions of “general narrativity” range from a global view to a more detailed description of the concept. The “globalizing” approach showcases narrativity as the organizational principle of all discourse, the intern organisation of texts (Greimas, Fontanille, Klinkenberg, Adam). Others point to the combination of syntactic (syntagmatic) and logical (paradigmatic) levels, or the levels of sequential and configurational dimension, that underly the narrative or discursive transformation (Todorov, Schaeffer, Hénault, Ricœur). Others see in narrativity the mode of representation of events, objects, changes of state, causal relations (Prince, Ryan, Hénault). The more pragmatic presentation puts forward the existence of three phases: the beginning state, the transformative act or plot, and the resulting state. These phases may be completed so as to reach a quaternary or quinary structure: 1) initial state of balance, 2) provocation, disruption, 3) trial and mediation = action [+4) sanction], 5) final state of equilibrium (Adam, Diguier, Ricœur).

#### IV. An example of narrative approaches in music analyses

A) An example of Raymond Monelle’s narrative analysis: J. S. Bach’s A flat major fugue, BWV 886

As we have mentioned, Raymond Monelle has worked on a theory of topics in music for almost a decade (2000, 2006, 2007). In doing so, he has produced several very interesting

analyses of Bach's fugues (2000, 2002)<sup>6</sup> – works which have been traditionally considered representative of “absolute music”. In his writings, Monelle sheds unprecedented light on their structures, which benefit from the organisation of topics in a binary opposition.

For instance, he describes fugues number 17 in A flat major and number 22 in B flat minor BWV 886 (from the second volume of the *Well Tempered Clavier*) as *metaphors*, the first of which he feels consists of an *allegory of listening*, and the second of a *macro-metaphor*: that of the “*memento mori*” or “*dulce amarum*” of visual representations that have been known since the sixteenth century<sup>7</sup>. The structure of the second piece (fugue number 22) is, in his view, the musical realisation of literary and visual conventions of the famous confrontation of the ideas or images of “life and death”. “This genre [created by Bach] unites incompatible subjects by following the suggestion of their internal correspondence” (2000, 2002:11, 2007b). Bach's two fugues present the advancing of two musical ideas as the subject and counter-subject.



Figure 5a and 5b: Subject and counter-subject of Bach's Fugue number 17 in A flat major BWV 886 (from the second volume of the *Well Tempered Clavier*)

These are the elements of the opposition that Monelle establishes related to Fugue number 17 in A flat major from the second volume of the *Well Tempered Clavier* (and related to the precursor in the *fughetta* in F major BWV 901, written twenty years earlier):

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Counter-subject</b>
Universe of the trio sonata, related to courts and drawing rooms of the	“Passus duriusculus” <sup>8</sup>
The quality of the sound of string instruments	Vocal music
The rationalism of the Enlightenment, the spurious stability of social hierarchy, and sophisticated badinage	Its sound meaning: grave and painful, of penitence; (see in A. Pirro), feelings of “affliction” and anxiety
“modern style”	“Stile antico”

<b>Synthesis as an oxymoron or paradox</b>	
Diatonic	Chromatic
Salon	Church
Modern	Ancient
Strings	Organ
Instrumental	Vocal
Metric	Non metric
Rational	Mystic
Easy	Painful
Abstract	Symbolic

Figure 6: Binary oppositions found in Bach’s Fugue number 17 in A flat major BWV 886 (from the second volume of the *Well Tempered Clavier*). Table based on Monelle 1997.

The first small fugue (in F major, BWV 901, which covers a single page) creates a usual fugue strategy (macrostructure) by using two main subjects (see figures 5a, 5b, transposed in F).

“It seems as though the inner threat, the obscurity and neurasthenia of the countersubject, were dispelled by the subject [. . .] The relation of countersubject and subject is metaphorical; the subject explains and focuses the countersubject, lifting out its potential for tonal clarity. The true and essential signification of the chromatic countersubject lies within the sphere of rational tonality after all, we seem to learn, and the gloomy landscapes of Sweelinck [*suggested by the counter-subject*] recede out of sight” (Monelle 2000: 200).

In contrast to his realization of the *Fughetta* in F major, when reworking the same musical ideas twenty years later in the A flat major fugue BWV 886 from the second volume of the *Well Tempered Clavier*, Bach “listens” to the exceptional measures of this *fughetta*

(measures 13 ff.) to carry out their achievement. “The metaphor is reversed; what was a diatonic vindication of the countersubject is now a chromatic clouding of the subject. The three parts [. . .] plunge further and further into a gulf of aurally unidentifiable keys in a transport of *aporia*” (Monelle 2000: 202). After measure 41, the triple counterpoint disappears, and the other voices, taken together, paraphrase the formula of lamentation, imposing a chromatic relation onto the subject. In the end, the subject falls into the servitude of the frightening chromatic system, which is laden with pathos and grandeur, like the prelude of a solemn chorale; the formula of lamentation is ubiquitous, creeping in through the voices of the subject (Monelle 2000: 205).

Monelle’s interpretation of this phenomenon is that this fugue indicates (in Pierce’s meaning of *indexicality*) the gradual domination of sentiment over rationality. In this sense, he considers this fugue as a *referential narration*. “The text’s own deconstructive listening is an allegory of listening itself” (Monelle 2000: 206).

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Materialist’ aesthetics examines the links between the real world (the life of man, his environment, his society) and expressive musical formulae.

<sup>2</sup> See the numerous publications of the ICMS congresses and the last e-book edited in Edinburgh by Panos Nearchos, Peter Nelson & George Athanasopoulos (2013).

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.icn.uni-hamburg.de> (Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology (ICN)); <http://www.narratology.net> (European Narratology Network); <http://www.nordicnarratologynet.ut.ee> (Nordic Network of Narrative Studies); <http://www.projectnarrative.osu.edu> (Project Narrative at Ohio State University).

<sup>4</sup> Thymic curve would mean evolution of affects (thymic being derived of thymos or thumos i.e. humor, temper, mood)

<sup>5</sup> His five (plus one) archetypes of musical structures through the history of music are: [0] initial chaos; 1) boundless production; 2) additional-tectonic process; 3) the circular "eternal" return; 4) tripartite form: point of departure-development-return; 5) dramaturgy in four acts: dramatization by imaginary finality (see Karbusicky 1990: 195).

<sup>6</sup> “BWV 886 as Allegory of Listening” (Monelle 1997: 79-88) (on the F major *fughetta* BWV 901 and its more developed version, the A flat major fugue number 17, from the second volume of the *Well Tempered Clavier*, BWV 886; a revision of this article consists of the eighth chapter of his book of 2000); see also 2002 (in this article, he deals with the B flat minor fugue number 22 from the second volume of Bach’s *Well Tempered Clavier*); and 1998 (relating to the binary opposition in various works from Bach to Mozart). And see also 2007: 239-250.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, a painting by Lorenzo Lotto: *Love crowning death (Dulce amarum)*.

<sup>8</sup> “Somewhat hard and rigorous passage”: motivic chromatic descent.