

LEVON HAKOBIAN
Moscow

THEORETICAL CONCEPTIONS IN MUSICOLOGY AS A POTENTIAL OBSTACLE TO MUSICAL COMPREHENSION

The core of the history of musical thought consists of large-scale doctrines striving to explain the empirical multitude of observed phenomena in terms of immutable categories and universals. The doctrines in question include, for instance, Hugo Riemann's theory of three functions and the Schenkerian analysis, both widely recognized as basic systems of teaching the fundamentals of Western art music. More or less 'universalist' conceptions are quite numerous also in Russian musical scholarship. To mention but a few:

- the metro-tectonic theory by Georgy Konyus (Conus, 1862-1933) postulating the rules of 'good' musical architectonics based on the law of the 'balance of temporal values' which is valid for any style;
- the theory of modal rhythm by Boleslav Yavorsky (Jaworski, 1877-1942) treating musical entity as a rhythmically organized deployment of a 'natural' (traditional) or artificially constructed mode or scale (the Russian term *lad*, being close to both 'mode' and 'scale', is not synonymous with any);
- the 'intonation' theory by Boris Asaf'yev (1884-1949), according to which the worth of a musical piece is conditioned largely by its 'intonational' (*intonatsionnĭy* – another all but untranslatable Russian term) content, i.e., *grasso modo*, by the presence of melodic and harmonic turns firmly rooted in the system of social relations and therefore, in Asaf'yev's terms, 'socially meaningful';
- the conception of general logical principles of harmony developed by Yuriy Kholopov (1932-2003), whose idea that any harmonic thinking, irrespective of the differences between musical styles, proceeds from a hierarchy of 'constructive elements', implies the possibility to analyze the most diverse musical phenomena with the use of a single universal methodology.

All such theoretical conceptions, notwithstanding the methodological differences between them, are based on their authors' belief that all the complex and differentiated phenomena, in the final account, have their origins in some very simple principles. Accordingly, any music that cannot be convincingly reduced to these principles, is either ignored or declared 'abnormal'. For instance, both Riemann and Schenker rejected any (even relatively moderate) manifestations of modernism; Yavorsky did not recognize the very possibility of non-modal and non-tonal music and considered Viennese classicism as a poorly organized, rather 'mechanical' kind of music preferring Chopin, Liszt, and especially Skryabin as richer and more organic embodiments of his theory; Asaf'yev's idea of intonation was used by him and

especially by official Soviet ideological services as a theoretical base for debunking anything new and unusual in modern music (one can hardly imagine a worse example of misusing a musical-theoretical conception); Kholopov, whose authority as an expert in the 20th-century music is undeniable, did not pay any attention to those phenomena in modern music that did not fit into his speculative system of harmonic hierarchies... In all such instances the claim to scientific objectivity is combined with a deeply subjective and essentially unscientific presumption of dividing music into the ‘right’ one, corresponding to the postulates of the theory, and the ‘wrong’ one, i.e. the rest. Any theory inevitably stops before what in music is not ‘structured’ well enough, not quite ‘system-defined’ or made not strictly according to rules. Theories may point to ‘irregularities’ – just like the grammar of a verbal language registers exceptions to rules – but they can hardly justify them aesthetically. The by-effect of their impact is the growth of prejudices around anything that does not fit into an *a priori* established framework. Given the influence of these theories in the educational practice – and it must be said that Yavorsky enjoyed an immense popularity among intellectually advanced musicians (suffice it to say that young Shostakovich was among his adepts), Asaf’yev’s writings formed the basis of the whole official Soviet musicology, while Kholopov was and still is the most influential theorist and thinker in the field of both new music and the music of remote epochs – such a by-effect can really impede the comprehension of large strata of little known music and discourage students from exploring things that defy theoretical generalizations imposed by authorities.

Generally speaking, the reduction of what is complex (particular, accidental) to what is simple (universal, substantial) is a method of any positive science. In this sense, there is nothing special about the science of music. But the products of artistic creation, perhaps apart from the most elementary ones, persistently resist reduction and refuse to boil down to universals. And this is quite understandable, since the human being is highly irrational and unwilling to act according to clear-cut rules. Hence, the task of finding out musical universals seems to be rather unpromising. To provide a relevant analogy, let us quote from a treatise by a well-known Russian philosopher and linguist:

Though the positivistic and structuralistic linguistics of the last decades was permanently engaged in looking for language universals, it seems highly significant that these efforts, in the final account, proved fruitless. The attempts to formulate even the simplest universals turn into futile discussions about, for instance, the status of the combination of subject and predicate: may we call it a universal for any language or the fact of absorbing predicate into subject in some languages (and of absorbing subject into predicate in others) reduces the “subject–predicate” scheme to the role of an abstract speculative construction, which can be considered a real universal only after “doctoring” the linguistic realities?¹

¹ V. BIBIKHIN, *Yazyk filosofii*, Moskva, Progress, 1993, p. 43.

A parallel comes to mind with the *Ursatz* – the Schenkerian equivalent of the ‘subject–predicate’ scheme. The great Austrian theorist declared it to be an absolute universal for any music, but in a historical perspective it proves to be merely a particular case of a more general idea defined by Kholopov as “central element of a system” (CES).² In relation to the enormous diversity of musical phenomena of the past and present, the synthesizing category of CES, in its turn, appears to be merely an abstract speculative construction, which – due purely to its almost all-embracing nature – is endowed with a rather low explaining potential.

Now, let us continue quoting from the same source:

This danger – to turn out products of our speculative mind – impends over all the universals. In any event, these are perplexingly scanty. Indeed, it seems that language can be “manufactured” from anything, there is nothing compulsory about it ... In the final account, “the only language universal is the language itself”.³

Another parallel with music comes to mind. Several decades ago no one would have argued against the assertion that the most important substance of any music (a universal) is sound. However, after such works as *4'33"* by John Cage (1952), *visible music I* and *MO-NO* by Dieter Schnebel (1962, 1969) and *Pas de cinq* by Mauricio Kagel (1966) it became clear that sound may be merely an optional accessory. Though these works can be (and often, indeed, were) qualified as ‘non-music’, from the perspective of our days such an attitude towards them appears rather inadequate: all they have occupied a firm place in the annals of music history, while their creators are widely known as professional composers who proved their capacity to record their musical ideas also with the help of conventional music notation signs. The experience of new currents has ‘de-universalized’ also such a feature of music as the deployment from the beginning through the middle to the end (Asaf'yev's formula *i:m:t*, which was developed by Viktor Bobrovsky into a big doctrine of the functional principles of musical form).⁴ We have – *mutatis mutandis* – to accept the conclusion quoted above: the only universal of music is the music itself. “The wind bloweth where it listeth” (“The spirit blows where it wants”, John 3:8) – this is, perhaps, the only generalization that can be easily applied to any music and, more broadly, to any artistic creation.

² See: YU. KHOLOPOV, *Garmonicheskiy analiz. V 3-eb chastyakh. Chast' vtoraya*, Moskva, Muzyka, 2001, p. 3 ff.

³ BIBIKHIN, *Yazyk filosofii* cit., p. 43. The source quoted in the last sentence is I. ROBINSON, *The New Grammarians' Funeral: A Critique of Noam Chomsky's Linguistics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 86, polemically directed against one of the most influential ‘reductionist’ doctrines in linguistics.

⁴ See: B. ASAF'YEV, *Muzikal'naya forma kak protsess*, Knigi 1-ya i 2-ya. Izdanie 2e, Leningrad, Muzyka, 1971, p. 83 f; V. BOBROVSKY, *Funktsional'niye osnovi muzykal'noy formi*, Moskva, Muzyka, 1978.

To overcome the material's resistance to the efforts aiming at its reduction, the adepts of big theoretical conceptions must take measures to 'subdue' it – with results that can be properly characterized by one of the entries in the *Diary* by Witold Gombrowicz (his considerations being provoked by a book pertaining to other humanities):

The text makes a strange impression. Of absolute seriousness and absolute childishness. ... Of absolute knowledge ... and absolute ignorance. ... Always the same high school of riding, which consists in keeping the appearance of the complete freedom of movement – while in reality the rider barely holds himself in the saddle. ... While reading [such texts], I am interested not so much in the idea as such (which, *grosso modo*, is familiar to me from other sources), as in the thinker's desperate struggle with the thought. How many efforts are wasted! And now multiply these efforts of the writer by the efforts of his readers. Imagine, how these masses of logical deductions influence less sophisticated minds, who read jumping from one thing to another. How in each of these heads the [writer's] ideas blossom forth with another bunch of misunderstandings. So, where do we arrive? In the realm of strength, light and precision or in the untidy kingdom of failure?⁵

The last question is, undoubtedly, rhetorical. The science of music – as far as it is really a science, i.e. a systematic algorithmized activity directed to the discovery of the objects' inner organization through the removal of external manifestations – notwithstanding all its strong intellectual support, turns out to be a “kingdom of failure”, since it has to do with human creativity, which defies any conceptualization.

* * *

I hope, no one will reproach me for a straightforwardly negative attitude towards music theory. The science of finding out the regularities of musical thinking through the structural analysis of musical text has produced classics of its own, which has played an invaluable role in the orientation of our perception of music and in the formation of our system of evaluations and priorities. Denying this would be simply ungrateful. And yet, a huge array of more recent literature, developing the methodological principles of big classical conceptions or propounding new conceptions that also claim to be scientific and universal, can hardly help the reader – whether a student, a professional musician, or an enlightened amateur – to clarify his perception of the unfamiliar or to discover new meanings in what is well known.

The transformation of science into a kind of futile scholastic practice – indeed, into the “high school of riding” mentioned by Gombrowicz – is clearly visible on the example of post-Schenkerian line in the contemporary music

⁵ W. GOMBROWICZ, *Dziennik I. 1953-1956*, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997, pp. 117, 139.

theory. The well-known doctrine of the Austrian theorist Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935) has undeniable, one might say timeless, virtues. It successfully serves didactic purposes, since it teaches good voice leading and the differentiation of essential and not so essential aspects of musical composition. Moreover, it transcends the scholastic fragmentation of analytical disciplines and teaches to regard musical work as a whole which is not reducible to a sum of particulars. As a broad-based musician, Schenker enjoyed considerable prestige and influence in musical life: Wilhelm Furtwängler himself was among those who considered Schenker their mentor (it is not unlikely that the great conductor's unique art of shaping a big musical line, as well as his inclination to emphasize the bass, have something to do with the immediate influence of the creator of *Ursatz* and *Urfinie* concepts). There is no doubt that Schenker's theory, despite its intrinsic shortcomings,⁶ has proved its practical importance. It seems that the same is not true for the production of the Austrian theorist's numerous (mainly English-writing) followers, trying to perfect his analytical tools and to adapt his analytical technique to the music created before Bach and after Brahms. Their attempts, at best, merely illustrate some considerations whose sense is clear enough without the support of Schenkerian diagrams. In general, this is just the kind of activity described by Gombrowicz: the thinker's struggle with the thought, which, *grasso modo*, is familiar from other sources.

In my overview of some of major post-Schenkerian publications,⁷ a considerable attention was paid to the "generative theory of tonal music" by Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff.⁸ The work of these authors – one of them being a composer and musicologist, the other a linguist, pupil of hyper-influential Noam Chomsky – is, undoubtedly, one of the summits of musicology conceived as a science *stricto sensu*. It combines the elements of Schenkerian thinking with those of cognitive psychology and Chomsky's generative grammar. Now, without repeating my judgments on the theory, I will confine myself to a generalizing statement. The Lerdahl-Jackendoff doctrine is built up as a strictly formalized system of rules, connecting the

⁶For a discussion of the inherent flaws of Schenker's doctrine, cf. E. NARMOUR, *Beyond Schenkerism. The Need for Alternatives in Music Analysis*, Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 1980.

⁷L. HAKOBIAN, "Teoriya muzyki v poiskakh nauchnosti. Metodologiya i filosofiya "strukturnogo slyshaniya" v muzykovedenii poslednikh desiatiletii" (second part), *Muzykal'naya Akademiya*, I-II, 1997, p. 1 f.

⁸F. LERDAHL - R. JACKENDOFF, *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1983. See also: F. LERDAHL, "Théorie générative de la musique et composition musicale", in *Quoi? quand? comment? La Recherche musicale*, ed. by T. Machover, Paris, Ch. Bourgois, 1985, pp. 101-120 (here some of the theory's premises and conclusions are extended to post-tonal music). The book's success prompted the writers to develop and specify their points in several further publications.

deep-laid, more or less abstract levels of the structure of musical text with the specific, immediately observable ‘surface’ level. The propositions of the doctrine are verifiable only on short musical excerpts, mainly square periods; the main ‘experimental’ samples are such structurally uncomplicated passages as a chorale from the *St Matthew Passion*, Haydn’s *St Anthony* chorale and the beginning of the main theme from his Symphony No. 104, the theme of the variations from Mozart’s Piano Sonata K 331 and the beginning of his Symphony No. 40, Beethoven’s *Theme of Joy* and the beginning of his First Symphony, Chopin’s Prelude in A (op. 28 n. 7). Any more or less complex case requires some reservations or is simply disregarded as untypical, transgressing an average grammatical norm. From the theory’s subtext, the following idea is easily deducible: the area of human consciousness, which is responsible for the cognition of music, does not especially require stimuli fraught with the disturbance of psychological balance, capable to amaze, to shock, to stir up new and unusual emotional experiences – or, to put it in contemporary scientific terms, to produce a cognitive dissonance. From the viewpoint of Lerdahl and Jackendoff (which, indeed, hardly differs from that of Schenker and his more immediate followers), a correctly built musical whole is analogous to a children’s fairy-tale with strained, dramatic, even frightening twists and turns – cognitive dissonances – coming to an obligatory “cognitively consonant” ending. And this is claimed to be true for any tonal music “from Bach to Brahms”, irrespective of epoch, style, and genre. The orderly system, built up according to all the rules of deductive and axiomatic thinking, brings us in the “kingdom of failure”. Representing the reality of European music of the 18th and 19th centuries in an oversimplified form, it does not open particularly fresh perspectives. In the final account, the most appreciable outcome of the whole undertaking consists in giving new, beautifully formalized names to some established concepts and categories. Nowadays, when performing musicians, music lovers and music critics are more than ever attentive to stylistic particulars, such a view seems to be rather irrelevant for anybody apart from a very marginal group of those for whom, as one sarcastic critic put it, music analysis can exist without music itself.

Curiously, post-Schenkerian activities in the field of the theory of tonal music continue, though the first francophone champion of Schenkerism, Célestin Deliège (1922-2010), declared as early as 1992 that the analysis of tonal music has virtually been done, and no room remains for any further theorizing about the principles on which the music of the 18th and 19th centuries are based.⁹ This sounds as a death sentence to a whole field of music theory, and yet the post-Schenkerian bibliography continues to increase – as if the work in the direction set up by Schenker and developed by his followers up

⁹ C. DELIÈGE, “Du cognitivisme à la formalisation grammaticale: un parcours non fléché”, *Analyse musicale*, XXVIII, 1992, pp. 7-21: 19 f.

to Lerdahl and Jackendoff, continues through inertia. The value of this quite sizeable literature as regards deeper comprehension of tonal music in general and its various styles in particular is an issue open to dispute.

* * *

Any excessive focus on universals to the prejudice of particulars seems to result in a principled (or, at least, in an almost ineradicable) neglect of “uncomfortable” realities of the history of music. Apparently, this is a flaw of any (i.e. not only post-Schenkerian) theorizing that strives to hold its ground within the frames of a strictly scientific methodology. Uniting the multitude of musical phenomena under the same methodological numerator, the “scientific” musicology inevitably becomes similar to a producer-oriented industry, whose products are of little or no avail for potential users – students and music lovers. A multitude of instances of such a self-contained theorizing is offered by another branch of the contemporary musical science, which seems to be quite influential in the educational practice, namely the semiotics of music. Since the early 1990s it has been actively cultivated in Russia by several schools based in Moscow and other important centres.

Since music, undoubtedly, is a sign (i.e. semiotic) system, attempts were made to adapt the semiotic concepts and categories to musical realities. For instance, many efforts, both in Russia and in the rest on the world, were made to define the place of musical signs in the Peircian typological scheme ‘symbol–icon–index’.¹⁰ The conclusions of different authors do not agree with each other, and the practical outcome of these efforts is unclear (as regards the art music of European tradition, the problem seems to be imaginary rather than real: generally, the musical sign combines all the three aspects, any of them can dominate depending on the circumstances of semiosis, i.e. the problem of musical semantics is ontologically irrelevant and, hence, theoretically uninteresting).¹¹ The attempts to overcome the main difficulty of the semiotics of music – namely the ambiguous, largely indefinite character of musical sign – pretty often result in a plain verbalization of the plan of musical

¹⁰ See for instance: R. JAKOBSON, “On Visual and Auditory Signs”, *Phonetica*, XI, 1964, pp. 216-220; B. GASPAROV, “Nekotoriye deskriptivniye problemī muzykal’noy semantiki”, *Uchēniye zapiski Tartuskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, CDXI, 1977, pp. 120-137; R. MONELLE, “Music and the Peircian Trichotomies”, *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, XXII, 1991, pp. 99-108; A. VAN BAEST - H. VAN DRIEL, *The Semiotics of C. S. Peirce Applied to Music*, Tilburg, Tilburg University Press, 1995; V. KHOLOPOVA, “Ikon. Indeks. Simvol”, *Muzykal’naya Akademiya*, IV, 1997, pp. 159-162 (this list embraces but a very small part of a multitude of variegated writings pertaining to this topic).

¹¹ See: L. HAKOBIAN, *Analiz glubinnoy strukturi muzykal’nogo teksta*, Moskva, Praktika, 1995, pp. 12-17.

content (i.e. in “retelling” music by means of words). To be sure, the high methodological claims of semiotics influence the style of the translation of musical narrative into conceptual terms, partly protecting the music-semiotical discourse from self-conscious literary fantasies. Yet, the approach itself inevitably leads to such consequences as schematization of musical semiosis and “fracturing” the musical narrative into artificially isolated instances. To tell the truth, nothing other can be expected when motifs, passages, themes, and other musical configurations are systematically treated in the light of stable semantic categories – such as ‘modality’,¹² ‘topos’,¹³ etc.

It is not unlikely that the semiotic methodology may provide interesting results when applied to non-European traditional music. On the other hand, its usefulness in relation to Western art music seems rather disputable. The principal and irremovable shortcoming of the semiotic approach consists in the attitude to its object as a sign system. In the science and philosophy of language such an approach is losing its topicality: the natural language is not so much a sign system as something infinitely more important – a “form of life” (Ludwig Wittgenstein), a natural milieu of human existence. Since for a musicologist and reader of musicological texts Western art music is in principle also a natural language, its treatment in the light of semiotic categories is unavoidably tainted by schematization which is not compensated by some really new, not superficial, knowledge.¹⁴ As regards the representatives of non-Western cultures wishing to familiarize themselves with Western music, they

¹² See: E. TARASTI, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994; ID., *Existential Semiotics*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2000.

¹³ R. HATTEN, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994.

¹⁴ Let us note in passing that the semiotics of music must be distinguished from the practice of interpretation of extra-musical meanings intentionally embedded into musical structures, i.e. inherent in their very nature. In contrast to semiotics, such a practice – it may be referred to as hermeneutics of music – has a centuries-old history. Its historically established forms include the baroque theory of music-rhetorical figures and Albert Schweitzer’s system of theologically meaningful configurations in Bach. From the hermeneutical viewpoint music is ‘talking with sounds’ (N. HARNONCOURT, *Musik als Klangrede: Wege zu einem neuen Musikverständnis*, Salzburg-Wien, Residenz, 1982) using the language that is natural for the composer’s ‘target’ audience and, hence, comprehensible to the latter in its diverse connotations (but, possibly, partly forgotten and therefore needing additional interpretation). If semiotics, by and large, charges music with meanings on its own behalf, proceeding from *a priori* theoretical premises, hermeneutics (on condition that it is based on a well-developed strict methodology) strives to make clear the meanings that are immanent to music and, hence, is less fraught with schematization of musical material. And yet, the important problem of methodological difference between semiotics of music and hermeneutics of music still remains virtually unexplored.

would hardly resort to the semiotic literature overloaded with complex schemes and sophisticated terminology.

Not all the adepts of semiotics, however, are ready to agree with the fact that their field is rather fruitless in practical applications, especially in teaching young people from around the world who want to learn more about Western art music. The following declaration of the influential semiotician musicologist Eero Tarasti is quite significant, making – let us refer once more to Gombrowicz’s *Diary* – an impression of ‘absolute seriousness and absolute childishness’:

The major task of semiotics consists in the transformation of implicit meanings into explicit ones – so that they could be explained even to those who do not belong to the tradition in which the analyzed music was created. For instance, the national styles of European art music contain some specific traits that are understandable only to those who were born in the given national communities. And yet, everyone wants to enjoy European music. Therefore, in our studies, as well in our teaching practice, we have to explain on what these specific traits are based.¹⁵

These few sentences sound utterly naïve. Obviously naïve is the author’s conviction that “everyone wants to enjoy European music”. Even more naïve is his belief in the very prospect of making musical meanings more or less explicit. But the most naïve – indeed, childishly naïve – is the idea that the understanding of the origins and the bases of these “specific traits” (i.e., scientifically speaking, the understanding of the mechanisms of musical semiosis) can enrich our perception of music and make our pleasure deeper – while the individual experience of every single human being, as well as the centuries-old experience of humanity, attests that the rational understanding hampers pleasure rather than furthers it. Obviously dissatisfied with the alienation of semiotics from immediate musical experience, Tarasti elaborated a new conception of “existential semiotics”. However, judging from the early outcomes,¹⁶ it also suffers with schematic presentation of theoretical categories, as well as with the tendency towards artificial verbalization of musical contents. Is such an approach really helpful for those who seek to comprehend new and unusual music or to find new depths in the universally recognized classics? This is another issue that is open to doubt.

* * *

Needless to say, reduction and schematization are essential instruments of any theoretical science. In our field, however, these instruments are too often used only in order to confirm or redefine truths, principles or regularities that

¹⁵ Quoted after I. KHANNANOV, “O znakakh i znacheniyakh. Mezhdunarodnyy kongress po muzykal’noy semiotike v Rime”, *Muzykal’naya Akademiya*, II, 2007, p. 184.

¹⁶ TARASTI, *Existential Semiotics* cit.

are already well known, more or less obvious, not especially controversial and, in general, not requiring additional corroborations or renaming. The evolution of big musical-theoretical conceptions attests this more than eloquently. This arguably means that the 'scientistic' paradigm in musicology and, consequently, in teaching practice has been exhausted and the new, deeper knowledge of music has to be acquired through alternative, not strictly scientific – perhaps rather literary, openly subjective, authority-free, not tied to concepts and systems – ways. As regards the science studying the music from Bach to Brahms, such an assumption seems quite plausible: all its big, substantial generalizations were made not later than in the first third of the last century and since then, actually, have not been renewed. As of the music of the 20th century, the strict scientific methodologies work more or less efficiently in the analysis of the pitch structures of serial music (significant is the method of set analysis – the *nec plus ultra* of scientism in the contemporary musicology), which is but a very small part of the new music still awaiting its in-depth theoretical interpretation. For a high music theory, conceived as a strictly formalized science, no really big and worthy tasks remain. They have been displaced by a game with abstract terms and concepts, having at best an indirect relation to music as such. The high intellectualism of such a game could suggest analogies with the 'glass bead game', but in contrast to Hermann Hesse's invention it lacks a spiritual dimension. Besides, it lacks such attributes of more 'commonplace' games as humour and sporting interest. In other words, its *raison d'être* is unclear. It seems that the change of paradigm – from 'formalizing' and 'generalizing' approaches to a more attentive study of particulars that make a musical piece or musical style unique – is the only way to lead the musical science out of the 'untidy kingdom of failure' and to renew the interest of many intellectually advanced students to music theory as a viable field of knowledge.