

***THE HISTORY OF MUSICAL SYMBOLS:  
A PRELIMINARY RESEARCH STUDY ON THE MUSICAL IMAGINARY***

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*Abstract: Many research studies are developing from Visual Art or Literature. Music seems to remain a rhetoric artefact even if a number of fundamental concepts, as Gilbert Durand's anthropological gestures are frequently using musical metaphors. Conversely, the musical symbols are relying on poetry; musical Semantics is mostly a matter of Literature or Mythology. The musical-mythological meeting area is significantly rewarding. A review on the musical symbolic might enlighten some less known aspects of the cultural dynamics. The history of the Laying Cross symbol, coming from the Middle Age is revealing the symbolic and inter-disciplinary openings during the evolution of the European music.*

***Keywords: Mythology, musical imaginary, rhetoric formulae, Laying-Cross symbol, numerology***

One of most controversial disputes in the European culture aims at establishing whether the musical discourse is bearing an intrinsic signification or is actually the carrier of an external message. In the first circumstance, all sentiments, ideas etc. which seem to be tightly bound to music are actually just a cultural convention. A significant statement of this hypothesis was expressed by Eduard Hanslick, a Viennese aesthetician and musicologist (1825-1904) in his famous work, *The Beautiful in Music*: "Music is carrying just a musical beauty [...] the shape, the musical idea is its unique purpose; the expression is just an adding"<sup>1</sup>. The opposite standpoint was pre-eminently promoted by poets, writers, but also by some important musicians. At the height of the World War I, a lot of musicians from France, Germany and Great Britain were questioned about this topic. The results were rather equal; half of them stated that music is tied to language, the other half that music is just music<sup>2</sup>. Thousands of pages for, or against, were written about. The most of people believe that music has the same plasticity as the word to express psychological tensions, affects and even ideas. Customarily, for non-musicians music is perceived through an associated language. Indeed, a metaphor can complete, enrich or clarify the musical message. Some associations are sometimes reaching what Gaston Bachelard called "a parallel adjectival delirium"<sup>3</sup>. Music as a whole, but also its compounds, rhythm, timber, texture, relief etc. can be classified as significant structures. Hence, it appears the temptation to ascribe verbal features to music. In some epochs, as, for instance the Baroque, the composers struggled to find expressive equivalents "as clear as in poetry"<sup>4</sup>. A same aspiration occasioned in the Romantic period the creation of the programmatic music. In present times, the Cognitive Sciences are investigating with a special concern the music reception and performance, reflected in thousands of research studies

<sup>1</sup> Eduard Hanslick: *The Beautiful in Music*, ed. Novello, London 1901, p.135; quoted by Leonard B. Meyer in *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, p. 30

<sup>2</sup> Robert Francès: *The Perception of Music* p. 284

<sup>3</sup> Gaston Bachelard: *Forming of the Scientific Esprit* p. 15

<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Georg Berger: *Aesthetics of the Baroque Sonata* p. 44

about. New technologies opened the opportunity to scrutinize the brain activity in real time and established some noticeable resemblances between musical and speaking processes<sup>5</sup>, as processing of phonemes, syntax and censure<sup>6</sup>. The musical language – as coherent, linear and predictable succession is close to the verbal language. The differences appear in within the internal structure of phrases; there is no musical equivalent to the verbal signification unities (morphemes). The “logical” unities of music are actually the result of a specific education and environment. Their perception and/or interpretation can be individual or temporary and never have the stability of the words.

In the history of culture music played a peculiar role, being seldom autonomous but associated to magic, healing and inter-human communication. Music was sometimes considered a crucial mean to reiterate the world genesis, to regulate the universal harmony and to communicate with the Gods. For many old civilizations the man is not the creator of the song, but just an intermediary. The ancient documents regarding music are referring to the signification of the musical act, not to the music itself. The antique Chinese used to associate music to numbers, moods, colours, animals, zodiacal signs etc. in a very precise system. In Li-Ki (Great Book of Chinese Rituals) it is said: “Music is tightly fastened to creatures. So, to know sounds without knowing the song is suitable to birds; to know the song without knowing music is for the ordinary people; only the sage can to know the music. Therefore we learn sounds for learning songs, we learn songs for learning music and we learn music for ruling”<sup>7</sup>. The Chinese established their musical system on a mathematical principle, intermediated by symbols which were seen as “efficient emblems”<sup>8</sup> as part of more comprehensive universe. Numeric symbols are present in Ancient India music and dances too. The Indian dancers employ a sophisticated combination of the 8 sentiments (love, pity, astonishment, laughter, anger, courage, fright, peace) by their 50 gestures of hands and 125 corporal postures<sup>9</sup>.

Music was ritualized, in a way or other, in all traditional cultures. Even the musical instruments, as magic object, were part of the game. If there are rather few technical details concerning music itself, an entire literature and mythology is related to the cultural structure built around the musical phenomenon. Sometimes the rituals or the added analogies lead to distortions of the natural display of the musical flow. For instance, the natural localizations of the sounds’ height in the human brain, formed around the age of 7 are “up” for the higher level and “down” for the lower. But the spatial perception of the pitches was inverted in some Mediterranean civilizations: Arabians, Hebrews and Greeks. In the case of the Semitic peoples the explanation could be the association of the “up” with “more important”, which lead, in a deeply patriarchal society, to the localization of the male voice register in a superior position. In the Ancient Greece the justification might be due to the cult of the lyre, which had the lower pitch emitted by the thicker (and higher) cord, in the middle of the instrument.

The discovery of the natural resonance of the sound by Pythagoras brought a physical confirmation for a connection between music, mathematic and cosmos. In the Greek culture,

<sup>5</sup> Fred Lerdahl: *The Sound of Poetry Viewed as Music* p. 413

<sup>6</sup> Stefan Koeltch: *Toward a Neural Basis of Music Perception* p. 112

<sup>7</sup> Robert Francès: *The Perception of Music* p.238

<sup>8</sup> Marcel Granet: *The Chinese Civilization* p. 31

<sup>9</sup> Robert Francès: *The Perception of Music* p. 151

music was related also to moral rules – the Ethos – which normalized scales, instruments, timing and repertoire. They considered that an “adequate” music had the power to induce to the listener moral attitudes and beneficial feelings for both individual and society. In these times, no debate on music could be possible but in ideological, moral or theological terms, because the metaphysical nature of all these correspondences. Hence, to learn music did not mean just to learn sound combinations but to penetrate a significations’ code hard to be understood today.

In the Western medieval Europe, music was controlled by the musical rules of the Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) – The Gregorian Choral. Gradually, the music becomes more autonomous. The technical elements began to prevail on the symbolic. Even before the Gregorian Choral, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Boethius divided the musicians in philosophers, composers and performers. “The only true musician is the philosopher, because he knows the reason of the fundamental nature of music, while the music-maker (composer or performer) acts just by instinct”<sup>10</sup>. Half millennium later, the value judgments became more nuanced: the composer was re-valued as musician, but not yet the performer<sup>11</sup>. During the second millennium, Europe was the cradle of a particular cultural trend in music which did no more belong to a divine reference but to humans; first, the initiates and eventually, the informed. The numerology (adjusted according to the New Testament)<sup>12</sup> or the analogies with the heavenly spheres became the field of some few scholars. The traditional call for symbols turned toward the so called “rhetoric formulae”, that means invented formulae to individualize some grouping of sounds. These artefacts, to be transmitted by cultural convention were not symbols from the beginning. Just some of them obtained such status along decades. The tendency to confer a symbolic load to the musical elements was lasting until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. “E flat major is the tonality meant for love, intimate thought, God presence [...] expressing by its three flats the Holy Trinity”<sup>13</sup> stated Daniel Schubart, a musician of that time. Even now the need to tie music to words or magical referring is lasting and even some composers are evoked through a mythical lens. The best known example is the numerological-mystical analysis of J.S. Bach’s creation. Nevertheless the creation of symbols is no more an absolute condition for the Western musical discourse. It remains a literary exercise in order to bring clarity and comprehension and is pre-eminently advocated by non-musicians.

The musical symbol can embrace any shape, as long as it calls for a broader cultural framing. The most obvious example is the national anthem. Still, in this case music is more an indicial sign with a direct and self-sufficient opening. A more subtle case can be found in the changing of the melodic directions in the instrumental accompanying of the Catholic Mass as suggestions for the believers’ behaviour.

One can find also individual (personal) musical symbols as, for instance, codifications of names, charades etc. in the works of several Romantic composers, as Robert Schumann. Franz

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Chailley: *400000 Years of Music* p. 173

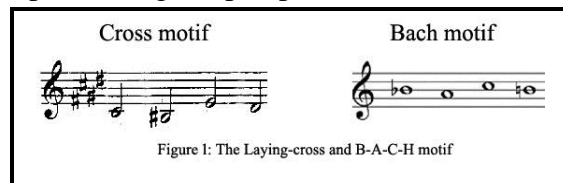
<sup>11</sup> Veronica Gaspar: “Wrong Piano Playing and the Laws of Musical Perception” p. 28

<sup>12</sup> Klibanski, Raymond, Panofski, Erwin, Saxl, Fritz. 1964. *Saturn and Melancholy. Research of philosophy of nature, religion and art*, pp. 190 and foll.

<sup>13</sup> Wilhelm Georg Berger: *Mozart; Culture and Style* p. 249

Liszt too has created his personal symbols for angelic or demonic<sup>14</sup>. The musical symbol can be also a quoting; be it homage or parody. There are two physical conditions for a musical symbol: delimitation from context and repeatability. The symbolic quality of any musical formula which is satisfying these imperatives is given by its opening toward a significant sphere informing the human sensibility. What makes a specific difference from any repeated formula, meant for the use of some few specialists is its involvement in a context beyond the musical reality. Besides the cutting out from the context, a symbol needs its re-configuration in an imaginary space. Such a difference is no more intrinsic to the creation process; it belongs to the contemporary listeners to confirm a symbol, according to their degree of awareness. The symbols can lose their initial signification, especially in the present days when the symbolic relevancy or the cultural openings are shaded by the quest for technical solutions and for the direct communication with the average audience.

A particular symbol coming from the early Middle Age crossed the history of the European music under several forms: *the laying-cross symbol*. He combined a technical solution (preparation and solving of a dissonance) with a sending toward the transcendental spheres. This created a peculiar shape evoking the perspective deformation of a laying down cross<sup>15</sup>.



The dissonances were generically called “diabolus in musica”, so it is not to be wondered if the medieval masters resorted to a symbolic exorcism through the cross sign. The melisma-like shape remains in the collective conscience even when the mystical implications faded. Alongside the evolution of music from cult to performance, the symbols are changing, sometimes keeping only a shape or an energetic movement, which might receive a new symbolical content, even when their initial signification disappears. The coincidence between the graphic contours of the laying Cross and the name of Bach put on musical notes (B-A-C-H) directed to the superposing of the two shapes, under the name of „Bach symbol” or “Bach motive”. The confusion between the two motives passes over the fact that the B-A-C-H figure has no more in the middle the essential start point of the whole symbolical construction: the dissonance! As for any symbol, the visual trigger was stronger than the aural one. The confusion was eased by the visual similitude of the contours and the connection with J.S. Bach, a composer strongly related to divinity in the collective memory. Besides, the name Bach can be also read in a cross of staves, which turns the motif to its origin. All the musical works which are employing one or another of these motives are serious, solemn and depressive.

<sup>14</sup> Tibor Szasz: “Liszt’s Symbols for the Divine and Diabolical: Their Revelation of a Program in the B Minor Sonata” p. 44

<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, the upright Cross got a musical symbol too.

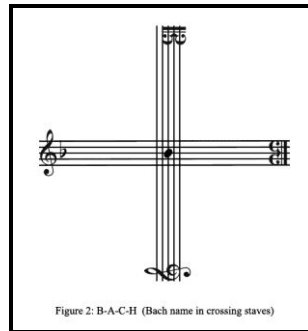


Figure 2: B-A-C-H (Bach name in crossing staves)

The study of musical symbols presupposes a broadened perspective to be aware of the cultural systems they belong to. The games and the imagination challenges are easier to understand in the contexts lacking mythical and mystical resonance offered by the modern Western Europe. The human imaginary researches might profit from the studies on the non-musical wrappings of the music in the entire history of culture. So far, the imaginary is studied from less changing disciplines, which are easier to be analysed, like visual arts or literature. Music remains mostly under the attention of cognitivists and semioticians. Nevertheless, I think that we need an intermediary link for unifying the peculiar detail with the cultural sphere that gave it sense and signification.

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