

The Specificity of Musical Meaning in Helmuth Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology of the Senses

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ABSTRACT

Some recent psychological and philosophical approaches to musical meaning, especially those on embodied music cognition, try to establish a bodily mediated relationship between sound structures and mind. Nevertheless, the structural synarthrosis of sensuality (sound), corporeality (movement) and understanding (meaning), as long as it is attempted in strictly empirical terms, loses much of its philosophical cogency. In his writings on music Helmuth Plessner, a pioneer of modern philosophical anthropology, provides an *a priori*, transcendental underpinning of the aforementioned synarthrosis, ensuring thus its necessity. Plessner proceeds to a systematic account of the phenomenal qualities specific to sound, such as produceability (Produzierbarkeit), remoteness-proximity (Fern-Nähe), voluminosity (Voluminosität) and phenomenal spatiality (tonal position), impulsivity (Impulsivität), temporal dynamism, ability to be displayed in intrinsically justified horizontal and vertical structures. These qualities render sound and sonic movements structurally conform to man's phenomenal corporeality. Musical meaning, albeit semantically open, is thus understood immediately in terms of human conduct (Verhalten). All these matters are discussed in the first section of the paper. The second section presents a critical account of some older and recent studies on embodied musical cognition in reference to Plessner's theory. This critical account aims at a theoretical reconsideration of some basic issues concerning this highly important trend of research.

I. MUSICAL MEANING AND HUMAN CORPOREALITY

A latent premise of nearly every contemporary approach to musical meaning is that it can be explained in terms of non musical domains of human experience. Remarkably, this conviction does not concern theories of extra-musical meaning alone. Nevertheless, a careful reading of some recent studies on embodied music cognition, supposedly initiated by a refutation of the Cartesian dualism of body and mind, reveals that this theory too -as long as it treats music as a field of metaphorical signification in reference to bodily experience- sanctions a dichotomy between acoustic sense-data deprived of any meaning and cognitive acts attributing meaning *a posteriori* to these sense-data. The fact that such meaning-attribution this time drafts its contents from bodily experience and not from disembodied cognition, by no means disconfirms the common ontological and epistemic assumptions shared by both these allegedly different approaches to musical signification. To give but an example, Marc Leman's assertion that "corporeal articulations may be seen as an expression of a corporeal understanding of music as intentional being" is based on the conviction that "this understanding is grounded in the human bias to attribute intentionality to things that move and with which we move or which we imitate" (Leman, 2008, p. 77). In other words, musical understanding is realized in terms of

metaphoric attribution of intentionality to sound-movements themselves deprived of any kind of intentionality. This happens for the simple reason that sound, the matter of these movements, is right from the beginning defined as "sound energy", i.e. as a merely physical entity situated *ex definitio* outside the realms of the social, the historic, the cultural and above all the anthropological.

The *a posteriori*, empirical meaning-attribution to sonic structures, themselves meaningless, can be recognized in studies that approach "sound qualities in terms of the actions used to produce them" (Mead, 1999, p. 4), i.e. in terms of physiological metaphors; in studies that stress the catalytic role of body-image schemas in the conceptualization of music (Saslaw, 1996) or make use of conceptual models and cross-domain mapping (Zbikowski, 1997; Brower 2000); in Steve Larson's theory of expressive meaning in music, according to which "the expressive meanings *we give* to musical sounds are, at least in part, an 'emergent property' of the interactions of those musical forces – on all levels of musical structure" (Larson, 1997, p. 102; emphasis added) and elsewhere (cf. section II). Essential motive of such novel theories is, explicitly or not, the need to bridge the gap between sound (matter) and meaning (mind) by the mediation of a third factor, the body, considered as the privileged meeting field of those two elements. Nevertheless, the attempted structural synarthrosis of sensuality (sound), corporeality (movement) and mind (meaning), remaining strictly empirical, loses much of its philosophic cogency. Moreover, the reluctance to differentiate qualitatively the acoustic from the other sense-modalities, and predominantly from the optical modality, is highly associated with an obvious difficulty to neatly delimit and specify the field of possible musical signification. Thus, two are the main resultant questions. First, whether it is possible to provide a necessary, *a priori*, structural correlation between sound, movement and meaning or, in a broader sense, between sensuality, corporeality and mentality. Second, whether it is possible to determine to what degree a strong qualitative distinctiveness of the acoustic modality delimits and specifies meaning in music, at least in a primary intra-musical level.

The musical writings of Helmuth Plessner (1892-1985) explicitly move in this direction (cf. von Fischer, 1995; Kalisch, 1997; Käuser 2000). For reasons impossible to examine here exhaustively (cf. Lessing, 1998, p. 13 ff.), the reception of Plessner's aesthetic writings has been slow and their influence limited, in spite of their great anthropological, gnoseological and epistemological value (on the reception of philosophical anthropology in the English-speaking countries, cf. Schacht, 1990; for an account of the most important trends of philosophical anthropology in post-war Germany, cf. Wein, 1957; for an excellent introduction to philosophical anthropology, cf. Fischer, 2008). Perhaps the main hindrance was and remains the scepticism about the epistemic

appropriateness of philosophic theories based in phenomenological intuition, especially vis-à-vis issues traditionally considered as a privileged topic of the natural sciences and their empirical methods. The problem with Plessner's writings on music is precisely that from the very beginning they were situated in the broader frame of a phenomenologically motivated philosophical investigation of the senses, explicitly refuting the principles and methods of the natural sciences. A philosophy of the senses like that of Plessner, mobilizing principles and methodological tools from phenomenology, Kantian transcendentalism and Diltheyan philosophic hermeneutics, could hardly gain wide acceptance not only from the established scientific community but also from the representatives of the existentialist anthropology (Schacht, 1974). The essential reason is that Plessner's philosophical anthropology of the senses presupposes and establishes a cultural-philosophic understanding of nature and at the same time a natural-philosophic foundation of culture; in other words it advocates, quite scandalously, an approach of nature in terms of meaning, i.e. a hermeneutics of nature, and at the same time an approach of culture and generally of human historicity in terms of nature, namely of human nature (Pietrowicz, 1992; Redeker, 1993; Haucke, 2000; Schübler, 2000; Holz, 2003; Mitscherlich, 2007).

A. Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology of the Senses

Such an intersection of nature and culture, of the corporeal and the mental -which characterizes not only Plessner's anthropology of the senses but the whole of his philosophy and alienates him thus both from the natural sciences and the existentialist philosophy, especially from that of Heidegger-presupposes first of all the invalidation of the Cartesian dualism of body and mind or of being (Sein) and consciousness (Bewusstsein) (Plessner, 2003b, p. 78 ff.; cf. Wiggins, 1984). Plessner's philosophical anthropology is grounded on a philosophical biology which, circumventing schemas of causality, reinstates the structural correlation of the living being with its environment (Umwelt). For this structural correlation Plessner (2003b, p. 181 ff.) uses the term "positionality" (Positionalität) (cf. Grene, 1966). Only things endowed with positionality have environment. Not only they are situated in space but, what is more, they generate and structure space, their living-space. Positionality has three forms: the open form of the plant, the centric form of the animal and the eccentric form of humans. A necessary expression of positionality, both in its centric and eccentric forms, is the correlation between the sensory and the kinetic functions, the so called senso-motoric or kinaesthetic unity. The principle of kinaesthetic unity explains the nature of the sensuality both of animals and humans in reference to the nature of their motility. The specific character of the kinetic is further determined either by the instinct (in animals) or by the mind (in humans).

Mind articulates this particular ability to an extra-instinctive understanding structurally related to the eccentricity of human positionality. The positionality of a living being is eccentric provided not only that it *is* in its body but also that it *has* his body or that it is phenomenally situated both inside and outside of its body. In the words of Plessner: "Positionally we have three things: the living being is body, in the body (as inner life or soul) and outside of the body as viewpoint from which it is

both" (Plessner, 2003b, p. 365). This living being not only senses and reacts but also *is aware* of its sensing and reacting. Such awareness makes possible the dissociation of sensuality from motility, i.e. the braking of the kinaesthetic unity and, consequently, the objectification of sensuality. This implies that from now on, perceptions cannot only function as catalysts of instinctively pre-formed kinetic chains but also that they can be understood as properties of things existing for themselves, regardless of the various significations attributed to them by the instinct and the kinetic orientations dictated by these significations. Only humans perceive things as having mentally detachable properties and only humans structure their experience in terms of the categorical bond of substance and accidentals (cf. Dilthey, 1984, pp. 173-182). This makes possible not only the adaptation and adjustment of human motility to the objective properties of things but also its emancipation from any kind of objective adaptation and adjustment. In other words, humans dispose of at least two kinds of kinetic potentiality: a potentiality for a hetero-determined, goal-oriented movement and a potentiality for a self-determined, aesthetically expressive movement. Both of them are shaped by the mind, here understood as the ability of the eccentric living being to perceive itself as an "I", the other individuals of its kind as "persons", the surrounding things as "objects" and the totality of them as a "world", all of them having, correlatively, the same eccentric structure as itself. A third kind of kinetic potentiality, directly issued from the constitution of human experience in terms of the substance category, is communication via conventional signs or symbols (cf. Cassirer, 1996; Langer, 1942).

According to Plessner, these three kinds of motility generate three fundamental forms of human cultural activity, namely science, language and art. Correlative with them are three different kinds of meaning, namely "schematic", "syntagmatic" and "thematic" (according to the terminology of Plessner, 2003a). Science aims at the utmost efficacy of purposeful action through schematic conceptualization or conceptual schematization of both the realms of nature and culture; language aims at the utmost efficacy of communication through syntagmatic articulation of significations (Bedeutungen); art aims at the most thorough exploration of the infinite possibilities of "free configuration" (freies Gestalten, Plessner 2003e), concerning both corporeal motility and sensual matter (colour, shape, sound). Within each of these three different cultural activities the senses acquire three utterly different functions. The practical teleology of the epistemic attitude necessitates the objective function of the senses, namely their ability to provide reliable information for the purposeful action; the communicative teleology of the language suspends the objective orientation of the senses, articulating sensual material in semantically functional sign-structures, themselves deprived of intrinsic meaning: "a simple sign must be meaningless (sinnfrei), in order to acquire its meaning only through that *which* it signifies (bezeichnet)" (Plessner, 2003a, p. 221; cf. Hegel, 1995, pp. 270-271); the aesthetic teleology of art suspends the objective function of the senses in order to make sensual material itself bearer of intrinsic meaning. In the last two cases, the human senses, preserving their function of perception (Wahrnehmungsfunktion), acquire additionally the

function of mediation (Mediationsfunktion), namely of meaning-mediation (Plessner, 2003c, p. 156 ff.).

B. Aesthesiology of Hearing and Musical Meaning

A further question is whether in the structural synarthrosis of these three kinds of meaning (schematic, syntagmatic, thematic) with the three kinds of movement (purposeful action, communication through conventional signs, free configuration) some senses play an almost irreplaceable role. The purposefulness of this question is not self-evident. In our every-day experience both the theoretical senses of vision and hearing seem to contribute equally to the effectiveness of action, linguistic communication and artistic activity or understanding. Yet a careful observation evinces the primacy of vision in the practically oriented movement of the body, since vision provides the objects of the action themselves and not mere indications of their presence or of their states. It also evinces the unique aptness of hearing for the free configuration, since in the case of musical sounds, and contrary to noises, the indicational function of the acoustic modality recedes substantially to even becoming redundant. What is more, Plessner distinguishes two cultural activities, each one of them so firmly attached to a particular modality, that a transfer of their operations to another modality becomes utterly impracticable: geometry is possible only in the domain of the optical, music only in the domain of the acoustic. In other words, neither can we do geometry with the ear nor music with the eye. On this acute insight Plessner grounds his repeated critique to all those expressionist and abstractionist radicalisms actually aiming at a “musicalization” of vision (Plessner, 2003f), condemned in advance to failure for reasons not of historical contingency but of aesthesiological necessity.

In the case of music therefore we have a remarkable indication that “between the differentiation of our sensuality in optical, acoustical and other modalities, our kinetic possibilities, namely our kinetic expressive possibilities *and* the possible orientations (artistic, linguistic, epistemic) of our understanding, there are correlations allowing a more accurate insight into the human functional rapports between body and mind as it has been possible till now” (Plessner, 2003d, p. 184). The next step is to provide a *proof* for the assertion that the relationship between acoustic modality (sense), self-determined motility (body) and artistic understanding (mind) is not empirically contingent but transcendently necessary and therefore binding. In other words, the question is how to demonstrate the mediative function of the acoustic modality in music. Without refuting the physiological and psychological conditionality of the acoustic perception, Plessner proceeds to a phenomenological approach of it. He previously stresses the fact that some of the typical features of the acoustic modality have an intra-modal validity. An initial issue therefore is to trace those properties of the acoustic perception that belong exclusively and necessarily to it.

The first thing differentiating sound from other sensations is its produceability (Produzierbarkeit). Like most animals, humans are not able to produce light and colours as they do with sounds. This simple fact already endows sound with corporeal significance and expressive value. Furthermore, sounds are not only emitted by the body but at the same time return back to it,

negating thus the limit between inside and outside and enabling the interconnection of those two directions (cf. Gehlen, 1955, p. 144). Beyond its produceability sound has thus the property to be at the same time far and near (das Moment der Fern-Nähe). Colours, on the contrary, are always far and corporeal sensations always near. The far-near quality of sound endows it with a crucial *anthropological* significance: by mediating the outside with the inside, objectivity (Gegenständlichkeit) with proprioception (Zuständlichkeit), sound “enlightens the unique relationship of the human subject with its body” (Plessner, 2003d, p. 187). Like man who, as the sole representative of the life-form of the eccentric positionality, *is* a body and *has* a body, who is phenomenally situated both *inside* and *outside* of his/her body, *possessed* by his/her body and *possessing* his/her body, so sound, produced and perceived, is enclosed by the body and encloses the body, is at the same time inside the body and comes to it from outside.

The negation of being either inside or outside, here and there, makes sound an ideal means of communication. It endows it too with one more significant feature: in contrast to colour which presents itself to the vision as an “even quale” (ebenes Quale) delimited by the surrounding space and delimiting space, sound presents itself to the ear as a “voluminous quale” (voluminöses Quale), as something which unifies, “homogenizes” space, being everywhere and nowhere (cf. Strauss, 1960; Grene, 1967). Voluminosity (Voluminosität) is precisely that phenomenal quality of sounds which enables them to affect the attitude and motility of the body; the latter reacts to them as a (phenomenal) “resonator”. Correlative to voluminosity is, therefore, the quality of impulsivity (Impulsivität). Impulsivity explains the necessarily emotional (Gefühlsmäßige) effects of sounds. The importance of this particular observation for the philosophical discussion of musical emotionality becomes obvious in the light of recent studies assuming that “emotions are essentially constituted by patterns of bodily changes” (Cochrane, 2008, p. 329), i.e. in studies that stress the relationship between emotion and the body.

The spatial character of sounds is recognized, further, in the property of pitch. Sounds occupy positions (Lagen) within a phenomenal acoustic space. This property makes them capable of being organized in interval-structured rows, in scales, something impossible for colours (a proposition like “the red colour is higher than the yellow” is utterly meaningless). In addition, the phenomenal positionality of sounds provides them with two more possibilities: first, the possibility of “vertical” arrangement in chords, complex structures of individual quality into which the sounds are incorporated without losing their identity (contrary to the mixtures of colours; cf. Hegel, 1993, p. 182) and, second, the possibility of “horizontal” arrangement in movements justified (motiviert) in themselves.

This last observation is crucial, since it establishes the self-significance of vertical and horizontal sound structures. The explanation lies in the very temporality of sound. Colours, like every other spatial object, exist in the *temps espace*, sounds in the *temps durée*. The fact endows sound with a dynamic quality (cf. Zuckerkandl, 1963, p. 15 ff.), becoming evident in the abrupt pausing of the sound. In the words of Plessner (2003d, p. 193), “sounding is a *process*”. Correlative with the temporality of sounds is their tendency to successive presentation, contrary to colours which practically can all be

arranged simultaneously in space (the simultaneous presentation of all musical sounds leads to noise, while the successive presentation of colours is not intrinsically meaningful). The dynamic quality of sounds, coupled with their immanent tendency to successive presentation, provides this immanent justification to the deployment of sound structures that is absent from a spatial or temporal deployment of colours, especially when they are abstracted from their material bearers. This entails that sonic movements become meaningful during their temporal unfolding and in reference to a whole which reveals itself only by the end of the unfolding and which is identical with the total unfolding. Sounds acquire semiotic function in the horizon of exactly this sonic whole which “is present in every step” and not in reference to some extra-musical entities. If “the simplest reference [Bedeutung] of the word meaning [Sinn] is the plain ‘indicatory direction’ [Zeigerichtung]” (Plessner & Buytendijk, 2003, p. 85), then in the case of music the “indicatory direction” of each sound is this sonic whole, open and undisclosed till the very end. That makes music a meaningful activity, substantiating a meaning utterly different from the meaning of other human activities such as purposeful action or speaking; meaning in music is a “specifically musical meaning” (spezifisch musikalische Meinung; Plessner, 2003d, p. 195; cf., selectively, Georgiades, 1957; Faltin, 1972; Lippman, 1981; Clark, 1982; Scruton, 1987; Kneif, 1994; Jauk, 1995; Eggebrecht, 1997, pp. 19-24; Koopman & Davies, 2001). Structurally it resembles the meaning of literary forms, with the difference that, since music does not operate with words, i.e. with closed word-references (geschlossene Wortbedeutungen), its signification (Bedeuten) remains open, multivalent (mehrdeutig) and ever construable (deutbar).

The important thing here is that upon precisely this semantic openness (and not only in some “structural properties” and “material attributes” of the musical object, Cook, 2001) are based all kinds of *a posteriori* meaning-attribution. The latter could be understood as attempts to negate and specify this semantic openness through indexical, iconic or symbolic signification. “In this openness lies the possibility to fill it with images, actions, affections [Affekten], movements of the will, events of every kind, in other words with contents taken from every sense-domain [Sinnesgebiet], so that its ideas gain intelligibility” (Plessner, 2003a, p. 188). In other words, all kinds of *a posteriori* meaning-attribution in terms of semantics, physiological or praxeological metaphor, body-image schemas, cross-domain mapping, emergent properties, are possible on the basis of this specifically musical semantic openness. The structural homology between sound and human corporeality provides a transcendental, *a priori* proof for this possibility.

The question now is whether there is also an *empirical* proof that this plethora of significations -thematized by recent research and especially by that on embodied music cognition- is not arbitrary but well grounded in the very nature of music. Plessner found the proof needed in dance, which to a great extent can be understood as “a kind of conversion of the noematic and expressive contents of music in bodily movements” (Plessner, 2003d, p. 196; cf. 2003a, p. 222-223). The dance interpretation of music indicates to an “inner relationship” between sonic and corporeal movement, conditioned obviously by the additional fact that the

non-objectivity (Nichtgegenständlichkeit) of musical sounds divert bodily reaction from the goal-oriented movement to the expressive one. The dance interpretation of music indicates also the possibility of understanding sonic movements as *gestures*. Plessner notices nevertheless that the gestural understanding of music is not universally valid but mostly concerns the musical practices of western modernity. Moreover, the “emotional deepening” of musical expression presupposes the historically conditioned prevail of the instrumental music over the vocal one. No matter what, the possibility to understand music in terms of expressive gestures attaches it to the realm of *human conduct* (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1942, p. 174 ff.), encompassing not only the expression of feelings but all kinds of movement (marching, dancing, goal-oriented action etc). It is not we that project onto music characters of human conduct; it is the phenomenal qualities of the musical sounds (remoteness-proximity, voluminosity, impulsivity, temporal dynamism, expressive charge) that endow their deployments with phenomenal corporeality. *Music conducts itself* (cf. Adorno, 2005, pp. 206-207) -it moves up and down, sets off and stops, moves to goals, escalates, climaxes and de-escalates, gets angry, grieves, screams, attacks, recedes, wonders, oscillates and so on- as a phenomenal body, the expressive content of the gestures and attitudes of which we understand *immediately*, since this phenomenal body is situated not in a spatial distance from us but in the very same phenomenal locus occupied by *our* phenomenal body. Without exaggeration, the conduct of music is immediately understood as if it was *our* conduct.

Let us recapitulate in form of positions the theory of musical meaning developed here. (1) Mind is not a uniform but a differentiated source of signification; (2) There are three different kinds of meaning: (a) linguistic-semantic, (b) schematic-conceptual and (c) aesthetic-expressive; (3) These three kinds of meaning correlate with three general kinetic attitudes of the body: (a) communication through signs / symbols, (b) purposeful action and (c) expressive free configuration. (4) Both of the theoretical senses (vision and hearing) mediate between one kind of meaning (mind) and one kind of movement (body); vision, however, mediates adequately between conceptual-schematic meaning and purposeful movement, while hearing mediates adequately between aesthetic meaning and free, self-referential, expressive movement. (5) Hearing owes this ability to the phenomenologically describable qualities of sound: produceability, remoteness-proximity, voluminosity and phenomenal spatiality, impulsivity, temporal dynamism, ability to be displayed in intrinsically justified horizontal and vertical structures. (6) Because of the sonic phenomenal qualities, musical movements are meaningful in advance and understood immediately in terms of human conduct. (7) The semantic openness and multivalence of music’s immanent, intransitive meaning makes it construable *ex definitio*. (8) Every kind of *a posteriori* sense-attribution of music in terms of disembodied or embodied cognition presupposes this primary, specifically musical meaning and is grounded on it.

II. TOWARDS A CRITIQUE OF EMBODIED MUSIC COGNITION

Since Plessner's philosophical anthropology of musical meaning establishes a necessary relationship between music and the human body, the need to compare it with analogous theories seems quite plausible. Such a critical comparison will bring to light problems but it can also provide some fertile prospects for further research. Of course, in the limited space of a paper this investigation cannot be but selective.

C. On L. Meyer's "Embodied Meaning"

The term "embodied meaning" has been used by L. Meyer in opposition to the term "designative meaning". The way Meyer defines embodied meaning has surprising similarities with some of Plessner's definitions. From the point of view of embodied meaning "what a musical stimulus or a series of stimuli indicate and point to are not extramusical concepts and objects but other musical events which are about to happen. That is, a musical event (be it a tone, a phrase, or a whole section) has meaning because it points to and makes us expect another musical event" (Meyer, 1956, p. 35; for a critique, Howard, 1971). Nevertheless, the difference from Plessner lies in the fact that in Meyer the embodied meaning is not given but occurring under psychological preconditions. In order to have meaning, a musical stimulus or a musical gesture must raise expectations on the base of preceding stylistic experience acquired through repeated exposure to specific kinds of music. Under the presuppositions of a psychological / empirical theory like Meyer's, music may or may not have meaning, i.e. the existence of meaning in music is contingent. Under the presuppositions of Plessner's theory music has always meaning (cf. Clayton, 2001), provided that this meaning is not understood in semantic but in aesthetic terms. Familiarity or unfamiliarity are psychological (subjective) states absolutely irrelevant with the (objective) existence or inexistence of meaning. The behaviour of an unknown living being or the gesticulation of a person belonging to an unknown culture for example, implies from the very beginning the existence of meaning regardless of the possible temporary lack of access to the *precise* content of that meaning. All manifestations of existential positionality, from the reactions of the simplest organisms to the culturally shaped human conduct, are *a priori* meaningful and thus construable. Besides, Meyer's theory is well suited to tonal music (for a different opinion, cf. Pike, 1963). Recent applications of metaphor, cross-domain mapping and embodied meaning theories to the analysis of atonal music (for example Malin, 2008) seem to verify Plessner's anti-psychological position about the immediacy of musical understanding in a primary, non stylistic or semantic level.

D. The Lakoff and Johnson Legacy

Meyer still uses the term "embodied meaning" indirectly as a metaphor for "intrinsic meaning". More recent studies, utilising the conceptual arsenal of Lakoff and Johnson, thematize explicitly the relationship between music and corporeality. Soon becomes obvious though that in these studies the relationship between music and corporeality remains rather extrinsic; music proves to be nothing more than one of the many

possible application fields of a general theory. Jana Saslaw (1996) for example, employs image schemas derived from bodily experience (container, source-path-goal, in-out, far-near etc) in order to demonstrate, taking Riemann as a model, how these schemas shape the theory and reception of music in modernity. The use of these image schemas is considered metaphorical *ex definitio*, since the mapping of bodily experience (source domain) upon sonic structures (target domain) presupposes the ontological asymptote of the two domains. Musical experience is not a bodily experience, although it may *become* something like bodily experience metaphorically. Lawrence Zbikowski follows the same line of thought. The realization of cross-domain mapping presupposes that the target-domain shares no common properties with the source-domain (Zbikowski, 1997, p. 201). The paradox here is that while conceptual models and image schemas record a phenomenologically constituted experience of the body, the sonic material of music is not a part of this experience. Body is here understood as a phenomenal, sound as a mere physical entity; the body has a phenomenal spatiality (it is experienced as a container structuring its world in terms of in-and-out, up-and-down and so on) the sound has not. Problematic therefore is not so much the metaphorical handling of musical meaning as the impressive confusion of methodologies. Plessner's methodologically consistent phenomenological approach of both body and sound, corporeality and musicality, has proved that their association has nothing to do with mapping of structures derived from one domain of experience upon another; it has to do with correlations between structurally cognate domains of experience: "Sounds are conform to the corporeal position of man" (Klänge sind der leibhaften Position des Menschen konform; Plessner, 2003d, p. 189).

Steve Larson's theory of "expressive meaning" (1997 and elsewhere), albeit in many points close to Plessner's theory of musical meaning, becomes too a victim of inconsistency. In order for "expressive meaning" to be inherent in music, as Larson's definition of it suggests ("a quality experienced *in* music"; emphasis added) the "interplay of directed tensions" ("musical forces") should have a real and not a metaphorical subsistence. Larson seems uncertain about which of the two is the case: On the one hand "the magnitude and direction of those forces derive from the relationships between musical objects", and on the other hand "they also depend upon the *creative* perceptions of an experienced listener" (1997, p. 102). In the first proposition musical forces seem to be objective, independent of the listening subject; in the second they seem to be subjective, dependent upon the listening subject. If the first is the case, then the expressive meaning as an "emergent property" has beyond any doubt the binding character Larson wishes it to have. If the second is the case, then the expressive meaning becomes contingent upon the mental competence of each listener. Larson himself uses the phrase "we listen x as y" contingently: we *may* listen a sonic event x as y, we *may not*. The question is whether a binding theory of musical meaning can be grounded on such precarious premises.

Another interesting approach to the bodily parameter of our musical understanding offers Andrew Mead (1999). He points to the fact that most times we deal theoretically with music as if it were an exclusively mental activity, forgetting the bodily preconditions of its existence. He suggests we should

understand musical meaning in terms of the physiological actions employed in musical production or reproduction. Thus, for example, we can understand pitch in terms of our bodily efforts needed for singing, rhythm in terms of our muscular cycles of movement, intensity in terms of the amount of power needed to produce sounds on musical instruments and so on. The grounding premise of this theory is that “sounds are the result of human action, and therefore can be usefully construed in terms of those actions” (Mead, 1999, p. 4). Unfortunately, no explanation is given about the predicated relationship between linear organization of pitches and vocal production of sounds. No question is posed about what enables sounds and not colours to transmit information about their physical conditions of production. Mead’s descriptions leave no room for doubt that his “kinaesthetic empathy” is possible provided the listener possesses a pre-knowledge of the physical conditions of sound production. If this knowledge is absent, then music has no kinaesthetic meaning. This latent premise is explicitly stated when Mead discusses the difference of listening to the sextet and the string orchestra versions of Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht*: “it is the *listener’s sense* of what is entailed in producing the sounds that is a major contributing factor in making this distinction” (p. 5; emphasis added). Contrary to this empirical subjectivism, Plessner’s theory of musical understanding can provide the theoretical justification missing from Mead’s otherwise acute empirical observations. The phenomenal qualities of sound enabling the communication of its physical conditions of production are the moments of far-near and voluminosity, of being here and there, nowhere and everywhere. Furthermore, our understanding of pitch in spatial terms is grounded on the phenomenal spatiality of sound, and the correspondence of sonic spatiality with the phenomenal spatiality of our body is what makes the vocal reproduction of sounds possible. It is because sounds have phenomenal positions that we can vocally reproduce them and not the opposite, i.e. it is not because we can produce them that they become understood in spatial terms. Finally, there is no possibility to understand different aspects of rhythms in reference to human physical motion, if there is no structural correspondence between body and sound, and this structural correspondence cannot occur as long as both body and sound are understood as mere physical entities. What is missing here is obviously a phenomenological approach to these basic elements of human musicality.

E. Cultural Determinism of Hearing and its Limits

While all theories discussed above presuppose a dichotomy between sensing and meaning, there have been suggestions that “not only [...] culture shapes the way one hears, but also that sensing is an inherently social and cultural phenomenon” (Downey, 2002, p. 490). They come mostly and expectedly from ethnomusicology. Sound here is not conceived as a pre-existing physical entity perceived the same by all people at all times and only subsequently endowed with cultural signification, but as a culturally pre-formed mediator of attitudes and meanings. The access of the observer to these meanings is possible only through a real participation to the culturally shaped bodily practices involved in the production of sound and determining its sensing. Needless to mention how

important in this context is the appeal to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1942 and 1945). It signals an important and necessary shift of methodology. Nevertheless, there are some remarks to be done here. Plessner (2003a, p. 79 ff.) distinguishes three kinds of intuition (*Anschauung*): apparent (*antreffende*), comprehensive (*innewerdende*) and filling (*füllende*). The contents of apparent intuition are displayable (*darstellbar*), these of comprehensive intuition preciseable (*präzisierbare*) and these of filling intuition pregnant (*prägnante*). Displayable contents of the apparent intuition concern all corporeal phenomena; preciseable contents of the comprehensive intuition concern significations; pregnant contents of the filling intuition concern sensations, emotions and mental acts (*geistige Akte*). In perception all these kinds of intuition actually converge: there can be no comprehension without appearance, that is no signification without apparent bearers of the signification and no apparent bearers of the signification without some sort of sensual contents (colours or sounds) filling the space of our perception. Now, theoretically crucial is the following observation: the apparent material bearers of the (linguistically articulated) significations do not lose their ontological autonomy and are not modified along with their signification: “Different are not the displayable appearances but the accents of signification [*Bedeutungsakzente*] in the appearances” (Plessner, 2003a, p. 172). In other words, since the status of the structural qualities of sounds, as described by Plessner, is *a priori* and not empirical, sounds do not and can not lose these qualities in the shifting contexts of the cultural practices involved in their production. Moreover, it is exactly these qualities that enable the social and cultural contextualization of sensing and the plethora of sound-producing practices.

F. Dance and Musical Meaning

Plessner’s theoretical postulations could be finally compared with Scruton’s observations on the relationship between music and dance (1993). Scruton notices perceptively that the best way to approach the “mystery of music” is not by studying listening but by studying dancing, “which places music in the very centre of our bodily lives” (p. 200). Nevertheless, the explanation he offers is quite problematic. It is grounded on the strictly empirical premise that music does not move, that its movement is fictional. (Obviously movement has for him exclusively to do with material objects changing places in physical space). The adaptation of such a premise (cf. Adlington, 2003) leads Scruton unavoidably to the conclusion that when we dance to the music we simply express emotions or fictional representations associated with the latter in a manner very close to formal gesticulation. What we actually do when we dance is to represent ourselves in real or fictional communities of dancers, not to respond with our bodily movements to gestures existing authentically in music: since music does not move, the latter is simply impossible. The expressive movements accompanying our musical listening are not substantially different from the semantically meaningful gestures of our everyday social demeanour. It becomes obvious that while Scruton generally differentiates between musical and linguistic meaning, he is unable to relate these two different kinds of meaning with two different kinds of human motility; so

he deduces expressive motility from the semantically meaningful one. Doing this, Scruton aligns himself with theoretical traditions like those of evolutionary anthropology and psychology, for which mimic expression can only be explained in terms of practical or social teleology, that is as a residuum of purposeful action. Plessner and Buytendijk (2003) have sharply contested not only rationalistic theories of mimic expression like the last one, but also a bundle of theories explaining understanding of expressive movements in terms of analogy reasoning, empathy (Einfühlung), imitation and perceptivity of the psychic being of others. All these theories overlook the “environment-intentionality of the living body” (Umweltintentionalität des Leibes; cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1945) which guarantees the immediate access to the meaning of behavior and conduct in terms of “subjectively-objectively indifferent” or “psychically-physically [psychophysisch] neutral” categorical understanding. The objects of understanding are images of attitudes given in sensual perception and acquiring their exact meaning in intentional reference to varying situations: “Only the concrete situation constrains the signification of the expression” (Plessner & Buytendijk, 2003, p. 126). Interesting here is the fact that Plessner and Buytendijk make special reference to music as an exemplary instance of the psychically-physically indifferent conduct (Verhalten). To the meaning of that conduct we respond with the movements of our body when we dance to the music. It must be stressed though that, in line with the aforementioned theory of mimic expression, each musical gesture acquires its exact meaning only within a concrete musical situation. This has nothing to do with subjective construction or reconstruction of meaning in terms of reflective contextualization. Contrary to the intentionality of linguistic texts, musical intentionality is self-constituted and intransitive. If we agree with Plessner that music conducts itself, then there can be no other “environment” for the musical “living body” but this very “living body” itself, since music does not share the same natural locus with living creatures. There is though one possibility for living creatures themselves to attain the peculiar status of musical conduct: the real living body becomes its own environment and its movements thus become intrinsically meaningful only *in dance*. Music and dance are just those instances of human conduct where the peculiar logic of the eccentric form of life reveals itself the most decisively: here the body really *has* itself and the mind truly manifests itself to its body (Plessner, 2003a, p. 290).

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