Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series VIII: Performing Arts • Vol. 18(67) Special Issue – 2025
https://doi.org/10.31926/but.pa.2025.18.67.3.8

Semiotic Perspectives on the Notion of the Sacred in the Music of Different Cultures

Sebastian FELEA[1]

Abstract: *One of the essential dimensions of human spirituality is the relationship with the sacred sphere and it has always been expressed in music. The sound organization of music composed and performed under the sign of sacredness is as diverse as the multitude of conceptions related to divinity. This study analyses the relationship between the different syntactic patterns of sacred music materials that serve as a sign (representamen) and spiritual realities for which they stand for (object) with reference to practical implications and conceptual space in which they are described (interpretant). The analysis of Islamic, African, and European cultures will reveal the association and interdependence between different worldviews and specific syntactic patterns.*

Key-words: *music semiotics, sacred music, style, culture*

1. Introduction: Semiotics and Music

The origin of semiotics as a general concern for sign and meaning is found in the period of antiquity. In Greece, the works of Plato (*Cratylos*) and Aristotle (particularly *Perihermenias*) reveal their interest for *seméion* and *symbolon*. Furthermore, written fragments of the debates between stoics and epicureans show the great extent to which the theory of the signs was developed.

In the Latin world, Augustin is considered the first thinker who proposed a separate science for this theory (397 AD). Subsequently, Dominicus Soto and John Poinsot are the first who gave a systematic approach to the topic and John Locke the first who suggested the name of `semiotics´ for the subject (1690 – *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the attempts of previous eras are articulated within a new framework of a modern science called `semiotics´ with the

[1] Western University of Timișoara, sebastian.felea@e-uvt.ro

contribution of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Pierce as leading figures. Saussure takes the human language as the most important sign system and propose the science called `sémiologie´ for the study of the life of signs within the social life. In his theory, the linguistic sign represents a dyadic model between signifier and signified and a union between the psychic character of an acoustic image of a word and its corresponding concept (Saussure 1998, 85-86). There is no causal relationship between these two terms. It is only an arbitrary relation validated by the tradition of a specific culture.

Following John Locke's suggestions, Pierce approaches this field from a philosophical perspective. He understands that "at the heart of semiotics is the realization that the whole of human experience, without exception, is an interpretive structure mediated and sustained by signs" (Deely 2009, 8). Semioticians of this movement consider that the entire reality of the living or non-living world, including the physical universe itself, can be described and understood as a complex network of signs that interact and develop, by the virtue of either nature or culture, in the process of *semiosis*.

For Pierce, the sign is a triadic model. It adds to the dyadic model of Saussure the actual object of the reality for whom the sign stands for. Therefore, the semiotic triangle consists of the *representamen* as primary element that stands for something else – its actual *object*, or *referent* – so that it creates in someone's mind an equivalent – the *interpretant* of the first element (Pierce 1990, 269-275).

During the last half of the 20th century musicologists have clearly shown a high interest in the semiotic analysis of musical works. From a semiotic perspective, the entire musical work is considered a macro-sign that subsumes an entire network of signs at each structural level of the piece. Publications of Charles Rosen (1971), Jean-Jaques Nattiez (1975), Gino Stefani (1976), Eero Tarasti (1979), Joseph Kerman (1985), Vladimír Karbusický (1986, 1987) or papers delivered at the International Congresses on Musical Signification are some of the most remarkable contributions regarding the study of signification and meaning in music.

2. Objectives and Methods

This paper aims to investigate music materials emblematic as sacred music in Islamic, African and European cultures. It also intends to describe their worldview with an emphasis on the concept of divinity and find correlation with sound organization. In other words, following Pierce's logic it will be shown the *ground* of the *representamen* in the process of signification of its *object*.

It should be noted that besides the benefits, semiotic investigations on musical works have also raised controversial discussions. For instance, not all theorists agree upon how the specific signs are defined in the musical discourse; the procedure for identifying the excerpts with specific signification have also been questioned; the musical language itself is an element of multiple opinions concerning the formalization and definition; in the end, the semioticians are still looking for a validation procedure for the results (Caravia 2010, 489).

However, in recent years some notable working methods have been settled. José Luiz Martinez (2000) has suggested that the analysis should be threefold, according to Pierces's model of semiosis: the sign in itself, the sign related to its possible objects, and the sign related to its possible interpretants.

A similar direction was established by Dinu Ciocan (Ciocan 2005, 14-15). He considered appropriate to apply in music the three main branches of general semiotics as proposed by Chrales Morris: syntax (which he extends to grammar), semantics and pragmatics. For grammar, he develops an extensive method of identifying elements of melody, rhythm, meter, harmony, dynamics, timbre and motives that generate the vocabulary of a certain musical work.

Semantics plays a central role within semiotic investigation, and it deals with antinomic notions such as certainty-doubt, hope-despair, optimism-pessimism, sacred-profane, profane-demonic etc. These coordinates describe the complexity of the psychophysiological states resulting from compositional strategy and performance. He sees semantics in close relationship with morals, wisdom and sacredness of music. Finally, pragmatics appears as a transdisciplinary study that correlates music with elements from psychology, sociology, theory of communication, culture, etc.

Over the years, musical fragments or figures associated with specific signification – in relation either to the music itself (more appropriate to the concept of pure music) or to extra-musical realities – have been labeled as intonations or topics. They were elaborated by Leonard Ratner (1980) and developed by Wye Jamison Allanbrook (1983, 1992), Kofi Agawu (1991), and Raymond Monelle (2000). In 2007, Monelle states that "we now understand that topics may be fragments of melody, of rhythm, styles, conventional forms, aspects of timbre of harmony, which denote items of social or cultural life, and through them expressive themes such as manliness, the outdoors, innocence, the lament. The nexus between musical element and signification is by means of correlation" (Monelle 2007, 178). Thus, extensive lists of topics have been created based on artistic periods or composers.

This paper will analyze worldview and concept of divinity (*object*) that correspond to the cultures (semantics) in which the works of sacred music were created and the sound organization (*representamen*), taking into consideration its stylistic features (syntactics). It will also be discussed the possible correlations (pragmatics) between music, concept and practices (*interpretant*).

3. Culture and Sacred Music

In all ages of history and geographical regions, music is one of the few things in common to all cultures (Nettl 1975, 71). Additionally, it is well recognized that the sacredness has always been one of the most important features and functions of music (Dănceanu 2005, 40). In every culture, music has expressed religious thought, and it has enhanced the experience of communication with the Divine. The intimate relation between religion and art is also nurtured by the fact that whatever people perceive as holy inspires artistic conceptions (Langer 1953, 402). Music represents an effective instrument that translates "religious experience and a metaphysical conception of the world and human existence into a concrete representational form" (Eliade 1985, 55).

Semiotics, in a large sense, deals with *objects* that are not limited to the physical environment. According to Pierce's understanding of sign, an *interpretant* (element connected predominantly to the conceptual aria) becomes itself a sign within the large network of semiosis (Pierce 1990, 275). Therefore, the worldviews with whole series of values and belief systems in any culture represent valuable *objects* signified by various means, including musical art.

The conceptions of divinity are portrayed in any culture depending on a threefold scheme that depicts in each case a pair of polar concepts: pluralism versus monism, personalism versus impersonalism, and distance versus nearness. The last polarity incorporates aspects of the first two, which makes it an overarching conception that explains divinity. It is usually referred to as transcendence versus immanence (Wach 1958, 78).

Transcendence is the characteristic that emphasizes the aspects of the divine being totally different than human being and distant (as eternity, holiness, omnipotence, omniscience, creative power, etc.). The immanence refers to similarities and closeness to the human being (presence, personal relationship, communion, etc.). This polarity will have a central role in analyzing the worldview of specific cultures.

3.1. Islamic Culture and Sacred Music

The Islamic civilization is permeated by religion. The faith in Allah and the conception of the Divine leaves its mark any aspect of life – material or spiritual – politics, economics, literature or social life (Gabrieli 1955, 87). Ismaʿil Raji al-Faruqi states that "the essence of Islam is 'tawhid', the act of affirming Allah to be the One, absolute, transcendent Creator, Lord and Master of all that is" (Al-Faruqi 1986, 73).

He explains that "tahwid rules out any immanentism and all confusion, diffusion, incarnation, emanationism, or absorption of the Divine in, or by the non-Divine, of the creator and the creature. It rules out all revelation or disclosure of the divine Self, for such would imply an entry into space-time compromising to its transcendence. The two realms of being can never meet (Al-Faruqi 1986, 88-89)." The transcendent reality is the source of truth and the only possible contact between God and man is a process of intellection.

Consequently, Islamic art as *representamen* does not indent to imitate nature or create symbols inspired of this field. Images of human life or aspects of natural world do not find their place in the context of worship. Such forms as dance, figural sculpture or painting or theatral performances are precluded. Instead, the Muslim artists are entrusted with the difficult task of expressing a reality that is not representable. Visual art, music and literature are engaged in creating structures that suggest the ideas of infinity and inexpressible (Al-Faruqi 1985, 173). This is how the 'arabesque' became a breakthrough and a sign of Islamic culture.

In the realm of music, the Qur'anic chant represents the highest form of religious art of sound. It serves the purpose of reflecting the aesthetic-religious conscience of infinite, transcendent God. Due to its specific features, namely the vocal-improvisatory character, non-standard scales, fluid intonation, and non-divisionary rhythm, it is not possible to notate this music on a modern score.

However, some characteristics of sound organization are evident. The non-developmental repetition of numerous small units creates an infinite pattern. Repetition applies to important tones in scale segment, short melodic or rhythmic motifs or refrain phrases. The small, distinct units offer space for improvisation. The chant is ornamented with a rich series of melodic and rhythmic figures (grace notes, trills, alterations between main tone and its neighbor, micro-intervals, etc.). The melody follows a limited range, avoids wide intervals and counterpoint. Instead, the intricacy resides in the dense activity in that single line (Al-Faruqi 1986,

476). The monodic structure is the standard even when groups of people are singing with heterophonic effects.

For the *pragmatics*, it is noteworthy that Islamic chant is largely vocal, many times soloist. Dramatic expressions like trembling of the voice, sudden change of timbre or other epic manifestations are discouraged. Thus, both singers and listeners don't have to change the mood nor associate music with psychological or kinesthetic correspondences from everyday life. It should remain abstract and non-programmatic. For the improvisation, considering that the chant does not depend upon written notation, the vocalist may improvise for as long as he feels to be inspired. It is another example of expressing the transcendence by an open-ended structure, which is suitable to the Islamic spirit.

3.2. African Culture and Sacred Music

Just as in the Islamic world, the religion is the strongest element in the worldview of Africans. The traditional background is shaped by coordinates of the sacred sphere in such a way that they influence greatly the thinking and living of the people concerned (Mbiti 1969, 1). However, it is a worldview in direct opposition with the Islamic model, from the perspective of transcendence-immanence polarity.

Despite some differences, African traditions share a common belief in a Supreme Being, a transcendent Creator of the Universe. However, this God is by no means accessible and has no influence upon or interaction with human beings. He is not a subject of worship, even less a person to communicate with (Eliade 1959, 123-124). Instead, the religious life and conceptions relate to smaller entities that are believed to be deities or spirits who owe their existence to the Supreme God and play the role of intermediators between Him and humans. They are associated with forces of nature and human ancestors and are omnipresent in everyday life (Mbiti 1969, 75-91). These beliefs outline the immanent orientation of this culture.

According to African worldview, the supreme religious experience is the worship ritual when a person is taken in possession by a deity (or spirit). As a dominant characteristic, Africans believe in multiple spirits with individual personalities and identified with aspects of nature. As a result, natural experience is equated to spiritual experience, and the role of worship is more utilitarian than spiritual or mystical (Mbiti 1969, 5). Worship rituals are possession rituals with interactions between humans and spirits and less contemplation. They develop psychic energy, emotional arousal and individual's intuition rather than intellectual

growth or philosophical contemplation. Hence, the preference for some artistic manifestations such as music, dance, and drama as means by which worshipers may attain contact with the deities (Rouget 1985, 117-118). There are numerous correlations between specific dances and movements and certain deities that are invoked by their means.

The analysis of sound organization of the musical materials that are part of the possession rituals will reveal several aspects. The rhythm, as primary element, is emphasized by all other musical parameters. Music has a percussive character. Instruments are selected based on their potential to be played percussively (Maultsby 1985, 50). While a wide range of percussion instruments of various timbres are utilized, it is remarkable that the indefinite pitch percussive sounds are more associated with the invocation of the spirits (Kauffman 1976, 14). Melodic instruments such as flute, trumpets, harps, lutes or lyres are usually combined with percussion instruments. The custom of hand clapping is very close to the ritual tradition.

The high emphasis on rhythm compensates for the absence or lack of melodic complexity (Nketia 1975, 125). When it comes to the human voice, the drama can manifest itself in performance by shouts, glides, bends, dips, cries, falsetto, melodic repetition. The singer may use sudden changes in dynamics or register and seek a harsh and tense timbre (Maultsby 1985, 49). At the level of form, the open structure is the preferable since it gives the chance to participants to get engaged in the experience. On the other hand, it allows music to follow a progression path to a climax by *accelerando* and *crescendo* as the possession ritual requires.

3.3. European Culture and Sacred Music

If the previous examples of cultural background are edifying *objects* regarding transcendent (Islamic) and immanent (African) orientations and their respective signifiers within the musical art, the Christian faith in the European space of the last 2000 years can hardly be classified in one of these two categories.

Firstly, this fact is determined by an inherent paradox related to Christian belief. The concept of God, Creator of the universe, powerful and separated from His creation aligns with de transcendent orientation. At the same time, there is an unquestioned emphasis on the divine immanence upheld by the doctrines of incarnation of Jesus Christ as Savior and the work and presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of individuals. Secondly, the Christianity has undergone major

transformations in the course of history resulting in multiple orientations in the present. The history of Christian religion and its present manifestations reveal the difficulty to maintain the balance between transcendence and immanence. In semiotic terms, it is challenging to define a unique *object* and even more difficult to identify a single *representamen* for the entire field.

Although a wide range of beliefs has been expressed and manifested, there is an overall shift from the transcendence orientation at the early age of Christian history towards an immanence orientation in present day (Stefani 1993, 267), a process determined by multiple factors. At the very beginning of its history, Christians were motivated to distance themselves from immanent orientations of pagan surroundings of the Greco-Roman culture. Then, through the Middle Age as the teaching of sacerdotalism and the sacraments developed, transcendent understanding was favored. Moreover, the rise of monasticism with its ascetic elements favored the same direction. In architecture, the gothic cathedrals may be semiotic forms of expression of transcendence orientation.

In this context, the Christian Church of the Middel Age developed music that served to express this conception. Whether we consider the eastern church with an emphasis on the apophatic theology or the western church with its more cataphatic approach, the conception of a transcendent God was dominant. Accordingly, the byzantine chant is the expression of a musical horizontal thinking through its melodicity. The monodic chant follows a modal organization and is performed by a single voice or group of voices in unison. The simple melody with melismatic ornamentation and use of micro-intervals, set on rhythmic formulas that stem from recitative associated with continuous dynamics, avoiding sudden changes nourishes the spirit of invocation. In the end, the ison converts the byzantine chant to multivocality, reinforcing the melody without transmitting a sense of harmony. At its turn, the Gregorian chant specific to the western church maintains an austere character. Linearity of melody that follow diatonic scales has been a marking characteristic. It should never create surprise, and the homogenic rhythm favors the contemplation state.

The history of the Protestant Reform determined major changes of worldview and concept of God. The emphasis on individual value and personal communication with God, without an ecclesiastical mediator led the Protestants towards a more immanent orientation. Thus, the proximity with every-day life and expression of human experience and emotions within the religious ceremonies made the Protestant music to capture these elements. Secular barform of German Meistersinger tradition or melodic contour specific to non-religious lied have been

adopted (Reynolds and Price 1987, 17). The Protestant chorale could have a wider range of melody, larger and unusual intervals and be harmonized, expressing human affects in worship. Later, the development of oratorios and cantatas with their respective concertante style confirm the same trend of the sacred music style that migrated towards the opera.

4. Closing remarks

In his treaty, *Basic of Semiotics*, John Deely argues that semiotic studies should avoid the usual approach of scientific research that tend to base their conclusions on a solid method (2009, 12-25). As an alternative, he prefers the semiotic point of view resulting from the analysis of all the signs available. This point of view may crystallize, can undergo adjustments or be totally rejected based on further studies that identify new connections of signs with their significations.

I suggest the same approach for this study as well. While the present paper is limited to drawing the main characteristics of some important cultures and to suggesting possible explanations for the stylistic features of the sacred music adopted, further studies may go deeper into the detailed specifics of any of these worldviews and come up with information that may grant specific nuances.

The intimate relationship between a certain concept of God as *object* (or *referent*) and a specific style of sacred music as *representamen* seems to be evident. The macro level analysis reveals that as the orientation of a certain culture regarding the concept of God (*object*) migrates from transcendence towards immanence, the sacred music style (as *representamen*) undergoes changes from the simplicity of melodic, predominantly vocal and linear patterns towards rhythmic complexities and progressions to climaxes. In this respect, it may be understood that while some connections between *object* and *representamen* that are culturally objective have their limited signification to some specific culture, there are fundamental connections related to nature.

This is once again obvious looking at the degree of stability of the *object.* A stable culture keeps the correlations with same sacred music style. In other words, in the realms of sacred music, the more an *object* changes, the more the *representamen* is affected and the *interpretant* adopts the new elements of the *object*.

5. References

Agawu, Kofi. 1991. *Playing with Signs. A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Al-Faruqi, Isma'il R. and Al-Faruqi, Lois Lamya. 1986. *The Cultural Atlas of Islam*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Al-Faruqi, Lois Lamya. 1985. "An Islamic Perspective on Symbolism in the Arts: New Thoughts on Figural Representations." In *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art*, ed. by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, 164-178. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company.

Allanbrook, Wye Jamison. 1983. *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: Le Nozze di Figaro and Don Giovanni*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Allanbrook, Wye Jamison. 1992. "Two Threads through the Labyrinth: Topic and Process in the First Movements of K. 332 and K. 333." In *Convention in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Music*: *Essays in Honor of Leonard G. Ratner*, ed. by Wye J. Allanbrook, Janet M. Levy and William P. Mahn, 125-171. New York: Prendragon Press.

Caravia, Paul. 2010. "Semiotică muzicală." In *Dicționar de termeni muzicali*, ed. by Gheorghe Firca, 489-491. București: Editura Enciclopedică.

Ciocan, Dinu. 2005. *O teorie semiotică a interpretării muzicale. Dimensiunea gramaticală. Dimensiunea semantică. Prima parte.* București: Editura Universității Naționale de Muzică București.

Dănceanu, Liviu. 2005. *Anotimpurile muzicii. O istorie eliptică și didactică a muzicii savante. I Primăvara*. Bacău: Corgal Press.

Deely, John. 2009. *Basics of Semiotics*. Tartu: Tartu University Press.

Eliade, Mircea. 1959. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

Eliade, Mircea. 1985. *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company.

Gabrieli, Francesco. 1955. "Literary Tendencies." In *Unity and Variety on Muslim Civilization*, ed. by Gustave E. von Grunebaum, 87-106. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Karbusicky, Vladimir. 1986. *Grundriss der musikalischen Semantik*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Karbusicky, Vladimir. 1987. "'Signification' in Music: A Metaphor?" In: *The Semiotic Web*, ed. by Thomas A. Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok, 430–444. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Kauffman, Robert. 1976. "The Psychology of Music Making in an African Society: The Shona." In *The World of Music*. Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG.

Kerman, Joseph. 1985. *Musicology*. London: Fontana Press.

Langer, Susanne K. 1953. *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Martinez, Jose Luis. 2000. "Semiotics and the Art Music of India." *Music Theory Online. Society for Music Theory* 6(1).

Maultsby, Portia K. 1985. "West African Influences and Retentions in U.S. Black Music: A Sociocultural Study." In *More Than Dancing: Essays on Afro-American Music and Musicians*, ed. by Irene Jackson, 25-57. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.

Mbiti, John S. 1969. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann.

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

Monelle, Raymond. 2007. "Sur quelques aspects de la théorie des topoi musicaux." In *Sens et signification en musique*, ed. by Márta Grabócz, 177–193. Paris: Éditions Hermann.

Nattiez, Jean-Jacques. 1975. *Les fondements d'une sémiologie de la musique*. Paris: Uge.

Nettl, Bruno. 1975. "The Role of Music in Culture. Iran, A Recently Developed Nation." In *Contemporary Music and Music Cultures*, ed. by Charles Hamm, Bruno Nettle and Ronald Byrnside, 71-100. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Nketia, J. H. Kwabena. 1975. *The Music of Africa*. London: Victor Gollancz.

Peirce, Charles S. 1990. *Semnificație și acțiune*. București: Humanitas.

Ratner, Leonard G. 1980. *Classic Music. Expression, Form and Style*. New York: Schirmer Books.

Reynolds, William J. and Milburn Price. 1987. *A Survey of Christian Hymnody*. Carol Stream, Ill: Hope Publishing Company.

Rosen, Charles. 1971. *The classical style: Haydn. Mozart, Beethoven*. New York: Viking Press.

Rouget, Gilbert. 1985. *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations Between Music and Possession*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1998. *Curs de lingvistică generală*. Iași: Polirom.

Stefani, Gino. 1976. *Introduzione alla Semiotica della Musica*. Palermo: Sellerio.

Stefani, Wolfgang. 1993. *The Concept of God and Sacred Music Style: an Intercultural Exploration of Divine Transcendence/Immanence as Stylistic Determinants for Worship Music with Pragmatic Implications for the*

Contemporary Christian Context. Andrews University, 1993. https://dx.doi.org/10.32597/dissertations/714

Tarasti Eero. 1979. *Myth and Music. A Semiotic Approach to the Aesthetics of Myth and Music, especially that of Wagner, Sibelius and Stravinsky*. The Hague: Mouton Publishers.

Wach, Joachim. 1958. *The Comparative Study of Religions*. New York: Columbia University Press.