

Replies to Ravasio, Noble, and Kluth

I. Preliminaries

I thank my interlocutors for their willingness to dialogue on the supremely important topic of artistic interpretation and for their insightful questions and perspectives. Above all, I am gladdened by the overall positive evaluation of the convincingness of my semiotic analysis. Like Michael Klein and Kofi Agawu, I confess to exemplifying the practice of analyzing more than theorizing—thus, if my reading is found to be robustly warranted, persuasive, or even compelling, my primary aim has been achieved.¹

I find myself now in the difficult position of responding to a multivalent (and not-entirely-harmonious) spread of my interlocutors' critiques. Ravasio expresses the signature worry of the analytic philosopher—that the interpretations reached in semiotic analysis of art are not *precise* enough. In my case, this objection is two-pronged: first, the reading is not definitive enough to warrant attributing profundity to *Beethoven*, and second, the aboutness that music displays is not specific enough to conclude to rumination. The composer Noble, on the other hand, presents the interpreter's concern that my reading is *too* precise, unfairly limiting the range of equally convincing listener accounts. Perhaps softening the interpretive claim from an exegesis of content to a selection of *homology* allows a plurality of interpretations to coexist. Kluth gives voice to the ethnomusicologist's objection, questioning the entire methodological foundation for the semiotic enterprise—structural analysis presupposes a *privileged observer*, confining engagement with music to that of a specific time, place, and demographic. Thus, the entire contribution of analysis appreciating art as profound is suspect if it is not equally relevant to listeners across human experience. How can I weave together these diverse strands into a single coherent response?

Though it may seem a curious move to introduce *new* material in a response that must already undertake such a Herculean task, I believe it will be the most efficient route to alleviate my interlocutors' concerns. By explicating the theoretical framework that undergirds my foregoing semiotic analysis, I hope to address simultaneously the major avenues of critique presented by my respondents. In addition to my primary roles as a composer and music theorist, I have oft found it beneficial in doing artistic interpretation to don the mantle of communication theorist and semiotician. After all, if the praxis of musical composition, listening, and understanding is a culturally-situated mode of communication, is it not sensible to turn to the *study* of communication itself for insight? Thus, if I may add yet another disciplinary voice to the conversation at hand, I shall present an abbreviated *social-semiotic* account of musical communication.

II. A Social-Semiotic Account of Musical Communication

What would it mean for the process of musical composition, listening, and understanding to be theorized as *communication*? One of the seven vibrant strands of communication theory is the “semiotic tradition,” which explores the intersubjective mediation of meaning via sign-complexes and sign-systems.² I propose that a *social-semiotic* model of communication—such as is set forth in Gunther Kress' *Multimodality* (2009)—productively characterizes the communicative processes involved in musical praxis. From this perspective, communication unfolds in two major stages—the first dominated by the interest of the maker of a sign-complex, known as the *rhetor*, and the second by the *interpreter's* interest.³ The dynamically bilateral emphasis on both rhetor and interpreter is the *social* aspect of social semiotics. The rhetor first assesses the communicational situation, including his/her interest, the audience's characteristics, the

semiotic requirements needed to bridge the gap to the audience's understanding, and the communicative resources available.⁴ Then the rhetor conceives a *design* to craft a specific *message*; the choices made at the design stage are of utmost semiotic significance, as paradigmatic analysis of what features are chosen versus what *could have* been chosen provides a hermeneutic window into the rhetor's interest.⁵

Once the sign-complex has been produced according to the rhetor's design, it may be taken up by another as a *prompt*. This other reaches an understanding of the prompt—shaped by his/her *own* interest—and thereby becomes an *interpreter*. Based on this interpretation, the interpreter may choose to make a *response* to the prompt, and where interpretation and/or response has taken place, *communication* has occurred.⁶ The interpreter's response may then itself be taken up as a prompt, so that the “semiotic sequence” of design → prompt → response forms a continuing chain of communicational action.⁷ In the context of semiotics of art, this account provides a conceptual foundation that elevates the role of both the rhetor (artist) and interpreter (audience) while preserving the importance of understanding the artwork's design (via analysis):

This theory diminishes neither the significance of the semiotic work of the maker of the initial message, the *rhetor*, nor that of the *interpreter*; ... For the analyst as much as in everyday communication, some aspects of the *design* of the initial message must be understood in order to engage in and make sense of the subsequent semiotic work of *interpretation*. ... It is work which leads to semiotic entities which are always new, innovative, [and] creative...⁸

Beethoven as rhetor created the *Kreutzer* sonata as a message according to his compositional design; I (and other listeners) take up the piece as a prompt, interpreting Beethoven's design through my own interest as a response. My response becomes in turn its own message, understood as a second-order prompt by my interlocutors to form their own responses. This, in turn, leads us to third-order communication: my meta-response to theirs. This symposium itself thus exemplifies the very social-semiotic communicative practice presented here.

III. Responses

With the conceptual foundation laid, I shall now respond succinctly to my interlocutors' questions. My aim is to alleviate not only the objections raised about the specifics of my reading of the *Kreutzer* sonata, but also the broader concerns about the general project of musical semiotics.

Ravasio: Can the profundity of the analysis be attributed to Beethoven?

Ravasio suggests that *Kreutzer* sonata's claim to profundity would be compromised if Beethoven's authorial intentions to display chronic depression cannot be established. The social-semiotic model addresses this worry by clarifying what it means for an artwork to be understood as profound. Artistic communication is behaviorally-focused—when an artwork is taken as a profound prompt by interpreters with appropriate response, communication of profundity is successful. Beethoven as rhetor designed a message capable of being understood as a profound prompt. Beethoven participates in profound communication as rhetor; I and others participate in the second phase as interpreters. As Kress writes, “Communication rests on both phases: the initial work of the rhetor and the subsequent engagement and interpretive work of the audience...”⁹ There is ample credit to share, and Beethoven's achievement is not lessened one iota by my semiotic work.

Ravasio: What profound insight into chronic depression does the sonata provide?

Based on my reading, the *Kreutzer* sonata clarifies or illuminates the phenomenological profile, the qualia, the *what-it's-like* of chronic depression through displaying rumination and alexithymia. I find dubious Ravasio's suggestion that a textbook could impart the phenomenology of chronic depression more effectively than sharing the dynamic experience of the music's virtual subjectivity, with which listeners may choose to feel *for*, feel *with*—or even feel *in themselves*.¹⁰ A clinical description of

depressive symptoms gives only a sterilized silhouette of psychopathological experience rather than its immense rawness—the kind of blended, nuanced phenomenology that the arts excel at portraying.¹¹

Ravasio: Can music communicate rumination?

Yes. Beethoven's design includes semiotically marked characteristics that, when taken as a prompt, are comprehensible as the phenomenological profile of rumination. If interpreting rumination is an *aesthetically-warranted* response, then the music has communicated rumination successfully. Ravasio objects that music possesses neither the temporal span or self-referentiality needed for rumination to be aesthetically-warranted. However, the requisite temporal recurrence is exhibited *virtually* by the musical subjectivity, not limited to real time. The key A minor functions as the piece's recurring (-) order, repeatedly reinforced throughout the piece from its opening main theme, providing the needed virtual timespan. Similarly, music attains sufficient self-referentiality through tonal interrelationships. When the coda's Adagio tonicizes B-flat major with the yearning motive one final time, it *refers* to the transcendent glimpse of B-flat major from earlier in the coda. Similarly, the somber redirection to A minor references the same B-flat major "slipping" into A minor through alexithymia. This is a robust musical homology—music "thinking," even "reminiscing," on past events.

Noble: Is musical meaning endangered by differing interpretations?

No. The so-called "problem" of differing interpretations is familiar to any involved in semiotics of art. In the social-semiotic model, the second stage is carried out by each interpreter according to his/her unique interest, shaping what features of the prompt are selected as *critical* and *framed* via interpretation into an aesthetically-warranted response.¹² Insofar as each response is warranted by the prompt, successful communication has occurred. Grounding responses in careful interpretation of the prompt avoids the charge of arbitrariness, sidestepping the cloud of infinitely varied interpretations to keep the rhetor's design central as a "guide to our own inevitably emergent expressive experience."¹³

Noble: Is musical meaning *content* or *homology*?

Both. In the first stage, the rhetor's design is *encoded* into the message as content, an immanent property of the artwork awaiting discovery through semiotic analysis of its marked features. However, the interpreter's semiotic work in the *second* stage is as Noble describes in his account of musical meaning as homology, with which I agree. Viewing the artwork's design/content as prompt—a *catalyst* for aesthetically-warranted responses rather than a dictator of what its meaning *must* be—baptizes the plurality of interpretations as *part* of the communicative process itself rather than a problematic inconvenience.

Kluth: Does musical narrative analysis assume a musically-literate universal subject?

No. The very definition of transvaluation invokes the listener's individual, contingent perspective so that a privileged reading is impossible. Rather, the interpreter's reading must be tested as an *argument* in the public sphere of interpreters, variously affirmed or contradicted by others. Almén's theory of musical narrative is primarily a *phenomenological* project—exploring the experience music as a temporally-unfolding art form—not a *taxonomical* one. As Robert Hatten writes, "Almén's theory can explain *each* listener's interpretive commitments"—a framework that is heuristic, not authoritarian.¹⁴ This is the familiar social-semiotic dynamic in all cultural communication; interpretation of art is no exception.

Kluth: Can semiotic analysis apply to a variety of musical styles, genres, and cultures?

Certainly. One of musical semiotics' virtues is that it bears no dogmatic commitment to a particular analytical methodology. Kluth wonders how one might analyze Berio and other twentieth-century genres; I commend one such reading of Berio's *Rendering* within a book full of narrative analyses of twentieth-century music.¹⁵ I, as a contemporary composer, primarily occupy my time with composing and interpreting twenty-first century music. *Different music, different tools*—the maxim applies also to music from cultures outside the "white, European male" canon. Communication is "joint and reciprocal

work;” just as a rhetor assesses the available communicative resources, the interpreter evaluates what semiotic tools will be most effective to discover the rhetor’s design.¹⁶

Kluth: What is the relation between semiotic analysis and significance in human affairs?

Kluth posits semiotic analysis as a stepping stone to music’s *true* significance, for which we must turn to “the social, the lifeworld, and to experience.” As Kluth recognizes, this is precisely the move I make in the latter half of my argument. What is musical semiotics’ role in the significance of human affairs? Semiotic analysis forms the *ground* for aesthetically-warranted interpretation that bridges from the artistic text to human experience. The semiotic deals with musical systems and stylistic meaning; the *hermeneutic* moves beyond to a work’s *strategic* meaning. In social semiotics, the interpreter decodes the rhetor’s original design, then infuses individuality and personal relevance by taking it up as a prompt. What further significance is lacking than that which enables rhetor and interpreter to communicate across space and time, to encounter directly the phenomenological experience—the lifeworld—of another? As Kress writes, “communication is a quintessentially social activity.”¹⁷ Thus is the structural elevated to the hermeneutic, experiential, social—the *profound*.

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Notes

1. Michael Klein, *Intertextuality in Western Art Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005): ix.
2. Robert T. Craig, “Communication Theory as a Field,” *Communication Theory*, Volume 9, Issue 2 (1999): 136.
3. Gunther Kress, *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication* (London: Routledge, 2010): 36-37.
4. *Ibid.*, 26.
5. *Ibid.*, 28.
6. *Ibid.*, 35.
7. *Ibid.*, 32.
8. *Ibid.*, 42.
9. *Ibid.*, 44.
10. Sympathy, empathy, and interiorizing; cf. Robert S. Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, forthcoming manuscript): Chapter 6.
11. On reading my analysis and listening to the *Kreutzer* sonata’s first movement, a subject familiar with the firsthand experience of chronic depression recognized the phenomenological profile of the subject’s own depressive symptoms. The subject shared that the music “provides an accurate representation of the stimulus and feelings (or sometimes lack thereof) for those unable to experience them firsthand. In a way, it is like providing a glimpse of color to the blind man.”
12. Kress, *Multimodality* (2010): 37.
13. Robert Hatten, “Aesthetically Warranted Emotion and Composed Expressive Trajectories in Music,” *Music Analysis*, 29/i-ii-iii (2010): 95.
14. Robert S. Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, forthcoming): Chapter 6.
15. Michael L. Klein and Nicholas Reyland eds., *Music and Narrative Since 1900* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012); cf. 42-43 for Berio’s *Rendering*.
16. Kress, *Multimodality* (2010): 44.
17. Kress, *Multimodality* (2010): 51.