

Review of Joan Grimalt's *Mapping Musical Signification*

Resenha do livro Mapping Musical Signification de Joan Grimalt

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1. Introduction

Published by Springer in 2020, with a foreword by Robert S. Hatten and an ambitious title, this recent book appeals to both professionals in the field and researchers as well as to initiates and even upper-level undergraduates with an interest in the emerging discipline of Musical Signification.

Mapping Musical Signification is, in the author's words, the result of years of research in the field of Musical Signification (Grimalt 2020, xv). It is a guide to a committed approach to the interpretation of Western classical music and it integrates the study of Musical Meaning into the analysis. The book could be defined as somewhere between an essay and a treatise. It presents a clear language, but does not shy away from the technical complexity demanded by specialization in the subject of study.

One of the main attractions of the book is that it offers a double reading: on the one hand, it can be used as a reference book, thanks to the general index on p. 23 and a meticulous alphabetical list of musical examples (p. 369) which, in the digital edition, allows access to each cited page with a click. Finally, the book has a detailed glossary of terms and authors (p. 395).



Moreover, the volume is not presented only as a glossary of terms, but follows an argumentative order that suggests a reading from beginning to end. Grimalt not only defines and musically illustrates each musical reference or sign, but also presents its genealogy, that is, the historical origin of the gesture in question and how it has evolved with musical practice.

MAPPING MUSICAL SIGNIFICATION	Signs	Chapter 1	Musical signs
		Chapter 2	Madrigalisms, rhetorical figures
		Chapter 3	References (topoi), semantic fields
	Sets of signs	Chapter 4	Sacred references
		Chapter 5	Martial references
		Chapter 6	Lyricism, Pastoral.
		Chapter 7	Dance references
		Chapter 8	Theatrical references

Table 1: Table of contents of Mapping Musical Signification

2. The eight chapters of Mapping Musical Signification

The first chapter presents the minimal units of musical meaning: sign, signifier, signified, interpretant, marker, among others. It is remarkable the subsection "The World of Flats", where a recurrent gesture in classical and romantic music is explained: a direct change of key, without modulation, down the circle of fifths, into the flat region. The author explains that, normally, this gesture indicates the irruption into another dimension, with respect to what in the rest of the piece was represented as real, based on examples of Mozart, Wagner, Chopin, and Brahms. The reader will become accustomed to find not one, but multiple examples of central composers of the canonical repertoire, to give fundament to the author's analytical proposals. Section 1.5 presents the state of the art in the field of Musical Signification. A brief review in chronological order of the most outstanding names and events of this emerging discipline rounds off this initial chapter with a useful overview.

The second chapter focuses on the music of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, especially on madrigalisms and rhetorical figures, which laid the foundations of Musical Signification for the following centuries. Of particular importance are two madrigalisms that have been very popular since they emerged from 16th-century madrigal, and which are often confused with each

other. They are the “pianto” and the “suspiratio”.¹ These two topoi are still present in today's music, for example in the soundtrack of the American television series *Mad Men* or in contemporary music, such as Sofia Gubaidulina's *Lamento*. The author clarifies both topoi, that tend to appear together in the same context, and locates the origin of the confusion between them in the German 19th century.

The third chapter delves into genres and styles, those meanings that derive from the History of Music. For example, the Classic Mixed Style, which can be interpreted as a fusion between the Galant Style and the Learned Style. The music of composers such as Haydn, understood as a mixed style, acquires great expressive power. In addition, Grimalt explains how this mixed style was the cornerstone for Western classical music in the following two centuries. The author has written about a new vision of Viennese Classicism in articles such as *A Humorous Narrative Archetype in the Music of the Viennese Classics as a Subversive Device* (Grimalt 2018) and *The political Beethoven through his instrumental music: some topical, narrative analyses* (Grimalt 2021).

The semantic fields are then tackled: of particular note is the semiotic square on p. 118, which presents the four main semantic fields arranged around two axes formed by the dichotomies Authority-Freedom and Spirit-Body (Fig. 1). The four semantic fields correspond to the main places where music was made in the 18th century: 1) the church, 2) the army, 3) the theater and the chamber, and 4) the dance hall. Each of them carries associated expressive meanings and presents relations of opposition, exclusion or complementarity with the others that can be represented graphically in a semiotic square. This semiotic square is not presented as the only or definitive one, but as a coherent and possible interpretation (p. 119). This dialogical and open position of the author will be recurrent throughout the text.

¹ The author uses single quotation marks throughout the text for references and topoi to differentiate the reference from the phenomenon itself. Thus, a depicted 'minuet' is distinguished from the minuet in its original context.

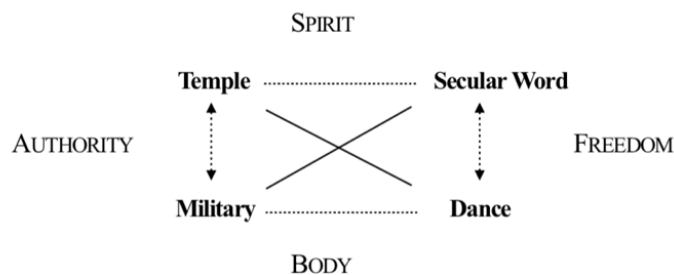


Figure 1: Four semantic fields in a semiotic square (Grimalt 2020, p. 118).

The following five chapters are devoted to each of these semantic fields: First, references to the sacred (Ch. 4). The chapter begins with a proposal for topical analysis: the author differentiates between static and dynamic references, that is, between those that have movement or a regular pulse, such as marches or dances, and those that do not, such as Gregorian chant, which, at least in its modern reconstruction, does not have an obvious regular pulse. Grimalt explains how Christian culture favored a type of spirituality that left aside the corporeal. When modern music wants to represent ecstasy or elevated spiritual aspects, it resorts to sacred references, such as the reference to "non-corporeal" chant, of which Gregorian chant stands as the model. This ecstasy need not be religious or mystical, but can also be a loving or pastoral ecstasy. The chapter proposes examples from Mozart and Vaughan Williams, among others. Other references treated in this chapter are the '*Dies Irae*', so popular in the 19th century as a symbol of death, or the '*Stile Antico*' from the polyphonic motet, a fundamental resource in Bach's, Haydn's, or Mozart's work. The author reviews chronologically these topoi and shows how they evolve and what nuances their meanings are acquiring throughout history. It is shown that topoi are variable and living concepts, not univocal, and that they are loaded with nuances as a new epoch uses them.

Chapter 5 deals with martial references, such as the "French Overture" and the controversial question of dotted rhythm. Attention is paid to the prologue of Monteverdi's *Madrigali guerrieri ed amorosi* (1683), where a description of three styles is made, with a clearly expressive intention: *stile concitato* (agitated), *stile temperato* (moderate) and *stile molle* (soft) (Table 2).

STYLE	PASSION	VOCAL RANGE
<i>Concitato</i> (agitated)	Wrath	High
<i>Temperato</i> (moderate)	Temperance, moderation.	Middle
<i>Molle</i> (soft)	Humility or Plea ¹⁹	Low

Table 2: The three styles of Monteverdi (1638) (Grimalt 2020, p. 153)

In addition, under martial references one encounters rhythms such as the anapest rhythm, especially important in J. S. Bach's work. Hunting calls and fanfares have undergone a process of stylization that is explained in §5.2, *Calls, Fanfares*, with examples from Palestrina to Mahler. Particularly noteworthy is §5.3, *Classic 'March': Irony, A "Toy Army"*, which explains how the Viennese classics rarely used references to the march in a literal sense, but rather generally in an ironic sense. Next, the author describes the "Dysphoric March" and its markers (Table 3): minor mode, moderate tempo, *piano* dynamics, somber character, 'ominous unison', among others. These markers are the opposite of those that define the "March" in its "normative" version.

	'MARCH'	'DYSPHORIC MARCH'
Mode	Major	Minor
Tempo	Fast	Moderate or slow
Dynamics	<i>Forte</i>	<i>piano</i>
Character	Energetic	Gloomy
Texture	Homophonic	Unison
Diastematic	Triadic, diatonic, imitating cornets and drums	

Table 3: Markers of the two martial topoi (Grimalt 2020, p. 190).

The volume continues with secular references: the lyrical and the pastoral (Ch. 6), references to dances (Ch. 7), and theatrical references (Ch. 8). The classification of this large number of references benefits from both the author's synthetic exercise and the richness of the musical examples provided, which hint at the author's extensive experience as a performer. The seventh chapter highlights the explanation of the doctrine of *tempo giusto* by J. P. Kirnberger (1776), fundamental to understand the music of the following centuries. The last chapter vindicates the importance of opera and theater for the understanding of instrumental music. It reviews comic opera and its roots, as well as those of tragic opera. The recitativo *secco* and the *accompagnato* constitute a source of references

in all instrumental music. The chapter continues with an explanation of Gluck's opera reform, the *dramma giocoso*, the Germanic melodrama, and reaches the comic references (§8.4, *Comic references*), where the close relationship between comic opera and the instrumental music of composers such as Mozart or Haydn becomes evident. Subtitle 8.5 discusses references to tragic opera that have spread to instrumental music, such as the "*Tempesta*", the "*Ominous Unison*", or the "*Ombra*".

In a field as new and emerging as that of Musical Signification, some concepts have been defined and used by different theorists under different criteria, which has been and is the object of criticism by musicologists from other disciplines or even from the same discipline. For example, *Approaches to Meaning in Music* (Almén; Pearsall 2006), reflects on the ambiguity of the term "meaning", an argument that is often used to discredit this discipline. The term is very broad and recent, so that different writers attribute one meaning or another to it. This happens with most of the concepts in use in the musicology of meaning: *topos*, *piano*, *suspiratio*, *isotopy*, *character*, *musical gesture*, etc. Grimalt's answer seems to be a solid study of the history of each term. The author shows a detailed knowledge of the related publications and offers a summary of the different terms that each author has used, arranged chronologically, which places his discourse within a dialogic process, in which different people give arguments based on claims of validity rather than power.

The work is part of the collection *Numanities*, edited by Dario Martinelli. The author claims Musical Signification as part of the (new) Humanities, with an implicit philosophical and political background. In his own words: "By humbly giving words to the ineffable, irreducible musical experience, the reflection on music's expressive meanings has the tremendous ambition of making the world more human, less cruel and unjust." (Grimalt 2020, xv). The book can be purchased through Springer's website as a digital or hard copy, and in major bookstores and digital platforms. The price of the hard copy, hardly accessible to students, conflicts with the pedagogical intention expressed by the author, and can only be overcome thanks to a powerful distribution task by Springer. The book is available for lending in the libraries of most Conservatories and Public Libraries world-wide.

References

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