

Fifty Years Off-key: A Map of Musical Semiotics from the Italian Perspective*

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Summary. Music has always been a problem for semiotics to the extent that the semiotics of music (music semiotics or musical semiotics) is the most neglected among the so-called “applied semiotics”. Therefore, this paper first exposes how music presents a series of theoretical challenges to the verbally and visually-oriented semiotic episteme. Subsequently, it highlights the pivotal role of Italian scholarship in the field, from the 1970s to the 2020s. A foundational figure is Gino Stefani (1929–2019), a pioneer of the semiotic analysis of music who operated in Bologna under the auspices of Umberto Eco and propitiated a fertile collaboration between musicology, musical pedagogy, popular music studies and semiotics.

Keywords. Italy, linguistics, musical semiotics, musicology, popular music studies

Zusammenfassung. Musik stellte schon immer ein Problem für die Semiotik dar. In der Folge ist Musiksemiotik die am meisten vernachlässigte Disziplin innerhalb der so genannten „angewandten Semiotik“. Dieser Artikel zeigt zunächst auf, inwiefern die primär sprachorientierten semiotischen Episteme durch die Musik vor eine Reihe theoretischer Herausforderungen gestellt werden. Anschließend wird die zentrale Rolle der italienischen Forschung beginnend in den 1970er Jahren bis in die 2000er auf diesem Gebiet beleuchtet. Eine Schlüsselfigur ist Gino Stefani (1929–2019), ein Pionier der semiotischen Musikanalyse, der in Bologna unter der Schirmherrschaft von Umberto Eco arbeitete und eine fruchtbare Zusammenarbeit zwischen Musikwissenschaft, Musikpädagogik, Populärmusikstudien und Semiotik förderte.

Schlüsselwörter. Italien, Linguistik, Musiksemiotik, Musikwissenschaft, Populärmusikstudien

1. Music and semiotics

1.1 *The semiotic need for difficult things*

It is quite common to think that music raises quite peculiar questions with respect to semiotics, the theory of signification. As Italian philosopher of language and semiotician Ugo Volli, an early collaborator and friend of Umberto Eco's, puts it:

The analysis of musical texts and systems stands as one of the most difficult fields for semiotics, to the extent it would constitute in some ways almost a challenge to the possibility of extending its concepts in a homogeneous way to all forms of expression. It is true that many of the typical notions of the discipline have been applied to the analysis of musical texts, however in many cases one can have the feeling that such applications may be far-fetched or that there is no more than a vague resonance between how these notions work in the original context and how they would work in the musical one. The difficulty with which the elaboration of more founded and convincing methodological perspectives was finally reached therefore seems to reveal how specific the problems of music as a subject matter to be studied in a semiotic fashion are (Volli 2003: 264).

It was not easy for semiotics to apply itself to musical materials. From the founding essay in which Belgian linguist, semiotician and musicologist Nicolas Ruwet (1966) had tried, in his opinion for the first time, to endow musicology with a rigorous method (applying a mixture of linguistic structuralism and generativism)¹, up to today, the history of musical semiotics is a story of attempts, adjustments, stretches and idiosyncrasies. Musical semiotics feels like a musician who has been trained on a keyboard being forced to apply their musicianship to a wind instrument.

If one were to open a manual or anthology of semiotics and scroll down the table of contents, one would see no trace of music. There are a few exceptions: the aforementioned Volli (2003), for instance, and Bernardelli and Grillo (2014). Music has its own place in the encyclopedic volumes that reconstruct the history and subfields of the discipline (Nöth 1995; Trifonas ed. 2015) and in those that deal with the semiotics of music among the so-called “applied semiotics” (Calabrese and Mucci 1975; Stefani and Marconi 1991). Still, musical semiotics seems to have been unable to go beyond the role of a minor, extremely specialised subsidiary. A semiotician who could be called a “music semiotician” because they dealt mainly with music has certainly studied other things as well (literature, cinema, advertising, painting, etc.); on the contrary, it is not common to find a semiotician involved principally with literature, cinema, advertising, painting, etc. who has also dealt with music. Music seems to stand as a kind of separate field; a different, difficult, and problematic subject for semiotics which, after all, remains outside its canon. Unlike other areas, such as literature, visual art or advertising, music does not seem to have ever been taken into great considera-

tion in the definition of what has been called “general semiotics” which, proceeding from its structuralist origins in the 1960s up to the affirmation of sociosemiotics in the 1980s, could be considered the “standard” or “mainstream theory”.²

If semiotics has a problem with music, if music is a problem to semiotics, the causes do not lie with music but rather with semiotics itself. And if semiotics wants to stand as a scientific discipline or disciplinary perspective capable of saying something meaningful about phenomena that are meaningful to us, it simply cannot consider such an important area of human life as music to be an “exception”. As Eco often suggested, starting with the early aesthetological masterpiece which anticipated his actual semiotic turn, *The Open Work* (1962), a theory of literature, a theory of translation and a theory of language that neglected the existence of something – different, difficult, and problematic – like James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* would not be legitimately authorised to call themselves “theories”. In other words, the exception must be made into the rule. Music would become a new semiotic wake, a new object capable of keeping semiotics awake. If music does not fit the traditional semiotic grids designed upon verbal language, we may imagine a semiotics re-conceived so as to include under its domain those objects which were the old exceptions within a system that had such a vivid focus only due to its narrow scope. The semiotic interest of semioticians for music is thus explained musically, since they are interested in music but, above all, semiotically, as they are interested in semiotics.

Music semiotics is difficult because it is necessary, and vice versa. Its origins date back to the moment when the idea first arose that a given music could be detached from a strictly functional value: we could conceive not only liturgical, court, theatre or dance music – music composed and played to pray, have a banquet, set up a show or dance – but also music to be listened to. Towards the end of the Baroque all arts started becoming emancipated from sociocultural needs and music slowly reached the status of an autonomous practice; this ideology was magnified by the romantic aesthetic and then the 1900 Modernist avant-garde proposing the idea of “art for art’s sake” and, in particular, “absolute music”. Music’s meaning was no longer tied to its pragmatics as liturgy, ceremony, show or dance, but could simply be activated through listening. This is when music semiotics was born *in nuce*: a discipline dedicated to explaining the meaning of something that was no longer self-explanatory.

1.2 Music as a semiotic problem

As anybody involved in it in any possible sense knows perfectly well, music is a knotty issue. Music represents a problem, because it presents us with a dilemma: that of meaning. We should not ask “what” sense it makes but rather “how” it does so, seeing that it always balances the two distinctive features which make it comparable to the sense of smell: its impregnabili-

ty and its capacity of communicating sensations, emotions, atmospheres, places, images and stories with surgical precision. Music is a big semiotic problem, since semiotics has always dealt with it as if it were a big problem. As a matter of fact, the semiotics of music is the most neglected among the so-called “applied semiotics”, a term coined around the mid-1960s, when Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco started getting involved with mass culture and Christian Metz with cinema. The semiotics of music developed in a parallel way to the general theory of signification, in a heterodox way in comparison to other applied semiotics and, internally, in the most inhomogeneous way. Indeed, there is no such thing as “the semiotics of music” in the sense in which, on the contrary, we may identify a “semiotics of painting” or “of advertising”; at most, we can identify different “possible semiological projects”, to quote Jean-Jacques Nattiez (1988: 186), who was principally responsible for the introduction of “musical semiology” within music studies, in the climate of so-called “New Musicology”. There is the paradigmatic-stylistic analysis of the neuter level elaborated by Nattiez (1987; in the footsteps of his masters Ruwet and Jean Molino). There is a group of scholars who stress the narrative component of music, mainly but not exclusively in the footsteps of Greimas (Tarasti 1994; Samuels 1996; Almén 2008; Grabócz 2009). Others focus on music as gesture and embodied metaphor (Lidov 2004; Hatten 2004). Others on the notion of “topic” (Agawu 1991; Monelle 1992). There is the inter-objective comparison of “musemes” (a neologism coined by Charles Seeger on the model of “morpheme”) elaborated by Tagg (1979) as the methodology for a “semiotic musicology of the mass media” (Tagg and Clarida 2003). Other scholars developed a Peircean, cognitive-interpretative perspective (Martinez 1997; Cumming 2000; an approach pioneered by Coker 1972). And there is the pragmatic musical competence model elaborated by Stefani (1982; see *infra*).³

Most of the aforementioned scholars are not exactly semioticians who dealt with music, but rather musicologists who pursued the semiotic way. In fact, the semiotics of music has historically been more the concern of musicologists than that of semioticians, with the fundamental difference that semiotics considers music as carrying meanings, whereas 20th Century musicology is formalist, following the path originally traced by Eduard Hanslick; as such, as a kind of minor branch of musicology, the semiotics of music has been suffering from what we may call “scorecentricism” (an ideological focus on the score), with the side effect of analysing not sounds, but graphic signs: the black dots on the pentagram which represent the visual translation of music. This fight between semiotic thinking and musicological tradition is clear in Nattiez (1975; Nattiez ed. 1971, 1975), Nattiez, Paioni and Stefani (eds. 1975) and Stefani (1973, 1976, 1985b).

The problem of music’s meaning has always been an issue of translation from one semiotic material into another. On the one hand, the difficulties in approaching the object derive from its peculiarities, its proverbial ineffability (Jankélévitch 1961) and its unclassifiability in terms of linguistic signs: for Peter Faltin music has no referent, for Ruwet it is asemantic, for

Émile Benveniste it has semantics but is not semiotic (i.e. it is not a biplanar system), for Marcello Pagnini there are “places of homological integration” between the two systems of language and music. For Claude Lévi-Strauss, the founder of structuralist anthropology, who was deeply inspired by music, it does not present proper meanings and signifies in a “profoundly mysterious way”. Roland Barthes talked of “musical significance”, something different and more elusive than “musical signification”. One of the crucial points of the semiotics of music is actually external to proper semiotic discourse: the ontology upon which the semiotic discourse builds at all. As pointed out by Volli

The field of musical semiotics is further complicated by the fact that – in a very similar way to what happens also to the semiotics of theater – one must distinguish between the written text (the score) and its performance, which is the true translation into musical fact (Volli 2003: 267).

Semiotics has long dealt with the issue of defining music in its own terms (a discussion of this metalinguistic quest can be found in Marconi 2012), but scholars have not been able to find an agreement, a solution which would not sound like drastic reductionism: “Music is the score”. So, on the one hand, there is the semiotic *impasse* due to music *per se*. On the other hand, such an *impasse* is due also to the discipline, to its predilection for verbal language, the “final metalanguage” (according to Benveniste) and “primary modelling system” (according to Lotman) focusing on which semiotics – at least in its linguistic, structural, generative European tradition deriving from Ferdinand de Saussure – has cohered and systematised itself. Even the homomateriality of music and the spoken word, both of which are made of sounds, can do nothing against this glottocentrism (the ideological supremacy of the word against all other semiotic systems) so that, in one way or another, we must confront the old question: “Is music a language”? Which would be, Noam Chomsky (2014) suggested, as if we were asking whether airplanes actually fly or submarines swim. Some authors propose overturning the perspective: Augusto Ponzio (and Lomuto, 1997), Lawrence Kramer (2002), Philip Tagg (2012), Daniele Barbieri (2020) and Guido Ferraro (2019) imagine a theory of signification that would be “musical” not in terms of being the passive application of principles that were originally conceived for a different semiotic matter to music, but rather a semiotics conceived on the basis of the semiotic matter of music itself. Italian music pedagogue Roberto Goitre (and Seritti, 1980) and Canadian musicologist David Lidov (2004) went further, asking themselves: “Is language a music”?

As pointed out by Eero Tarasti “oddly enough, few of the great semioticians have said anything about music as a sign” (2002: 4). Basically, Louis T. Hjelmslev, Algirdas J. Greimas⁴, Jurij Lotman and Umberto Eco (but see chapter 2.1) did not deal with music in a theoretical fashion. Roland Barthes, who was also a skilled pianist, had great musical intuitions, but never organ-

ically developed them.⁵ There is not even an entry dedicated to music in the *Analytical Dictionary* edited by Greimas and Joseph Courtés (1979); or, rather, a short, partial and confused one was included in the second “experimental” volume of the dictionary, which was subsequently removed from the canon (Castellana 1986).

When it is not literally a blank space, musical semiotics is familiar with bad reviews. Whereas a philosopher of the phenomenological school like Giovanni Piana (2005) denies the very possibility of a semiotics of music (“Music is absolutely not a sign”) and an expert in musical aesthetics like Enrico Fubini (1987) judges semiotics fruitfully applicable only to the field of pop music, a media scholar educated in semiotics like Gianni Sibilla (2003) overturns this judgment and evaluates positively only the outcomes emerging from the semiotics of classical music. Given this axiological confusion, it is no surprise that 20 years after its first formalisations (after Ruwet 1972), one of the most prominent musical semioticians, Raymond Monelle, was to draw such bitter conclusions in relation to the progress of the semiotics of music:

The chief enterprise of music semiotics remains unfulfilled. The complaint of ethnomusicologists, that music analysis was based on a vague and impressionistic metalanguage, was to have been met by a scientific and universal methodology which would make it possible to describe and compare ethnic musics as linguists do with language. But with all the making-explicit of principles and criteria, there has been no single agreed and tested method for the description of music, and writers have still tended to confine themselves to discussion of one musical style only. Only Jay Rahn (1983) seriously tries to lay down a theory for all music, and his results are inconclusive. It is a lamentable failure for our study and perhaps shows that there is much still to be done (Monelle 1992: 327).

Beyond the formal, musicological and aesthetological issues, the status of music semiotics is similarly lacunose and confused. Lucio Spaziante, a semiotician interested in music as a communicative and sociocultural fact, underlines that the sociosemiotics of music is a very “little-traveled line of research” (2007: 13). In other words: communication scholars have paid scarce attention to musical communication. Which is paradoxical if we think, as Tagg reminds us whenever possible, of the number of hours per day in which we listen to music, whether incidentally or accidentally, in “direct” and, even more, in mediated form. Music is ubiquitous, to quote Anahid Kassabian (2013), but semiotics has apparently opted to be deaf to it.

Still today, in the era of TikTok – a video social platform born for do-it-yourself music videos – music is not a highly semiotised field, nor is semiotics a very musicophilic discipline. However, we can still learn something from the musical semiotic *impasse*, from the errors scattered throughout the last five decades of confrontation between “organised sounds” (as Edgard Varèse would say) and the “science of signs”. The way in which music signifies, the way in which we make sense of it by turning it into signs,

obliquely shed light onto the mechanisms of meaning-making that we have always conceived on the basis of linguistic texts. The postulates of general semiotics are of no exception for music; if anything, this is a field of investigation that osmotically forces semiotics to greater elasticity and greater accuracy at the same time. Jacques Attali (1977) claimed that “music is prophecy”: as a matter of fact, the horizon of today’s musical semiotics is by necessity entirely projected into the future. If this path proves as challenging as it promises to be, it will certainly be a long one to travel.

2. Music and semiotics in Italy 1970s to 2020s: a provisional outline

It is very difficult to try and map the fragmentary development of musical semiotics in Italy. Nevertheless, what this section will attempt to do is discuss a handful of leading figures, outline some tendencies and identify possible macro-thematic clusters. As we have seen, the contribution of Italian authors to the debate around the semiotics of music has been prominent; in particular, we have already addressed the theoretical contributions of Pagnini (1974), Goitre and Seritti (1980), Stefani (1982), Ponzio and Lomuto (1997) and Barbieri (2020) and we have already mentioned Sibilla (2003), Spaziante (2007) and Marconi (2012).

2.1 *Umberto Eco*

Eco (1932–2016) did not develop a proper semiotic theory of music nor did he encapsulate music organically in his philosophy of signs; nevertheless, he was a key reference who made it possible to start studying music and especially popular music in a semiotic fashion. His advocacy of the critical and scientific study of popular songs can be seen in his preface to the Adornian work by Michele Straniero, Emilio Jona, Sergio Liberovici and Giorgio De Maria (1964), later included in Eco (1964). An amateur musician himself (trumpet and recorder) and friend and close collaborator of Luciano Berio’s [see the four-handed work for magnetic tape *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*, 1958]⁶, Eco was strongly influenced by the avant-garde music produced in the context of the “Studio di Fonologia RAI” established in Milan by Berio and Bruno Maderna in 1955, in the definition of the aesthetics he would later call *The Open Work* (1962). While Eco was laying the foundations of contemporary Italian semiotics in his lectures at DAMS (the faculty of arts, music, and performance, in Bologna), Gino Stefani was contemporaneously doing the same – under Eco’s auspices – with respect to music semiotics.

2.2 Gino Stefani

Stefani (1929–2019, the stress is on the first ‘e’; pictured in Figure 4, along with Umberto Eco and Mario Baroni) is the musicologist who developed the most convincing theoretical proposal within the framework of a pragmatic approach to the semiotic issues of music (Middleton 1990: 244–247). Such pragmatic vocation was due to his primarily didactic-pedagogical interests.⁷ For Stefani (1982: 9–32)⁸ the meaning of a musical text is indeed rooted in its immanent level, namely in the sound itself, but it is somewhat overdetermined by the concrete usage that we make and, moreover, are able to make of music. Therefore, musical meaning would actually stem from the “knowledge, the knowing-how-to-do and the knowing-how-to-communicate” of all the subjects involved (musicians, listeners). The different levels of musical competence would constitute “extra-textual variables” that influence both the result of musical activities (playing, listening), as well as the possibility of making them objects of discourse (namely, constructing a metalanguage capable of verbalising musical experiences). Influenced by the typology of Eco’s codes, Stefani (1982: 13) identifies five levels of competence:

- General codes (GC [It. *Codici generali*, CG]): perceptual and logical schemes, anthropological behaviours, basic conventions through which we interpret any experience and, therefore, also those related to sound;
- Social practices (SP [*Pratiche sociali*, PS]): projects and modes of material or sign production, or, in other words, cultural institutions (language, clothing, agricultural work, industrial work, sports, shows, etc.), including also “musical” ones (e.g. concerts, criticism, etc.);
- Musical techniques (MT [*Tecniche musicali*, TM]): theories and methods more or less specific or exclusive to musical practices (instruments, scales, compositional forms, etc.);
- Styles (St [*Stili*, Sf]): related to epoch, genre, current, author, meaning particular ways of creating musical techniques, social practices and general codes;
- Opus (Op [*Opere*, Op]): specific musical oeuvres (symphonies, songs, etc.).

Depending on the listener’s level of competence, the musical text will produce different “layers of meaning”. Although the various types of competence are differently articulated and evaluated in different communities, it is possible to identify a “high competence” (it. *competenza colta*, lit. cultured competence), which

tends to engage in an appropriation of the work with sounds that is specifically and autonomously of the artistic-aesthetic kind, and therefore considers the Op level to be most relevant (Stefani 1982: 25–26)

and a “popular competence”, which

inversely [...] tends [...] to a global and heteronomous (‘functional’) appropriation of the work with sounds (Stefani 1982: 25–26).

When these two competences meet halfway, we can identify a “common competence”, the maximum extension of which is given at the MT level and narrows in correspondence with both GC and Op.⁹ The levels of competence identified by Stefani may be translated into prototypical sociological terms if understood as conditions of possible codified uses of music; let us think, for example, of the famous proposal by Theodor W. Adorno (1962: 3–25), who identifies six types of musical conduct (expert, intuitive, consumer, emotional, resentful, passive) based on choices, inclinations and tastes rooted in the degree of competence of the musical *datum* possessed by the listener. Albeit outdated in terms of metalanguage, with such an emphasis on the notion of “code” (elaborated by Eco and then replaced by Eco himself with the more elastic “encyclopedic model”), the theory proposed by Stefani (a self-admittedly “provisional” one; Stefani 1982: 27) is the only one that tried – bypassing the structuralist approach, but always within a semiotic framework – to give a systemic account of the pragmatic nature of the construction of musical meaning as discourse: a circulation of meaning between texts, practices and their metatexts.

Stefani’s writings on Baroque and liturgical music, music pedagogy, the relationship between music and pacifism, as well as on musicotherapy (in the framework of an approach that he would later define, along with his wife Stefania Guerra Lisi, *MusicArTherapy in the Globality of Languages* [it. *MusicArTerapia nella Globalit  dei Linguaggi*]) are pivotal. In the 1970s, along with Nattiez and, later (in the 1980s) Tarasti¹⁰, Stefani was the international promoter and spokesperson of the semiotic approach to music; a rich autobio(biblio)graphical commentary on the paths of music semiotics can be found in Stefani (2009). Like Nattiez (who transmitted his and his collaborators’ semiological sensibility to the music encyclopedia he edited for leading Italian publisher Einaudi, based in Turin), Stefani was a populariser of music scholarship as well (1985a). This component, the capability of using semiotics as a meta-perspective with which to frame music and give it depth, was taken up by his pupils so that, for instance, we can find it in the encyclopedia issued by *laRepubblica/l’Espresso* publishers and edited by Eco whose music section was scrupulously edited by Luca Marconi and Lucio Spaziante (Spaziante and Marconi eds. 2012).

2.3 Semiotics and popular music studies

In Bologna, while Stefani was teaching musical semiotics, Mario Baroni and Rossana Dalmonte, partners both in research and life, among the founding members of *GATM-Gruppo Analisi e Teoria Musicale* [Group for the analysis and theoretical study of music, Fig. 4] in 1989, applied semiotics to musicology maintaining a strong emphasis on formal analysis with the final aim of turning the discipline into the possible epistemology of a computational understanding of music (see Baroni, Dalmonte and Jacoboni 1999).

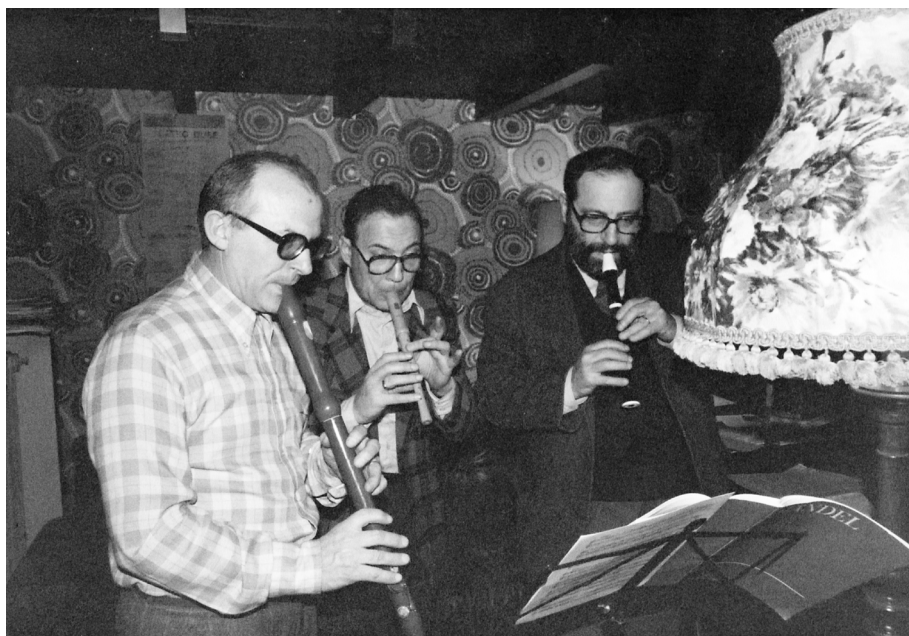


Fig. 4. Gino Stefani, Mario Baroni, and Umberto Eco (left-right) playing flutes at Mario Baroni and Rossana Dalmonte's house in Bologna, early 1980s. Courtesy of Baroni-Dalmonte.

The DAMS in Bologna, in the original venue in *via Guerrazzi*, and the offices of *Laboratorio Musica* [Music laboratory] (a monthly magazine edited by avant-garde composer Luigi Nono issued 1979–1982), between Florence and Rome, are where semiotics and popular music studies met, thanks to the meeting of Gino Stefani and Franco Fabbri, the former bearing the semiotic heritage of Umberto Eco and the latter the popular music scholarship of Philip Tagg. The project was to renew musicology from within, providing an alternative to the traditional, philological, historicistic, scorecentricist approach to music that would update the canon (by studying not only Art music but also phonographically mediated and non-Western music) and encompass both introversive and extroversive – formal and sociocultural –

meaning at the same time.¹¹ The genre theory proposed by Fabbri (1981, 1982, 2002) was strongly influenced by both Eco and Stefani; Fabbri's pupil Jacopo Tomatis (2019) published a monumental study on the Italian song that aimed at bridging the gap between formal and ideological analysis. Two of Stefani's pupils and collaborators, Roberto Agostini and the aforementioned Luca Marconi, among the earliest second-generation scholars (the first being Fabbri himself) in the field of popular music studies in Italy, translated and edited a collection of seminal writings by Tagg (1994), ranging from his classic analysis of the theme of the TV series *Kojak* to his later reflections on rave music.

Stefani's pupils and early collaborators also included Francesco Spampinato, Dario Martinelli, Johannella Tafuri, Maurizio Spaccazzocchi and Franca Ferrari. Whereas the others focused mainly on the relationship between musicology and pedagogy, Agostini, Marconi and Martinelli cultivated that between semiotics and popular music. Besides essays related to pedagogy (in the Stefanian tradition), Agostini published studies on cutting edge and emerging music phenomena (2002, 2008) as well as a short history of popular music studies in Italy (2006). Martinelli is an internationally renowned expert in the biosemiotic field of zoomusicology (2010) and, in addition to dealing with classic themes such as authenticity and ideology, he has gradually oriented his semiotic analysis towards multimodality and the audiovisual (2020). Luca Marconi (1960–2019) is a key figure of connection between different areas of music scholarship – music analysis, pedagogy, popular music studies, sociology (see Gasperoni, Marconi and Santoro 2004) – under the unifying umbrella of semiotics; fascinated by the theories of Leonard B. Meyer (1956)¹², Marconi (2001) studied the relationships between the body, emotions and musical forms, as well as an incredibly manifold series of topics, such as intertextuality (2006a), prog music (2006b), enunciation (2007), Italian singers-songwriters (2014a), etc.

2.4 From the semiotics of the plastic arts to the semiotics of music

Andrea Valle (a pupil of Gian Paolo Caprettini's in Turin – who in turn studied under D'Arco Silvio Avalle, among the founders of literary semiotics in the 1960s – and Eco's in Bologna), Guido Ferraro (an early collaborator of Caprettini's) and Stefano Jacoviello (a pupil of Omar Calabrese's in Siena, perhaps the most important Italian semiotician to deal with the semiotic analysis of painting), independently and ending up with very different solutions, all share the same theoretical intuition: a return to the Greimasian proposal of the semiotics of the plastic arts (originally conceived in order to deal with visual texts generally defined as abstract, in opposition to the figurative/mimetic ones), to free it from any specific substantialisation (plastic semiotics would not appeal only to the visual domain) and, on this basis, build up a semiotics of music which would not be subject to musicological ideology, metalanguage and tools.

Valle, an avant-garde composer himself (in the experimental, computational tradition of Iannis Xenakis), who scrupulously studied the heterodox semiography of music in the 20th Century (2002)¹³, proposed a “semiotics of the audible” (2004, 2015) rooted in Pierre Schaeffer’s acoulogy (the detection of a set of distinctive features of the audible domain), Jacques Fontanille’s somatic semiotics and Wayne Slawson’s theory of “sound color” (i.e. timbre); his interests are explicitly connected to technical and phonographic issues and, therefore, to the materiality of sound, so that his theoretical proposal has to be understood within the wider framework of a proper “semiotics of the sensory”.

Guido Ferraro is another Italian semiotician (along with Ponzio and Barbieri; the three authors share very little apart from this common theoretical elan) who has used music to rethink semiotics as a whole; albeit rejecting the definition of “plastic semiotics of music”, Ferraro provides what perhaps is the clearest application of this paradigm to the sound domain:

Music is [...] to be considered substantially ‘abstract’ in the sense in which we intend non-figurative painting to be: the iconic reference occurs on bases of a plastic nature, [...] rather than figurative (2007: 22).

In music Ferraro finds a more complex model of signification than verbal and visual language and the most prominent example of what he calls the “amodal bases” of narrativity (2015, 2017, 2019: 274–281).

Jacoviello, both a musicologist and a musician (he taught semiotics of music at the University of Siena), elegantly proposes a philosophical aesthetics articulated on the double level of immanent meaning (the only one judged pertinent in a structuralist perspective and on which, therefore, the author focuses) and the hermeneutics of cultural forms (pertaining to a properly sociosemiotic approach). More specifically, Jacoviello’s model (2012, see also 2009, 2011)¹⁴ is based on the centrality of the figural device: a “transparent” syntactic-semantic structure defined by the differential relationships between traits (phonic, rhythmic and timbral) and configurations of traits (phrases, rhythmic configurations, synchronic [i.e. chords] and diachronic [modes] harmonic configurations) on the musical expression plane, a structure that acts like a synaesthetic conductor of the semantics of all the different object-semiotics at stake (e.g. the voice, conveying linguistic meaning via the lyrics in opera and song, and the instrumental musical part) and that opens to the discursive dimension (in the proper sense of the Greimasian generative trajectory of meaning).¹⁵

2.5 Media studies, sociosemiotics, and other lines of research

Media scholar and music journalist Gianni Sibilla (2003), a pupil of Gianfranco Bettetini’s (among the founders of the semiotics of the audiovisual and cinema), mapped the media narrative of pop through its six interlaced plac-

es (song, live performance, press, radio, iconography and audiovisual, digital media) in what is perhaps the best introductory book to date in the field. Mara Persello (2003), a pupil of Francesco Marsciani's (himself a direct pupil of Greimas's), analysed the glam genre and form of life. Paolo Peverini (2004), a pupil of Isabella Pezzini's (another scholar in the direct lineage of Greimasian scholarship), analysed music videos (before the YouTube era that started in 2005). Lucio Spaziante, a pupil of Eco's and Paolo Fabbri's (who himself sporadically wrote about music, mainly free jazz)¹⁶, proposed – among other things – a semiotic reflection upon sound design (Spaziante 2009, 2013) and extensively applied sociosemiotics to popular music textualities (genres, live performances, videos, song structures; 2007) and icons (2016). Claudia Attimonelli (2008), a pupil of Augusto Ponzio's and Patrizia Calefato's from the Bari school, mainly dealt with electronic popular music and, in particular, techno, using a critical and culturological approach. Three collective resources may help map the musical sociosemiotic field: Dusi and Spaziante (eds. 2006, focusing on intertextuality and remix culture), Calefato, Marrone and Rutelli (eds. 2007) and Pozzato and Spaziante (eds. 2009); the first two also enjoy the advantage of being freely downloadable from the official website of AISS, the *Italian Association for Semiotic Studies*.¹⁷ Marrone (ed. 2005) develops a strong sociosemiotic hypothesis concerning the mutual translation between different semiotic regimes such as psychotropic substances on the one hand, and arts (literature, cinema and music) on the other.¹⁸

Francesco Galofaro, a pupil of Eco's and Marconi's (close to Marsciani's ethnosemiotic approach as well), has always dealt with the issue of meta-language in semiotics and, besides specific analyses (mainly of classical or contemporary composers), has kept this perspective also with regards to music, conceived spatially (2004) and semi-symbolically (2013).¹⁹ Claudio Paolucci, a pupil of Eco's, who, among other courses, teaches semiotics of music and audiovisual languages at the University of Bologna, has tried to epistemologically bridge the gap between the structural and interpretative traditions of semiotics, and between semiotics and (post)-cognitive sciences, integrating – as pivotal – the role of music in meaning-making processes – with Pink Floyd's song *Wish You Were Here* as the main case study (2020: 285–356) – within his systematic rethinking of enunciation theory as impersonal, following a path traced by Gustave Guillaume (and then Gilles Deleuze), in opposition to the traditional approach that Greimas retrieved from Benveniste, modelled upon face-to-face dialogic communication. Pierluigi Basso, a pupil of Paolo Fabbri's specialised in visual and audiovisual semiotics, has not explicitly dealt with music semiotics but for several years ran a website dedicated to music criticism (*orfeonellarete.it*, online 2000–2021) and integrated music within a more general reflection upon semiotic aesthetics (2002: 412–415). Michele Pedrazzi, a musician and media artist, has mainly dealt with sound studies (2007) and jazz improvisation (2008). Emiliano Battistini, a guitar player as well, who obtained his PhD in semiotics within the Palermo group (led by Marrone), has main-

ly dealt with the semiotics of minimalism (with Cristina Cano, 2014) and sound studies (with Patrizia Violi, eds. 2020). Gabriele Marino, also an amateur drummer, who obtained his PhD in semiotics within the Turin group (led by Ugo Volli, Guido Ferraro and Massimo Leone) and teaches semiotics of music cultures at the University of Turin, has mainly dealt with the relationship between music and writing (2011) and, relying upon Jacoviello's proposal (within the framework of a critical analysis of the history of music semiotics), with enunciation theory applied to phonographic music and with the system of musical genres (2020). Michele Dentico, who published a book about fandom in a different realm to music (football; 2020), as a PhD within the Rome group (led by Pezzini) is currently (as of March 2022) working on the spaces of consumption of electronic popular music.

Notes

- * This article is dedicated to Italian music semiotician Luca Marconi (1960–2019). The author wishes to thank Ivano Cavallini, Gianfranco Salvatore, Christian Zingales, Ugo Volli, Gianfranco Marrone, Roberto Agostini and, most of all, Tiziana Migliore (for her patience) and Stefano Jacoviello (for his trust). Due to old ideological issues, the semiotics of music – and especially the Italian branch – is at risk of disappearing (e.g. even the most important books in the field are no longer available and hard to find in libraries): it is not rhetorical for me to say that it is an honor to try and give my own own contribution to its memory and, thus, survival. All translations from Italian into English are by the author.
- 1 “Generativism” as in Noam Chomsky’s linguistic theories. On music semiotics as “systematic musicology” see also Stefani (1974).
- 2 This theory that we may provisionally call “standard” or “mainstream” would coincide with what we generally call the “semiotics of the text” or “textual semiotics” (which would include the “generative trajectory of meaning” as elaborated by Algirdas J. Greimas), with key integrations – not unproblematic on the epistemological level – from the theory of “cooperative interpretation” as elaborated by Umberto Eco. By “sociosemiotics” (not to be confused with the “social semiotics” of M.A.K. Halliday) we mean the developments of the structural-generative semiotics elaborated within the Paris School which coagulated around Greimas (prominent figures were Jean-Marie Floch, Eric Landowski and Jacques Fontanille) that aimed to rediscover Ferdinand de Saussure’s “prophecy”. Saussure imagined a “semiology” yet to come that would study “the life of signs in the framework of social life” (semiology would include the study of linguistic signs, namely synchronic linguistics, and would in turn be included within social psychology). Sociosemiotics is a critical discipline in the Kantian sense (that is, it is interested in reconstructing the conditions of possibility of sociocultural phenomena); it studies “discourses” (a dimension of what Hjelmslev defined as the “content plan” that goes beyond the substance of manifestation; e.g. “music discourse” is made of musical sounds themselves but also metatexts – people talking about music – and the practices related to music production), and has often been defined as “spectacular”, because it

studies the forms with which society presents itself as spectacle through cultural products (sociosemiotics studies how a given culture self-represents itself). This approach was anticipated, in the 1960s, by the “critical semiotics” (in a Frankfurt School-like sense) of Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco and Ferruccio Rossi-Landi. Here we do not distinguish sharply between sociosemiotics and the semiotics of culture, as later outlined by Jurij Lotman. Landowski (1989) is generally considered the manifesto of sociosemiotics. In Italy, two important references for this area are Marrone (2001) and Ferraro (2012). For the application of the sociosemiotic approach to music, and especially pop music, see Spaziante (2007).

- 3 For a synthetic review of the main theoretical positions see the classic *Handbook of Semiotics* edited by Winfried Nöth (1995). For a more in-depth critical reconstruction of the issues of musical semiotics see Stefani (1985b), Marconi and Stefani (eds. 1987, being a reader), Nattiez (1988), Monelle (1992), Agawu (1991), Tarasti (2002), Sibilla (2003: 81–96), Marconi (2012) and Fabbri (2014).
- 4 But see Greimas, Castellana and Maluli Cesar (2017).
- 5 Barthes wrote about music outside the rigid structural methodology he had contributed to founding (Jacoviello 2018), opening the path to sound studies (the grain of the voice, the Kristevian feno- and geno-song; Barthes 1972), enactivism and embodiment (the somathemes; Barthes 1975) and popular music studies (Laing 1969: 194–196). Some commentators (Ponzio, Calefato and Petrilli eds. 2006) argue that Barthes’s interest in music is actually the basis of his semiotic approach.
- 6 Among the first published editions of the piece, one can find: Luciano Berio (1967). *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*.
- 7 Worth mentioning here is Boris Porena, a composer and musical pedagogist close to Stefani due to the mutual respect stemming from one same pedagogical goal: to “enhance people’s basic music skills” (Stefani 2009: 13). Porena reflected a lot upon the new ontology of music determined by phonography and proposed the idea – whereas most music scholars at the time still considered the record a mere box in which to stock music (e.g. Maselli 1972: XI) – of a “properly productive use of the record, an opportunity for processing messages at a metalinguistic level” (Porena 1975: 197). In other words, Porena talked of electroacoustic music in the terms that Floch’s axiology would define as “mythic”.
- 8 An English translation of the theory is Stefani 1987. In Italian, see also Sibilla (2003: 89–90), Marconi and Stefani (eds. 1987: 32–35) and Jacoviello (2012: 137–160).
- 9 Stefani 1976 (104–105) had already defined a “high” and “popular code”.
- 10 Worth mentioning here is Italian-Swiss Costantino Maeder, a collaborator of Tarasti’s educated in Italian and comparativist studies who has authored and edited several books linking together historiographical approaches, musicology and semiotics.
- 11 The opposition between introversive and extroversive semiotics, namely “internal” (endosemantic) and “external” (esosemantic) meaning, was first proposed by Roman Jakobson.
- 12 Meyer’s perspective was influential also for Barbieri (2004, 2020), a pupil of Eco’s specialised in visual and poetry semiotics.
- 13 The English translation is Valle 2018.

- 14 For the sake of philology, it must be noted that Jacoviello (2011) is the English translation, adaptation, and update of an essay originally published in Italian in 2007 (the year of his doctoral thesis as well, to which we can trace back his theoretical proposal).
- 15 Like Ferraro, Jacoviello refuses the interpretation of his proposal as strictly tied to plastic semiotics (e.g. Marconi 2014b; Gecevičiūtė 2016).
- 16 See <https://www.paolofabbri.it/> [last accessed on 27 March 2022].
- 17 See <http://www.ec-aiss.it/biblioteca/biblioteca.php> [last accessed on 27 March 2022].
- 18 See also the thematic section of the AISS website dedicated to music: <http://www.ec-aiss.it/archivio/tematico/musica/musica.php> [last accessed on 27 March 2022].
- 19 Semi-symbolism being a notion coming from visual semiotics and, in particular, the semiotics of plastic arts.

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Image sources

Fig. 4. Left-to-right, Gino Stefani, Mario Baroni, and Umberto Eco playing Händel on flutes at Mario Baroni and Rossana Dalmonte's house in Bologna, early 1980s. Courtesy of Mario Baroni and Rossana Dalmonte.

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