Fondements d'une sémiologie de la musique
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As the subject of *Fondements* is relatively novel, a brief description of it may be useful to establish the terms of our review. Semiology interprets music as a system of "signs". It is a science with two categories of thought—the nature of the sign (anything from a Kagel nod to all Western music being eligible as a musical sign) and the nature of the sign-system. To discover valid signs, a taxonomic procedure is necessary. The most widely used procedure is paradigmatic, where "similarity" (that is, in the musical time-flow, "repetition") serves to define both the musical unity of the sign (its extent) and its relationship to other signs. Naturally this is a problematic procedure, for transformation rather than repetition is the most typical musical relationship. Semiology studies music-as-symbol, a synthetic object comprising three categories (achieved by a "tripartition"). Two of these are familiar from traditional theory (as object-created and object-perceived), and one is traditionally assumed—the abstract category which provides a level for analysis.

The paperback cover of *Fondements* shows the first two measures of *Tristan*, emerging from the brain rather than the ear, and having the misfortune to be turned on their side. For many musicians this may seem to symbolize musical semiology—abstraction in theory and distortion in analysis. Nattiez’s book, however, testifies to the wide interest in interdisciplinary thinking, and particularly to the impetus that modern linguistics has provided in music theory.

Nattiez aims at an audience of musicians and musicologists, psychologists, anthropologists and so on (p. 12). It may be that he underestimates musicians in worrying whether the terminology will be understood, and this is a significantly defensive worry in a book claiming to found a dis-
cipline. Even if they do understand, his inter-disciplinary goal is subject
to a primary condition: before he can pull the musician from an ivory
tower (p. 13), he must convince him that there will be a musical reward.

The book is described as a “synthesis” of recent views. This synthesis
is astutely criticized by Bernard Lortat-Jacob (MUSIQUE EN JEU,¹
No. 24, Sept. 76, Chroniques, pp. 104–07), who reviews both the rela-

tionship between musical semiology and linguistics, and the tripartition
which defines the object for semiological analysis, as well as taxonomic
method and its application to music by Debussy and Brahms, and Nat-
tiez’s critique of generative approaches. Lortat-Jacob’s account frees us
to discuss wider implications and specific problems of Fondements. Nat-
tiez’s article “De la sémiole à la sémantique musicales” (MEJ, No. 17,
Jan. 75, pp. 3–9) serves both as a summary of Fondements itself and as
some indication that the views of this fascinating study, which may well
become a classic if controversial text, are tenaciously held.

A book cannot hope to convey a multitude of equally central ideas, so
that the sheer variety of information and opinion in Fondements need
not embarrass the reader. There is a fundamental notion which must
justify the whole investigation. This is the tripartition (p. 50ff.) of “sym-
bolized” (that is, used and therefore in some way evident) artistic phe-
nomena into a poetic (roughly, creative) level, an “aesthesic” (percep-
tual) level, and the crucial neutral level.

Nattiez uses the word “aesthesic” (esthésique) on the basis of its
etymological purity (p. 52): it means “the faculty to perceive”. But its
full meaning is the faculty to perceive the external world by the senses.
This makes it more problematic for the tripartition, because it is hard to
see in what way the poetic level can antedate the aesthesic or be inde-

pendent from it. Presumably “neutral” (with its negative connotation,
originating referentially rather than intrinsically, as “not either”) is
eytymologically acceptable because “possible confusions” (see under L’es-
thésique, p. 52) are to the advantage of the symbolic divisions, suggesting
the notion of an independent substantial level for analysis.²

The tripartition is culled from the work of Molino (see “Fait musicale
et sémiole de la musique”, MEJ, No. 17, Jan. 75, pp. 37–62, in par-
ticular sect. I. 4.3., pp. 46–49). Nattiez’s discussion returns to the concept
of neutral level time and again, and the third part of the book is a
“description” of it. But the concept has been hotly contested. Perhaps
the most important reservation is made by Ruwet, who points out that for
a theory to be productive it must be susceptible to falsification (“Théories

¹ Hereafter referred to as MEJ.
² Here we will use “aesthetic” throughout.
et méthodes dans les études musicales . . .”, MEJ, No. 17, Jan. 75, pp. 11–36: see sect. 2, pp. 16–19). The careful arguments in the confrontation between Nattiez and Ruwet might indeed be characterized as an opposition of dogma and hypothesis. It has yet to be shown that the tripartition is a theory in the sense in which Ruwet defines the word. Fondements does little to remove it from the gnomic code of musical perception.

In theory this could count against Nattiez, but there is a practical value in dogma. This is clear from the theoretical work of Schoenberg and Schenker (neglected by French theory in favour of Riemann), which is not preoccupied with a definition of the musical reality under examination. Both would have been inclined to accept Molino’s tripartition. They would doubtless be less convinced that it is a hypothesis, except in the sense that all intellectual activity is somehow hypothetical. Nevertheless, the modern epistemological crisis—“what is analysis and of what is it the analysis?”—seems to have an origin in demonstrably seminal discourse of a traditional kind. In the well-known article “Brahms the Progressive”, Schoenberg is using something like the tripartition, opposing as he does “beauty” and “aesthetic effect” (which are in turn creatively and perceptually oriented) at the same time as analysing the source of these qualities (the immanent object at its neutral analytical level, which Schoenberg is happy to call the “music”). Nattiez cites Deliege’s acknowledgement of Schoenberg’s progress on the road to analytical taxonomy (p. 402), but neglects an examination of its partially articulated hypostatic basis.

This basis is a time-honoured problem in the study of Schenker’s analysis—a stretch of varied music may well be the prolongation of a simple musical phenomenon, but where is this process located? what is the background? If the questions which need to be answered in these and newer theories have an oppressive similarity, they might be put together. The generative manipulations of Schenkerian practice could be a testing ground for semiological theory. Nattiez discusses Schenker’s analysis as a generative theory, mainly through quotation of other theorists (Forte, Bent, Treitler, and Babbitt—see pp. 374–76 and ff.) : for some reason none of Schenker’s publications are listed in the bibliography. He complains that there is no preservation of sense in passing from background to foreground (compared with Chomsky’s grammatical analysis, p. 380). But it may be present in taxonomic classes he has not considered. For ex-

3 In Style and Idea (Faber, London, 1975, rev. ed.).

4 This can be compared with Nattiez’s suggestion that generative grammar serve as a validation technique for distributional analysis (p. 105).
ample, he neglects Schenker's regulation of the generation of more elaborate structures by formal contrapuntal rules.\(^5\)

Such problems in the general thinking in *Fondements* may be inevitable, given that Nattiez chooses to offer more theory (often cited rather than original) than critique of theory. Even with specific ideas, however, he can seem to be more concerned with elaboration than with thorough scrutiny. His comments about Gardin's validation tests (cited on pp. 391–92) are an illustration. The issue here is a common concern—that of the nature of analytical metaphor. Two of the tests are:

Le test de *pertinence*: le métalangage utilisé permet-il, appliqué à d'autres œuvres, de mettre en évidence la singularité de l'œuvre étudiée?

Le test de *simulation*: le modèle permet-il d'engendrer des pastiches présentant les mêmes propriétés que l'œuvre en question?

(The *pertinence* test: does the metalanguage used allow the singularity of the work under study to be made clear when it is applied to other works?

The *simulation* test: does the model allow the generation of pastiches showing the same characteristics as the work in question?)

To combine them is not a simple procedure, for they are designed to show on the one hand properties which make the work unique and on the other properties of the work which may be reproduced in pastiche. This implies that properties of uniqueness (*pertinence*) reappear in pastiche (*simulation*). Should the pastiche itself pass the pertinence test? If so, “singularity” must entail the paradigm—work/model/pastiche. However Gardin's ideas are understood, Nattiez's comment (p. 393) that the simulation test can be only approximate (and might better be called a “quasi-validation” test) strips the tests of their combinative theoretical interest. In the absence of a practical demonstration of “quasi-validation” it is hard to see what purpose this serves.

Whatever may be the theoretical difficulties of semiology, the vital test is its analytical application. Molino praises the discipline for having proposed an analytical procedure which can be applied equally well to a Yoruba melody, a fourteenth-century *Geisslerlied*, *Pelléas*, Brahms, and Xenakis (*op. cit.*, p. 53). But breadth and depth of analytical theory are often in inverse proportion, and on this basis the practical value of paradigmatic analysis has been widely questioned, not least by Ruwet himself.

\(^5\) Kassler, in conjunction with Babbitt, hoped to formalize Schenker's system. “A report of work, directed toward explication of Schenker's theory of tonality ...” (unpublished, Princeton University, Sept. 1974) was, unfortunately, incomplete. But the intention is significant.
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(since his pioneering work collected in *Langage, musique, poésie*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1972). Here we take as a case-study Nattiez's analysis of Brahms's Intermezzo, Op. 119 No. 3, noting first that Nattiez can be commended for choosing material somewhat alien to his native field (as suggested by Lortat-Jacob: see his review, *op. cit.*, p. 4n.).

The melodic analysis of the Intermezzo has flaws in the detail, mainly to do with transformations of the paradigmatic presentation (where similar "signs"—stretches of music—are grouped together). For example, if "A₃" on p. 307 (which gives the lower R.H. part from mm. 41–44) were written without its rhythmic notation, its melodic equation with "A" (p. 307, second staff) would be questionable (cf. lower R.H. part from mm. 45–48), especially in an analysis designed to function through the separation of rhythmic and melodic parameters. The two-note figures to the right of staves 3, 4, and 5 on p. 309 show the same problem (these notes are from the lower R.H. part in mm. 6³–⁴, 7⁶–⁸¹, and 8³–⁴). They are as much rhythmically as melodically related, the intervals of a 2nd and a 3rd being non-paradigmatic (that is, simply, they are not the same, and are no more similar, taxonomically or generatively, than a 2nd and a 7th). Note that on p. 308 these same intervals are defined as non-paradigmatic (top three staves, cf. mm. 53–55², top part: *Fondements* misprints D♯ for D♭ in m. 53⁸).

If these are small factors in the argument, they nevertheless show that Nattiez is accounting for the rhythm to some extent, so that it is not clear in what sense the "melody" is a parameter. He observes that the analysis is arbitrary because it deals with only the "melodic line" (p. 320): but this melodic line is itself not consistently defined. Has Brahms notated a "line" with separate stems? Not in mm. 33–34 (see "E" on p. 306). Is the melodic line an inner part? Not in mm. 37–40 (see "F" on p. 306). Nattiez suggests that the structures surrounding a parameter can be provisionally neutralized and left aside (p. 320). In practice, however, the emphasis should be on the continuity of neutralization.

In the harmonic analysis, Nattiez discovers an ambiguity in the opening measures, interpreting them in both C and A/a. This aspect is set apart from the analytical method, for the harmonic models are characterized by the choice of a tonic, a choice made on intuitive criteria. Nattiez is sensitive to the ambiguity of Brahms's harmonic procedure, but he sets himself above conventional intuition in assuming that this is a special perception—as if there were some proof that "the harmonic rhythm, our knowledge of Brahms and of tonal music of this period dictate ... a harmonic analysis in C" (p. 326). This is far from being evident. The analysis in C can only be provisional in the first five measures, and becomes progressively less tenable up to m. 13. It is not "dictated" but is a function of the scope of harmonic unity chosen for analysis (—the music may
well sound as if it is in C, but this is an aesthetic, not a neutral nominal operation). If a unity of twelve measures is chosen, because of the quasi-paradigmatic relationship: 1–12/13–24, the internal harmonic relationships are not tonally accounted for. And to consider the tonality as a function of the time-flow is to bring a given notion to the analysis, to adulterate the semiology by characterizing the sign-system in terms of a different system.

An ambiguity has been identified by Nattiez at both the melodic and harmonic levels. And he gives a practical use for this kind of identification:

Le niveau neutre, parce qu’il multiplie les possibilités d’organisation d’une même matière musicale, fournit une base pour rendre compte des phénomènes esthésiques [sic], et d’abord de l’interprétation [p. 327].

(The neutral level, because it multiplies the organizational possibilities for the same musical material, provides a basis to account for aesthetic phenomena, and first for interpretation.)

This follows the observation that different pianists select one or the other solution in expressing the ambiguities Nattiez has identified analytically in the opening measures of the Intermezzo. He regards it as a “considerable aesthetic phenomenon” (p. 326) that one interpreter stresses one variable (Klein, the melodic cell) and another a second variable (Katchen, the harmonic rhythm). The language makes such claims that it is fair to ask whether a decisive appraisal of aesthetic phenomena permits the semiotologist to consider only certain, privileged possibilities. Is it not feasible to play the music so that neither variable is stressed? Would this not produce a truly ambivalent expression of the ambiguous structure? The new concept of neutral level is being played off against an apparently received category of aesthetic operation called “interpretation”. But is “interpretation” a definitive concept? If Brahms’s music can be played without stressing either variable, has not a distinction been made between this performance (where the parametrical conflicts are not subject to an arbitrary expressive hierarchy) and “interpretation” (in the manner, according to Nattiez, of Klein and Katchen)? This is a continuing question for the practical musician, replaced in the semiological inquiry by an unnecessarily limited assumption (which jars against the frequent references to practical applications for semiological theory).

This line of thought leads back to the harmonic analysis, for there Nattiez has found a case of musical ambivalence. He proposes that “it is equally possible to imagine from the beginning an analysis in A, a tonal center at the same time major and minor” (p. 325). If there is, as Nattiez claims, an explanatory relationship between analysis and interpretation,
then here he has in principle taken account of performance with no
prominent variable—through an analysis maintaining properties which
are different but "equal" (the two possible tonics,6 and the two modes of
A). In other words, an implicit theoretical basis has been put forward
for a more subtle version of the concept "interpretation".

This basis for an aesthetic phenomenon, however, is itself suspect. An
analysis with A as a tonal center from the beginning of the Intermezzo
can only be "imagined": no traditional theory and probably no semiology
could show systematically that it is true as an alternative to the analysis
in C. The chords which the model in A (p. 325, second model) describes
as III and V of A at the beginning (and here firmly in the minor mode)
could refer diatonically to four keys (C, G, a, and e). If a longer term
analysis would allow some possibility of a tonicalized A (following an
ambiguous C)7 towards the end of the first twelve measures, this is still
a perception closed to the semiological proposition. A paradigm of signs
of an explicit signification might bring some abstract order to the com-
plex harmonic structure, but the question remains—by what criterion
should the harmonic unities be established?

At least Nattiez confronts the problem of unities to some extent, but
he never fully explains why it is essential to do so. Molino claims that
quarrels about this are false quarrels, that the nature of the unity is a
function of the level of abstraction (op. cit., p. 56). But it seems clear
that the point at which a harmonic unity (series of chords, progression)
establishes a tonal significance (higher harmonic unity, key) is not a
falsely privileged analytical level, but one of the most pertinent indica-
tions of what is characteristic of the music. This refers especially to
Brahms, and is in general relevant only to tonal music. But it may be that
any music has a hierarchy of pertinence, with certain unities in a priv-
ileged position. If not, it would be hard to account for the poetic level in
serial music.

Essentially, then, the harmonic taxonomy here is a formalized, intuitive
system. Nattiez shows nothing more revealing than would an analysis
based on the taxonomy of Schoenberg’s Harmonielehre or Structural
Functions of Harmony, and it is hard to see that Nattiez’s epistemological
tenets are more systematic or neutral in this case.

It is all the more disappointing, therefore, when the nature of the
discipline cramps normal intuitive sense. Ruwet himself can fall prey to

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6 Nattiez adds (p. 325) that there is a temptation to regard the analysis in A as
more satisfying: this he tries to justify by traditional harmonic theory.
7 Schenker started from just this kind of problem, the need to account not only
for the sequence of events but also their position. See his comments on initial
tonality in Harmony (MIT Press, Cambridge, 1973, paperback ed., trans.), e.g.,
p. 255.
this. His consideration of the opening of Mozart's Piano Concerto in E flat, K.271 ("Théories et méthodes . . .", op. cit., pp. 29–32) misses a vital perceptual grid—that of metrical discontinuity. Even at fairly objective levels of analysis (instrumental opposition and harmonic repetition, or quasi-repetition) it is easily maintained that the first six measures of K.271 are the misnotation of four measures of $3 \frac{3}{2}$. To ignore this (see Ruwet, ibid., p. 30) or to dismiss it as an uncultured perception (—once the piece is known through one hearing, can disbelief be suspended to the extent of hearing a $3 \frac{3}{2}$ the second time?) has sterile consequences: for one thing, the scope of the performer (who can easily convey a $3 \frac{3}{2}$ here) is limited by the theory for no obvious reason. By the same token, Nattiez ignores the striking quality of the "melodic line" in the Intermezzo at great cost to the usefulness of his analysis. First, there is no melodic parameter in the conventional sense. Whatever the melodic characteristic may be here, it is clearly to do with the interference between the top part (or parts) and the apparent melody in the middle of the texture: this is characteristic of other piano music by Brahms (e.g., Op. 117 No. 1) but not of all his piano music—a distinction which the semiology could not capture in Nattiez's usage. Second, the quality of the "melodic line" is an important structuration of the piece as a whole. If Nattiez's line can be generously regarded as the Hauptstimme, this becomes harder to discern after m. 55: a theoretical question suggests itself, if this is ignored—what makes the music stop once it has started?

The enormous scope of *Fondements* is indicated by its bibliography of over 250 items—a decidedly valuable feature of the book. As a final twist, however, a crucial part of the scholastic apparatus is missing. There is a glossary of linguistic terms—a rather demoralizing gesture, for even the strict mono-disciplinary musician will realize that a concept such as Saussure's classic distinction *langue*/*parole* can only be misunderstood from a nine-line summary.8 Unfortunately, though, there is no index. The effect of this can be imagined by the English-reading musician who contemplates an attempt to understand and to use, say, a non-indexed version of Meyer's *Music, the Arts and Ideas* or *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. Less serious is the lack of reference to text in the bibliography, but this too is an obstacle to the book's service as a foundation for the discipline.

8Nattiez realizes this problem (see p. 13), but fails to record in the glossary which specialized books should be consulted.