

Nattiez, Jean-Jacques. 1990. *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*. trans. Carolyn Abbate. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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Music and Discourse is a translation and revision of Nattiez's *Musicologie générale et sémiologie* (1987), which in turn drew heavily from his *Fondements d'une sémiologie de la musique* (1975). In addition to these sources, some of the text is adapted from articles published elsewhere, while some topics are completely new to this 1990 incarnation of Nattiez's ideas. As the first of a projected three-volume study, it lays the theoretical groundwork for the series, and opportunities for gritty analysis are usually postponed to a future volume. The present review attempts to evoke the content of the work as a whole, and also to consider in greater detail a few issues raised in it that seem particularly relevant to the field of cognitive ethnomusicology.

The book's Introduction explains the conceptual pillars of Nattiez's theory, and attaches names to the shoulders he is stepping on to move up toward the goal. Semiology, or semiotics, can be defined as the science of signs. Ferdinand de Saussure, working during the early part of this century, was among the first to elucidate that central concept of semiology, the *sign* (Saussure 1922). A sign is comprised of two entities, the *signified* and the *signifier*, which are related to each other through a process of referring (a process sometimes called *semiosis*). The signified is some real entity (physical object, idea, etc.) and the signifier is some representation

of or reference to that entity. Historically, semiology arose among linguists trying to come to terms with this process of referring in language. In more recent decades, semiology has also delved into other realms such as art and music.

Nattiez uses the ideas of C. S. Peirce to expand Saussure's classic formulation (Peirce 1931-1935). In Peirce's view, every signifier also in turn functions as another complete sign, which can be called the *interpretant* of the first sign. It becomes clear that every sign sets off a chain of interpretants. As a simple example, consider that someone may draw a picture (the signifier) of a real tree (the signified), and that another person may come along and use the word "tree" (a signifier) to refer to the picture (now the signified); of course, the word "tree" can refer to the actual tree at the same time. In other words, there is not a simple, linear relationship among signifiers and signifieds; rather, every sign is situated in an infinite, multi-dimensional web of interpretants.

Finally, Nattiez, following Jean Molino (Molino 1975/1990), erects the central pillar of his theory by distinguishing among *poietic*, *neutral*, and *esthetic* levels of semiotic analysis. (The spellings of *poietic* and *esthetic* are intentional, to separate them from the conventional meanings of poetic and aesthetic.) The *poietic* level deals with all aspects of the production of a piece of music, from the creative process to the act of writing down or remembering to the cultural milieu that influences the composer/musician. Analysis of the neutral level (*not* "neutral analysis", an ambiguous wording which got Nattiez in trouble before) concerns itself with the immanent configurations of the *trace*—the end result of the *poietic* process, i.e. the score and/or sound-object, "the music itself." The *esthetic* level deals with the "receiving" end or consumption of music, including perception, cognition, interpretation, and reception history. By examining these three levels in turn, the analyst can grasp music in all its multifaceted totality. "The *essence* of a work is at once its genesis, its organization, and the way it is perceived. For this reason ... [we] require a theory that deals with the practical, methodological, and epistemological results of this holistic vision of music. I shall call this general theory *musical semiology*" (ix-x). Elsewhere, Nattiez states that "the task of semiology is to identify

interpretants according to the three poles of the tripartition, and to establish their relationship to one another” (29).

The main benefit of carefully delimiting these analytical domains seems to be avoidance of unnecessary confusion when one makes inappropriate claims for one level based on analysis of another level. Analysis of the neutral level remains essential—it is the centerpiece of the whole semiotic process, a “foot in the door” to analysis of the poietic and esthetic levels. After all, the trace is the primary (but not the only) artifact whereby aspects of the poietic level can be deduced; it is also the necessary fodder for any study of musical perception and interpretation. Thus structuralist analyses are perfectly acceptable as long as it remains clear that it is the neutral level being analyzed, and that claims for the poietic and esthetic levels are not made before one has explicitly moved into those domains.

This three-tiered analytical structure—the *tripartition*, for short—would seem to suggest the classic scheme of communication theory, a straight line from producer to message to receiver. Nattiez, however, makes the shocking claim that “semiology is not the science of communication” (x, 15, 16). The idea that a producer “encodes” a message into the immanent configurations of a work, and that the receiver then “decodes” that message, is far too simplistic, especially in the case of music whose signs have no *semantic* meaning as such. First, it is not necessarily the case that a composer is capable of or even desiring of a perfect expression of his or her intentions in a configuration of notes. Second, each so-called “receiver”, far from being a passive vessel as the word implies, actively constructs musical meaning for him or her self. Each listener brings to bear different experiences and levels of musical sophistication, and may make interpretations that are entirely meaningful on an individual basis but which bear little relation to the poietic process.

After the Introduction which lays the conceptual groundwork, the first chapter (“The Concept of Music”) of the first main section of the book (“The Semiology of the Musical Fact”) explores how musical semiology as formulated here might illuminate various musicological problems. The first such problem is a huge one, namely “What is music?” Definitions vary and

even conflict according to which level of the tripartition is emphasized. Nattiez applies Marcel Mauss's expression *total social fact* to music in an attempt to encompass all three levels. For Western art music, Nattiez presses the point by considering cases on the margins of what is considered music, such as sampled and artificial noises in electroacoustic music, or aleatory and silence in the works of Cage. Consideration of the poietic and esthetic dimensions leads to the conclusion that "music is whatever [composers or listeners] choose to recognize as such, and noise is whatever is recognized as disturbing, unpleasant, or both. The border between music and noise is always culturally defined" (47-48).

Another perennial musicological problem concerns how to deal with cultures that have very different concepts of music from those of the analyst. The influence of cognitive anthropology on ethnomusicology has provided the impetus to investigate indigenous conceptions of music. For one example of a mismatch between a researcher's and an indigenous person's concept of music, Nattiez draws on his experience with *katajjaq*, the "Inuit throat-game" genre (Nattiez 1987). While the *katajjaq* displays many features that seem musical, Inuit women who participate in it conceive of it primarily as a game. Even so, a study of the sound components of the *katajjaq* as a musical fact (an analysis of the neutral level) is justified, because the sounds show definite patterns of organization and well-formedness from which poietic and esthetic processes can be inferred. A researcher need not be confined to what is unequivocally defined as "music," but rather should be free to investigate anything that seems "musical."

Even when informants' verbal reports are available, which in some cases can amount to a full-blown ethnotheory, an analysis of the neutral level using the tools of the researcher should not simply be discarded. Ethnotheory corresponds to the poietic level and therefore should be accorded its full significance, but it cannot take the place of an analysis of the trace. Cultural context and cultural articulations must be linked to and integrated with immanent sound configurations, since an entirely "emic" approach is simply not possible. Analysis of the trace using the researcher's own conceptual framework can and must serve as a starting point for a

comprehensive (three-tiered) semiological analysis. In this context Nattiez discusses, among others, the highly developed ethnotheories which Steven Feld found among the Kaluli of New Guinea (Feld 1982) and Hugo Zemp among the Are'are of the Solomon Islands (Zemp 1978, 1979). Nattiez revisits the issue later in the book.

A final musicological problem to which Nattiez addresses himself in this chapter concerns musical universals. If musical universals are to be found, they will certainly not be among immanent data. Any trait that appears universal is only hypothetically or probabilistically so, subject to new discoveries and to the revision of one's understanding of the music of the world's cultures. Further, "any characterization of something as 'universal' [depends] heavily on which of the object's traits are *selected* in a given analysis" (63). In other words, both the musical object and the musicological discourse about it are symbolic facts that must be interpreted according to semiological principles. Even if traits of musical objects from two different cultures seem identical on the surface, they cannot be considered the same if the producers—necessarily, by virtue of their culturality—conceive of them differently. Likewise, two musical producers in different cultures may be striving for an identical goal, but with very different results. "Since etically similar phenomena can be emically dissimilar, and etically distinct phenomena may result from the same emic categories, *universals can no longer be sought at the level of immanent structures, but in more profound realities*" (65). Those more profound realities are likely to be processes rather than structures, namely processes of production and perception (or poietic and esthetic processes) since these may be rooted in a psychology that is common to all humans. Nattiez credits John Blacking (1973) as one of the first to realize the universal implications of production (i.e. poietic) strategies for music. Nattiez believes that Blacking's famous "deep structures", despite the connotation of the phrase, are relevant to the poietic and not the immanent level. Nattiez also points to Leonard Meyer (1960/1971) as one of the first to think about universal perceptive (i.e. esthetic) strategies. Finally, Nattiez tips his hat to psychologist Dane Harwood (1976) for zeroing in on possible candidates for perceptive universals (e.g. generalization of the octave, grasping melodic contours, and others).

In the following chapter (“The Concept of the Musical Work”) Nattiez touches on some of the issues that arise when one attempts to precisely delimit the immanent level. He explores the physical and ontological existence of “the work” which is fairly (but not entirely) straightforward when considering the work’s manifestation as a score or as a particular performance, but which gets trickier when one deals with improvisation and oral traditions; issues of transcription arise with these latter two situations. Then, in “The Status of the Sound Object,” some specific ways in which analysis of the neutral level leads naturally into analysis of the poietic and esthetic levels are discussed.

The last chapter (“Musical Meaning: The Symbolic Web”) of the first main section is the most overtly semiotic. It begins to explore how, in Nattiez’s view, signs actually function in music, and how various approaches in philosophical aesthetics relate to the tripartition. Nattiez discusses various facets of intrinsic and extrinsic referring (or introversive and extroversive semiosis). In this context the idea of modal ethos from the ancient Greeks through to modern times are reviewed. This chapter begins down the fascinating road of symbolic functioning in music, but the bulk of the analytical work is, as usual, postponed to a future (as yet unpublished) volume.

It should be apparent by now that Nattiez has an ambitious and all-encompassing view of the domain of musical semiology—Western and non-Western music, oral and written traditions, theory and ethnotheory, cultural context, music perception and cognition...and so on, even including discourse *about* music, to which the second and final main section of the book (“The Semiology of Discourse on Music”) is devoted.

Among the many insights offered in the book, this one surely ranks among the most significant: discourse about music is a *metalanguage* which is itself subject to tripartite semiotic analysis. “An analysis in effect states itself in the form of a discourse—spoken or written—and it is consequently the product of an action; it leaves a trace and gives rise to readings, interpretations, and criticisms” (133). Historically, musical analyses have tended to align themselves with one pole of the tripartition and to assert the primacy of that pole at the

expense of the others. Rather than forcing a decision about the “best” style of analysis, the semiotic approach allows an ecumenical mindset in which every analysis has some validity within a certain pole of the tripartition, since analytical diversity is “the inevitable result of the symbolic nature of musical and analytical facts” (134).

It is important to understand the *analytical situation*, or the direction and degree of communication (if any) among the levels of the tripartition, of a given analysis. One must also understand that a single analysis can never examine all possible variables of a total musical fact; it necessarily makes choices (whether explicit or implicit) about which variables to isolate and bring to the fore, a process Nattiez calls *autonomization of variables*. Additionally, one should judge whether an analysis is non-formalized (e.g. impressionistic analyses, paraphrases, hermeneutic readings) or formalized (i.e. constructing models that attempt to extract the compositional rules from a given corpus of music). Nattiez believes that the semiological tripartition allows the scholar to strike a balance, albeit uneasy, between such humanistic and structuralistic styles of analysis.

Chapter 8 should be of particular interest for cognitive ethnomusicology because it contains a section dealing with “The Discourse of Musical Producers”, and with ethnotheory in particular. Nattiez cautions against both under- and over-privileging ethnotheory. Certainly indigenous articulations of how music should be created, performed, and heard are extremely valuable, but the informant’s word is not necessarily more “true” than that of an external observer. An informant’s knowledge of his or her own musical tradition is also mitigated by personal experiences and biases. An indigenous musician’s discourse about music, as a poetic element, is a piece of testimony that can inform, but at the same time must be cross-checked against, immanent analysis. “[I]n no case...should presentation of the musical ethnotheory think of substituting itself for analysis of the music. The indigenous discourse cannot cover all aspects of the musical fact; this justifies yet again the *necessity of undertaking an analysis of the neutral level*” (194).

Nattiez's view of the status of ethnotheory in turn informs his stance on the emic/etic distinction. One task of musical semiology is to "outline the nature of the relationship between the indigenous discourse and the researcher's discourse. It is a question of *dialogue*, and dialogue alone, for there can be no purely emic or purely etic analysis" (196). In other words, it is impossible for the researcher to view the world wholly through indigenous eyes (i.e. "purely emic"), while at the same time one cannot hope to conduct an analysis that is devoid of contextual influence (i.e. "purely etic"). Instead, the semiotician should situate both "insider" and "outsider" discourse with respect to the tripartition in order to integrate them into the web of symbolic functioning.

To conclude the book, Nattiez attempts a concrete demonstration of the foregoing principles by analyzing the (in)famous "Tristan Chord" (a harmonically ambiguous sonority that serves as a linchpin for Richard Wagner's music-drama *Tristan und Isolde*) and the subsequent voluminous discourse about it. A wide variety of analyses, dating from the time of the work itself through to today, have reached radically different conclusions about the chord's harmonic function, influenced largely by how each prioritizes the poles of the tripartition. Nattiez discusses the particular merits and deficiencies of each analysis, and finally presents his own preferred reading of the chord while not insisting that it is the only "right" reading.

The depth and breadth of thought in *Music and Discourse* deserves, and has received, a number of careful reviews among subsequent periodical literature, the majority of them in music journals of various stripes. The reviews selected for consideration here range in tone from laudatory (Town 1994) to downright scathing (Edwards 1992), and they manifest varying degrees of familiarity with and sympathy for the semiotic agenda.

A few of the reviews maintain a positive tone throughout, either because they are more concerned with content summary than with criticism, or because they find nothing to criticize. Pizà (1991) appreciates the epistemological savvy of Nattiez's tripartitional model because it attempts to take account of "an implicated knowing mind and a variable knowable phenomenon" (112). Massi (1992) attributes "a complete reassessment of music and language

about music” (1287) to Nattiez’s book. Town (1994) provides the most expository review, and it is therefore perhaps the best read for non-specialists who simply want to grasp the book’s salient features.

Samuels (1991) finds much of the book’s worth in that it helps elucidate many existing theoretical positions in musicology, as well as some of musicology’s intractable problems, by mapping them onto the tripartition (39). His main criticism, however, is that the neutral level of analysis, as “an impossible realm of contemplation of the musical work free from any sort of preconception and aware of all possible structures and configurations” (39), is a myth. Even if the neutral level is a methodological convenience rather than an epistemological necessity, as Samuels has Nattiez argue, it nevertheless separates Nattiez from “mainstream” semiology. Hatten (1992), himself a musical semiologist of some reputation and therefore sympathetic to the semiotic agenda, asserts the value of Nattiez’s contribution to the field, but at the same time he further clarifies the problem with the neutral level that was noticed by Samuels. “The neutral level is a theoretical fantasy” (Hatten 1992: 93) because the analyst, despite all attempts at rigor and formalism, will unavoidably be influenced by an awareness of the poietic and esthetic realms, and by his/her biases regarding elements in those realms. A neutral level may exist, but the analyst, as an embodied, non-neutral human, cannot grasp it. Hatten proposes a revised way of thinking about the central pole of the tripartition based on the Peircean concept of *abduction*, “the creative component of analytical reconstruction [that] lies in the formation of explanatory hypotheses” (94).

Since the neutral level of analyses can proceed from hypotheses, and presumably those hypotheses are developed with attention to their *potential* poietic or esthetic relevance, perhaps a better term for Nattiez’s neutral level would be ‘hypothetical level’ (Hatten 1992: 94).

Micznik (1992) guardedly praises Nattiez’s work, but makes a major objection to his statement that semiology (as he conceives of it) is not the science of communication. “The main merit of Nattiez’s model is its ambition to embrace within one encompassing methodology the various studies of music that have mostly been separated” (534). Micznik believes, however,

that Nattiez's anti-communication statement removes him from his foundations in Saussure and Peirce, whose discussions of signs are deeply rooted in communication theory. Micznik joins Nattiez in rejecting the *traditional* communication scheme (producer sends a coded message which is decoded by a receiver), but does not feel that this is sufficient grounds for his strong statement.

For most semioticians, communication (especially of an aesthetic object) is not dependent on whether the initial message has been captured intact at the other end, but rather on the sheer intention of communication embodied in the production of a signifying object and on the interpretive response it arouses in the addressee. [...] Once this is understood, Nattiez's claim that semiology is not based on communication would not have been necessary (Micznik 1992: 531).

The main complaint, among many, of Edwards (1992) is that Nattiez does not, or worse, perhaps can not, keep the tripartitional poles separate. Confusion reigns when "elements of the tripartition begin recurring on different hierarchical levels (the level of the work, the level of the metalanguage). [...] We may think it is hardly worth the effort to rigorously separate three components of the symbolic just to begin mixing them together again" (116-117). Nattiez's book demonstrates, in Edwards' view, that "if you have trouble thinking or writing clearly about music, semiotics will only compound your problems" (120).

As if to demonstrate the multidimensional web that is academic discourse, Agawu, whose own book on the semiology of classical music (1991) received a joint review with Nattiez from Edwards (1991), Micznik (1992), and Hatten (1992) (no doubt due to the close publication dates and nominally similar subject matter of the two books), wrote his own review of Nattiez (1990). Agawu characterizes the book as "an attempt to rethink everything (i.e. traditional approaches to musicological analysis) through once again in terms of the tripartition" (317), and as such it demonstrates the benefits of being theoretically self-conscious in this manner. A protest that is unique to Agawu among the reviewers concerns Nattiez's treatment of ethnotheory in Chapter 8, "The Musician's Discourse", where he "pours cold water on the concept" (319).

I hope that some day Nattiez will consider the political implications of some of his claims, especially when they pertain to non-Western musical cultures. For example, to state emphatically that 'It is a question of *dialogue*, and dialogue alone, for there can be no purely emic or purely etic analysis' (196), without taking note of the fact that, strictly speaking, there cannot be dialogue if researcher and researched do not inhabit the same politico-economic space, is to mock the researched (Agawu 1991: 319).

While these reviews make it clear that a consensus on the theories and methods of musical semiology is far from realized, it is also clear that Nattiez's is a powerful voice in the ongoing debate. That voice has relevance for many real-world, present-day musicological concerns. On a very general level, Nattiez provides a model for how various subfields and specialized interests within (ethno)musicology are related to and can fruitfully converse with one another. He also helps clarify certain thorny issues of special interest to cognitive ethnomusicology, such as musical universals, ethnotheory, and the emic/etic distinction—or at least provides hefty fodder for further chewing on these topics.

The present review cannot do justice to the full scope of Nattiez's careful consideration of others' ideas, but one can recognize that he manifests an intellectually ecumenical spirit, willing to distill the useful parts of anyone's theory (since no theory is *entirely* false, in Nattiez's view) while at the same time not shying away from pointing out grave conceptual problems in those theories. On the flip side, the reservations expressed by some of the reviewers cited here concerning Nattiez's ideas should not be lightly dismissed, either. Hatten's and Samuels' poignant attack on the neutral level bears weight. There does seem to be a contradiction, or at least a tension that needs to be addressed, between Nattiez's recourse to immanent analysis and his statement that there can be no purely etic analysis. Although Nattiez may be a little too insistent about the necessity of immanent analysis (especially in light of its questionable epistemological status), he thereby gives permission to indulge in structuralistic analysis without guilt—as long as one maintains an awareness of where such analysis fits into the larger scheme, and does not make inappropriate claims about its results. While Micznik's criticism of Nattiez's anti-communication statement is not necessarily misplaced, it seems to be aimed at a less-than-fundamental aspect of Nattiez's overall thinking. His particular insistence on this

point is new to the 1990 volume, and may be a reaction to prior criticism. It is a necessary, if somewhat overstated, way to distance himself from the simplistic *traditional* communication schema.

Nattiez's own view of the purpose of his theoretical enterprise is at once ambitious and humble: "Because it is a *program for analysis*, semiology takes up [various musicological] questions, and attempts to answer them with control and rigor—but not, of course, definitively" (178). Further than that, Nattiez makes some excellent, perhaps common-sense recommendations for analysis that should be taken to heart:

All analysis with a semiological orientation should, then, at least include: (a) a comparative critique of already-written analyses, when they exist, so as to explain why the work has taken on this or that *image* constructed by this or that writer: all analysis is a representation; (b) an explanation of the analytical criteria used in the new analysis, so that any critique of this new analysis could be situated in relation to that analysis's own *objectives* and *methods*... Making one's procedures explicit would help to create a *cumulative progress in knowledge*, and consequently the emergence of an analytical discourse that would be more satisfying, because it is more controlled (177).

The semiotic agenda might not seem so different from a "general musicological one, but this would not surprise Nattiez: "In some respects, musical semiology is not, in comparison to 'traditional' approaches, asking radically new questions... My musical semiology asks familiar questions about music" (178), but presumably in a new, theoretically self-conscious way.

As for Nattiez's *particular* brand of semiology, it is difficult to make a final judgment concerning its effectiveness without being able to weigh all the evidence, so to speak. Since the current volume lays only the groundwork for his semiotic theory of music, actual practical applications are sparse. It is therefore still difficult to grasp what his musico-semiotic analysis would actually look like; the last chapter, which attempts to serve as a concrete demonstration of the foregoing principles, is intentionally much more concerned with "discourse" than "music". At any rate, the impression one gets after reading this first volume is that Nattiez's musical semiology looks very different from other styles on the market, such as that of Eero Tarasti (1994). Perhaps Nattiez should not be faulted for planning this *magnum opus* as a tripartite publication, but instead for making his English readers wait so long for the next installment. A hardcore researcher will want to read his original French titles to fill this void.

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