

Memories of the body and pre-signity in music: points of contact between Existential Semiotics and Globality of Languages¹

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The transition to new semiotic models, other than Greimasian structuralism, can be counted among today's often interdisciplinary currents of thought and research. While Eero Tarasti, in the formulation of his Existential Semiotics, benefits from the suggestions of certain philosophical orientations in order to breathe new life into semiotics, Gino Stefani and Stefania Guerra Lisi, in the context of the Globality of Languages,² refer to psychophysiological models to examine phenomena of communication and expression. These two semio-aesthetic paradigms, however, find common ground in a shared intention to move beyond "semiotics of rules and grammars" (cf. Tarasti 2002: 126). One particular aspect of this convergence will be examined in this text: the proximity between the notion of "pre-sign", such as it is formulated by Eero Tarasti in the works *Existential Semiotics* (2000) and *Signs of Music* (2002), and the notion of the "psycho-affective memory of the body", proposed by Stefania Guerra and Gino Stefani (2004, 2006).

1. Synesthesia, memories of the body and semiosis

The conjunction that we would like to propose here thus goes in the direction well illustrated by Eero Tarasti in his description of the passage from classical semiotics to the new semiotics: the latter are primarily interested in the signification which precedes the formation of rules, and follow a chain of "pre-signs" which are related to the gestural and the emotional.³ For Tarasti, the life of a sign is always in a state of becoming, and the "pre-interpretant", or "pre-sign", is the first step of this life. It precedes the production of a new sign, coming "before the formation of signs", before their "crystallisation" and their "concretisation".

The proposal of a notion such as the "psycho-affective memory of the body" by Gino Stefani and Stefania Guerra Lisi can, in our opinion, be included in this same opening of horizons. According to these authors, all intense experience will evoke bodily "memories", formed at a stage of prenatal life which lacks all sensory specialisation; during this phase of human development, stimuli, particularly of the tactile variety, are linked to all the other senses and to emotional states. These bodily "memories" would therefore be intersensory. "It is certain," write Stefani and Guerra Lisi, "that we pass from prenatal intersensory experience to post-natal experience, which, despite progressive hierarchised specialisation, retains *vicarietà*⁴ and connection, even if we focus only on a single sense" (2004: 271). Such a notion shelters us from the risk of moving beyond the frontiers of semiotics and entering into a "pre-semiotic" biological field: these "memories" constitute an "anthropological lexicon of traces", the elements of which function as "interpretants" within the process of semiosis. Their presence thus moves us from the mechanical biological relations of stimulus-response (which, in the terms of C.S. Pierce, would be merely "dyadic" and not semiotic) to genuine bodily "languages" (to "triadic" signic structures, and thus semiotics).

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² The discipline of the Globality of Languages, which was founded by Stefania Guerra Lisi during the 1970s, continues to be developed today by its founder and by Gino Stefani, and is applied by an international group of researchers. This discipline operates in the areas of research, education, entertainment and therapy on the basis of a psychophysiological semiotics and aesthetics (see, among others, Guerra Lisi 1987 et Stefani and Guerra Lisi 2004).

³ Cf. Tarasti 2002: 91–104 ; 124–126.

⁴ Substitutability by vicarious senses.

The “homological model of synesthesia”, developed in the *Globality of Languages* (Stefani and Guerra Lisi 2004: 261), plays a key role in the extension of the field of semiotics to psychophysiological phenomena. In this discipline, the bodily origin of all potential signification is virtually intermodal. Productions of meaning evoking different sensory modalities are here reinterpreted as so many derivations of a single foundation: a tonic emotional state capable of simultaneously activating all sensory modalities, as well as motricity. The connection between auditory experience and tactile, gustatory, motor or visual evocation would thus not be created by mere mental association, nor by a kind of “short-circuiting” of the senses, but rather by a “common matrix” from which the various manifestations of bodily experience would constitute the results of an articulative process. From this perspective, the eventual “*analogical relationships*” (similarities of forms) established, for example, between an auditory experience and a tactile sensation, recognisable through the use of the tools of componential semantics, are less important than the *homological relations* (identity of function, genetic and structural connection). Synesthesia would thus be a spontaneous and universal mental disposition, which develops already during prenatal life: its origins are in the intersensory modalities which are particular to the foetus, who has not yet developed specific sensory systems and experiences an equivalence between tactile pressures, autoplasmic images, and sounds amplified by the amniotic fluid. One example is the experience of musical “caress” and of “caressing” sounds. The origin of human affectivity and of the possibility of establishing an emotional dialogue with others is found in prenatal cutaneous stimulation. Sounds are perceived by the foetus in a tactile-pressive manner and invested with emotional value. For these authors, music is a “privileged vibrational envelopment” (2006: 19): in communicating and being communicated, it has enormous potential for contact. This explains the origins of metaphors relating to the “sonic gesture”: sounds are “caressing”, “hard”, “violent”, “penetrating”, “sharp”, etc. Music has the ability to awaken the pleasure of emo-tonic nuance and of the vibrational caress by reactivating these memories of the body.

When one takes into account the institution and learning of these equivalences (in the prenatal phase or in the successive phases of acquisition of sensorimotor schemes), one finds all the terms of Peircean semiosis. The sensory modalities of the foetus (in prenatal life) and the memories of the body (in prenatal and post-natal life) give birth to interpretants in order to establish connections between a certain signifying “sign” (a “representamen”, such as, for example, a cutaneous pressure, a whispered word, or the vision of a nuance of colours) and a signified “object” (for example a tonic and emotional effect such as that which is produced by a caress).

The verbal label (“interpretant”) connects the meaning (“object”) – in this case a listening experience – with the music (“sign”), which is supposed to have produced this experience in the listener. Although the cultural attribution of a verbal label makes the mechanism triadic, expressions of experience which are not culturally codified, not yet tied to labels, but simply *expressed*, will not be triadic without the bodily pre-sign. The possibility of defining meaning with the help of a codified label is thus not a determining factor for the process to be semiotic, as the expression of emotions is already semiosis, already triadic, before being set into a label. Furthermore, the interpretant, which functions as the trace of an experience, can also belong to non-verbal and less codified languages (for example, a drawing expressing the pleasure of the caress felt when listening to a piece of music). The determining factor in semiosis is that, *without the synesthetic memory of the equivalence between “sonic nuance” and “cutaneous nuance”, we would not have been able to feel the caress in the music*. There is thus a kind of “*pre-interpretant*”, as Tarasti would say (2000: 30), which functions as a guide for the apprehension of meaning and for the development of verbal labels, even if it remains latent with regards to the results of semiosis at work. The relation between “interpretant” and “pre-interpretant” is thus configured as the relation between the *trace* and the *track*; the latter is merely a primary trace which directs the attribution of meaning towards new traces (without, however, predetermining them in a mechanical manner).

Recent musicological trends have borrowed from other disciplines notions tied to amodal sensorimotor patterns and close to the concept of “body memory”: the “image schemata” proposed by the philosopher Mark Johnson (1987) have been applied to music by various researchers (cf., among others, Brower 2000 and Marconi 2001); the “vitality affects” studied by psychologist Daniel Stern (1985) have been taken up, for example, in the works of Michel Imberty (2005). In our view, these notions, although elaborated in different disciplinary contexts, can be considered to be *pre-signic tracks of signification*.

This model is doubly triadic, as the semiotic triangle is doubled by the pre-semiotic triangle. Such a model is likely to be related back to the model of the life of signs in three stages – “pre-signs”, “act-signs” and “post-signs” – proposed by Eero Tarasti in *Existential Semiotics* (2000: 33–34).

The various types of *amodal sensorimotor patterns* can be considered, in our opinion, as a particular category of pre-signs. In effect, they precede the phase of fixation of concrete signs (in other words, they precede the production of specific meaning connected with a listening experience): their formation dates back to the beginnings of human life (*anteriority of their formation*); in the course of a musical listening experience, they are activated by “modulations of the vital flux”, below the state of consciousness and sensory specialisation, and continue to guide it throughout its *mise en langage* (*anteriority of their reactivation*). Further, these bodily patterns give “existential” depth to signs by putting them in relation with dimensions important to human beings (intense sensations and emotions, profound experiences, etc.) and with the “golden age” of human ontogenesis, the pleasure of intra-uterine life. It is not, however, a question only of “references” to moments of importance to the existence of the individual (“transcendent” signifieds of musical signifiers), but of the very source of the possibility for attributing meaning to a musical listening experience, or for clarifying a meaning *through* musical language. The body is not “signified”, “evoked” by music or “associated” with a certain music, it is rather *the source* of the various ways in which a sign can bring forth meaning, in which meaning comes to the sign to establish it as a sign.

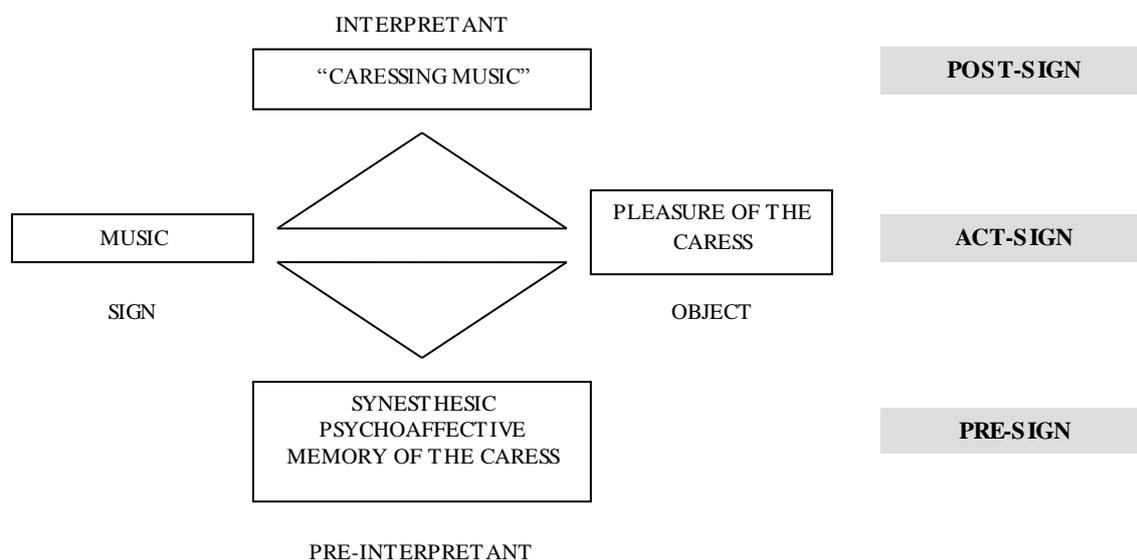


Fig. 1. Semiotic and pre-semiotic triangle

2. Ontogenetic and phylogenetic pre-signities

These patterns have given rise, throughout the history of music, to various actualisations, which function, in their turn as pre-signs for further actualisations. If we accept that these crystallisations are so many pre-signs, it would yet be necessary to distinguish them from bodily pre-signs which are reactivated for each experience. It is therefore possible to distinguish two

types of pre-signity: a phylogenetic pre-signity and an ontogenetic pre-signity. In the first typology, we find the history and phenomenology of the concretisations of a same bodily pre-sign. The pre-sign/act-sign dialogue is here made in the domain of intertextuality and of intersemiosis (as is the case, for example, with the relationship between Ernest Chausson's *Piano Quartet* and César Franck's *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*, mentioned by Tarasti 2002: 124). In contrast, bodily patterns are associated with the second form: ontogenetic pre-signity. Furthermore, if we leave the field of psychology, we find that the “transcendental ideas” discussed by Tarasti (2000: 20, 33), which are not tied to any specific artistic discipline, more closely resemble this second category. The notion of “silent speech” discussed by Bernard Vecchione in his works on the hermeneutics of existence can also be added to this vertical pre-signity: that “speech” which announces itself at the door of, unbeknownst, or even contrary to, utterance (2009). In addition, Vecchione speaks of the “wholeness” of *Dasein*, which weaves together several types of “pre-signitive sources” and which precedes all “signitive specificity” of the verbal, of the musical, of the plastic, etc.: “each pre-signitive specificity is probably, although perhaps in proportions which vary every time, woven from all the pre-signitive sources which constitute *Dasein*” (1997: 123). Such philosophical reflections resemble the psychophysiological considerations illustrated above on the subject of synesthesia.

It is possible to represent this double pre-signity in the following manner:

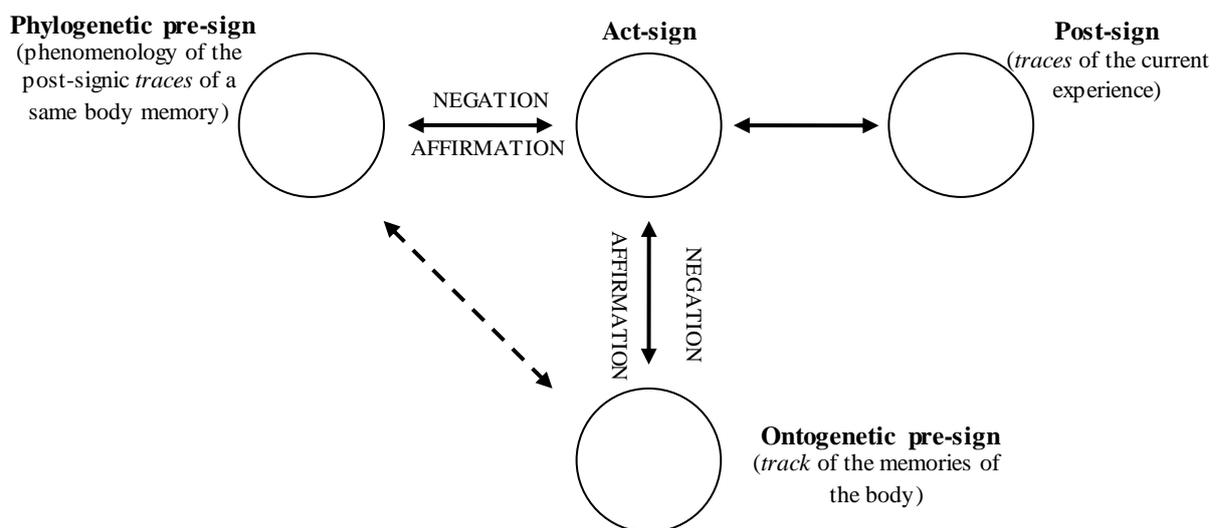


Fig. 2. Double pre-signity of bodily memories

The passage from pre-sign to act-sign can be effected in two ways: either by “negation” (the pre-sign is “abandoned” and “denied”) or by “affirmation” (by a “concretization” in the “perceptual world of *Dasein*”, the pre-sign fulfils the act-sign with “something more profound”, which motivates it and renders it signitive, by giving it a “transcendental”, “existential” depth (Tarasti 2000: 34).

A musical example will allow us to better understand the functioning of this double pre-signity. My research on the reception of Claude Debussy's *La Mer* have shown that a feeling of “fluidity”, aerial or liquid, is felt in listening to this work, even by those who do not know the title of the piece and of its three sections (Spampinato 2005a, 2005b). Thus, the water in this piece is not simply *recognised* in its visual manifestations (shape of waves in the melodic curve, rhythm which reproduces the coming and going of the waters on the shore, timbres which shine like the sun reflecting off the surface of the sea, etc.), it is also *experienced*: the muscular tonus is hypotonic, the gestural, descendant, the posture, relaxed; and the prevalent emotion is a feeling of the pleasure of being contained, enveloped, gently rocked, transported; the pleasure of the nuance is

synesthetic (gradations of light and colours, alongside tactile strokes and light sonorous opalescences). In short, not only do we *perceive* and *recognise* water and the sea, but we *are* this water and this sea. Fluidity, from this point of view, is thus entirely bodily: tonic and emotional, amodal and synesthetic (cf. Spampinato 2011). This is an “architecture of vitality affects”, to use the expression proposed by Imberty (2005) to define the psychological aspects of stylistic phenomena in music; and, for Imberty, water is the archetype of Debussy’s style (1987). From a historical perspective – as pointed out by Caroline Potter (2003), among others – in *La Mer*, Debussy avoids the devices which western musical tradition had forged for translating water into music (most notably, arpeggios). The musician invents new strategies of signification by diverting not only the “rules” of tonal music (an issue much studied by historians and analysts), but also the rules of musical signification itself. He proposed to establish a new path between a *meaning* and its musical *manifestation*. Thus, the guide along this path, which constitutes the measure of comprehension of meaning in listening, is not the reference to a context or tradition (phylogenetic pre-signity), but the rooting in a bodily and emotional “ontogenetic pre-signity”. In this case, it is therefore possible to recognise a vertical relation of *affirmation*, whereas a primarily *negative* relation is configured on the horizontal plane.⁵

Another example of the application of this model of bodily pre-signity concerns the analysis of interartistic phenomena and relations. As I have shown in recent work (Spampinato 2007, 2011), the first of Debussy’s *Préludes pour piano (Premier livre)*, *Danseuses de Delphes*, invites the listener to adopt the same sensorimotor pattern as Claude Monet’s painting *Le bassin aux nymphéas, harmonie verte*, namely the bodily schema of “swinging”. If from a historical and phylogenetic perspective there is no relevant connection between these two works, from an ontogenetic and homological perspective, beyond any communicational intent on the part of the author, they are based on the same bodily pre-sign.

3. Towards a pre-signic imaginary

Thanks to the double articulation of the psychophysiological dimensions of pre-signity, we have a dialogue between a *phenomenology of traces* and an *anthropology of tracks*, in which the track is the body memory which gives a meaning to the traces. It also becomes possible to delineate a topography of bodily (and virtually intersensory) imaginary space which can be called up by a passage, a work, a composer, or a musical genre. It is not, however, a question of a merely acoustic imaginary, but of a *kine-synesthetic imaginary*, with roots in the muscular tonus and in emotion. Hence the possibility for the experience, not only of expressing oneself in a work, but also the possibility, for the work, to be known, revealed, expressed in words, or translated into choreography, staged, etc. By following the various phases of the life of a sign, existential and psychophysiological semiotics thus provide a valuable contribution to the phenomena of production and reception of meaning, by untangling the complex relations between tradition and invention, anamnesis and creative act.

⁵ But this vertical relation always contains a negation in so far as these schemas are implemented without the knowledge of, and sometimes contrary to, the compositional development and creative projects of the musician. This is where work on utterance breaks down, escapes the conscious control of the composer, that meaning announces itself and is perceived. And the horizontal relation is equally complex in so far as the composer, despite being critical with regard to musical tradition, always finishes by weaving a dialogue of affirmations and negations with this tradition.

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