

Robert Samuels. *Mahler's Sixth Symphony: A Study in Musical Semiotics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 175pp.

Semiotics and Mahler's Sixth Symphony: The Suicide of Music Analysis?

Robert Samuels's new study of Mahler's Sixth Symphony is a welcome addition to the analytical literature on the composer's music. Combining insights from semiotics, deconstruction, genre theory and narratology with such traditional methods as Schenkerian and formal analysis, Samuels seeks "to explain the tremendously powerful effect that this symphony has always exerted on listeners, and to explain this effect in terms that could address both the sequence of notes on the page and the accumulation of programmatic anecdote and interpretation that has surrounded it" (p. 2). Early in the book, he attacks the narrowness of current analytical practices, contending that only by moving beyond purely musical considerations can the actual significance of the purely musical be properly understood. Traditional analysis, he suggests, produces only "partial representations of the [musical] text, whose selectivity indicates ideological choice" (p. 13) and compounds the problem of this partiality by taking its "representation" as constitutive of musical significance. Yet there is no escaping such partiality, since the totality that would be the musical work is nowhere wholly present. "Writing always engenders more writing; the refusal to accept this fact of human communication is called 'ideology'" (p. 4). This leads Samuels to semiotics, to the thesis that music is a system of signs (p. 1). If semiotics does not escape ideology because its representations too are only partial, it at least foregrounds the ideological choices that must always be made.

Samuels's semiotics is primarily "esthetic" according to Nattiez's typology; that is, Samuels places theoretical emphasis on the question of "how the listener 'makes sense' of the musical work" (p. 12) rather than on compositional process or "poietics."¹ A listener, he suggests, "engages in a sign-producing activity which consists of delimiting semiotic codes according to different ranges of reference amongst potential signifying units" (p. 15). By this, Samuels means that musical signs are the result of the particular code that a listener invokes. Listening for the motivic code, for instance, produces "a certain sort of signifying unit within the musical text,

¹ Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

and hence a certain sort of structure," namely a structure of motivic relations (p. 15). Likewise, listening in terms of other codes creates other kinds of musical signs, so that a wide range of analytical techniques would be needed to give a sense of the extent of possible musical signification. In Samuels's view, such a concern for musical signification has an added advantage in counteracting a pernicious tendency in Anglo-American music analysis toward producing a single "'correct' reading of structure," replacing it with "a more open-ended inquiry into the possible multiple meanings which the musical text can carry" (p. 5).

Samuels's basic semiotic tool is the s-code based on the work of Umberto Eco.² Samuels defines an s-code as "any collection of objects, ideas, musical stimuli or whatever that can be grouped together and described as structured in some way. Thus a harmonic structure, a pattern of motivic repetition, a given musical form, and an explanatory narrative can all be described as arising from s-codes of different sorts" (p. 6). Semiotics, however, does not provide an analytical method itself but only "an orientation for analysis, a kind of 'meta-analytical' discourse" (p. 14). For Samuels, semiotics is, among other things, a means for probing the limits of an analytical method and of the musical codes and signs that that method can reproduce. As he notes, codes are partial, never identical with the totality of music; they will therefore always reveal "moments of excess or absence in the musical text" where the text is no longer "readable" in terms of the code invoked. Strictly musical codes such as motive and form "[threaten] to become elusive and speculative as soon as any more than the simplest analytical observations are made" (p. 65). This gives rise to what Samuels calls "semiotic exegesis": "where one code fails, another, of wider referential scope, is invoked" (p. 94). The fact that codes are always partial drives semiotic analysis forward through a process of supplementation. "A semiotic analysis," he writes, "constantly finds points at which one code needs to invoke another to explain the distribution of the units it identifies" (p. 24). The extent to which signification extends beyond the immediate context of the particular code defines its "signifying scope" (p. 14). Samuels continually expands the signifying scope in the book, which self-consciously traces a progression "from 'introversive semiosis,' finding relations within the work in hand, to 'extroversive semiosis,' which relates the work to an intertextual space" (p. 14). In this "deconstructive" movement of analysis, the invocation of a particular s-code always requires a code of wider signifying scope to resolve enigmas and ambiguities produced by that s-code (p. 55). By drawing out those musical moments when

² Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

the code and the work do not coincide, semiotics highlights the operation of the codes, the manner in which "the code dictates the segmentation of musical signs" (p. 14). Since codes are always partial, moreover, "it follows that different analytical techniques will become appropriate in the context of different codes. . . . The results of existing analytical techniques can be made to serve new ends" (p. 14).

Samuels's book follows this deconstructive path from introversive to extroversive semiosis, which is at the same time a path from musical to extramusical considerations. The "genuine autonomy" (p. 62) of the Andante of Mahler's Sixth serves to justify his most ascetic introversive analytical procedures. In this movement, he examines only those purely musical signs "whose referential scope is entirely 'intramusical,' and initially even 'intratextual,' requiring no interpretant (to use Peirce's term) drawn from outside the work in hand" (p. 18). Samuels first performs a paradigmatic analysis of the surface motivic content, looking especially at the opening motive of the main melody and the characteristic motives of descent in the movement (ex. 1). He finds that whereas the interval content of the opening motive "is varied . . . each time it appears," the interval content of the descent motive is held relatively constant (p. 61). Samuels suggests that this is what makes the variants of this theme comprehensible to the listener: "the re-working and melodic recombination fall into a coherent structure" because the invariant features of the descent motive allow the transformations of the main motive to unfold by what seems a "linear logic" (p. 61). Still, Samuels recognizes the limits of this kind of analysis, the way it must continually overreach itself: "any discussion of apparently 'purely musical,' abstract motivic shapes is likely to throw up multiple connections in which significance is both undoubted, and yet only describable by resort to metaphor or narrative" (p. 26). Motivic analysis, for instance, cannot even explore its own significance without stepping outside itself, without drawing on informal, metaphorical modes of exposition and analysis that are, strictly speaking, outside the bounds of motivic analysis.

Samuels next turns to form, a code whose referential scope is wider than the motivic code. The formal code, though still largely introversive, is intertextual rather than intratextual because it presupposes the concept of a formal mode. Any movement "gains significance from its relationship to other movements with similar form or function" (p. 35). Indeed, it would have no "form" at all outside this intertextual matrix. Hence, the formal code remains an "analytical fiction" for Samuels, since it "does not really exist in music" (p. 56) but is created by bringing a particular s-code, that of form, to bear on music.³ Samuels uses this s-code to investigate the

³ Cf. Marion Guck, "Analytical Fictions," *Music Theory Spectrum* 16, no. 2 (1994): 217-30.

Example 1. Mahler, *Symphony no. 6*, III, mm. 1–10. x = opening motive; y = motive of descent.

Andante moderato

4

7

formal problems of the finale, a movement that has always posed severe interpretive difficulties to analysts and critics. He runs through various attempts to parse the movement into something resembling sonata form, including those by Adorno, Bekker, Floros, and Sponheuer. Samuels notes that many of the sectional divisions within the finale prove surprisingly resistant to any coherent sonata-form interpretation, despite the fact that the movement as a whole seems unmistakably sonata-like in tone as well as overall shape. The various appearances of the opening measures of the movement are especially noteworthy in this respect because each recurrence renders the actual formal function of the section it introduces “undecidable.” “The chord is ‘unreadable’ [in formal terms] except as a formal marker, an indicator of a major sectional division” (p. 86). A sectional division may be clear, in other words, even when the formal function of that section remains ambiguous. In fact, any reading of a section in

terms of a particular formal function “must willfully and arbitrarily privilege one sort of sign over others identifiable at [that] point. . . . It is a state of aporia, a situation in which the structuring of experience, upon which any construction of meaning relies, exposes itself as arbitrary” (p. 86). The very formal complexity of the finale also underscores the operation of the formal code, the way in which that s-code is invoked and deployed by listeners to make sense of musical experience. At the same time, the failure of the formal code to produce a convincing sonata-form interpretation pushes analysis beyond that code. “Faced with the limit points of the application of existing formal categories to the musical text, the analyst is faced with a choice: either to invoke new categories, or to turn to alternative codes to justify a preferred hearing” (p. 89). Either alternative, Samuels notes, leads to new s-codes, in particular away from introversive, “purely musical” codes and toward extroversive codes such as genre and narrative.

Genre theory is potentially the most interesting s-code because, “situated midway between those codes which refer entirely ‘intramusically,’ such as motivic working or harmonic process, and those—such as musical narrative or programme—which refer entirely ‘extramusically,’ requiring interpretants that are wholly cultural” (p. 93), it mixes introversive and extroversive interpretants. Though more extroversive than either form or motive, the generic code differs from those more introversive ones in that it considers music a “social practice as well as an artistic convention” (p. 94). This opposition between social practice and artistic convention, while initially plausible, is really untenable to the extent that it must efface the institutional production of the musical. “A form such as a *ländler*, march, minuet, or waltz,” Samuels writes, “carries some inheritance from its origin as a social activity, no matter how much it may also have a history within the practice of ‘high art’ composition” (p. 94). Samuels here forgets that artistic convention is itself always also a social practice, that motivic and formal attributes, not to mention sonata form itself, always owe their origin to social activity—that of music. The symphony and other genres of absolute music are no doubt especially interesting because they actively participate in and so also reflect to an acute degree the social activity—music—on which they are predicated. A sonata or symphony is self-consciously composed as music in a way that is perhaps not true of the waltz, which necessarily takes the dance it motivates into consideration. This, however, defines the *social* difference between the symphony and the waltz; it does not show not that the waltz has a connection to the social world where the symphony has none.

Better is Samuels’s idea that simply identifying a genre of a work does not necessarily say anything about the relation of genre to signification. “Generic fingerprints” such as distinctive rhythmic and melodic shapes do

not simply “signify” a particular genre; rather they make reference to the genre “in order to signify something else” (p. 110). Genres, moreover, “invoke expectations relating not only to melodic and rhythmic shapes, but also to typical middleground shapes and formal outlines” (p. 108). These middleground shapes, which open “a dialectic of generic and symphonic-formal codes” (p. 115), help support the coherence of large-scale symphonic form (p. 112). In the Scherzo of the Sixth, for instance, Samuels demonstrates a “tendency towards collapse and dissolution at sectional cadences” (p. 117). This effect, he contends, is “a direct outcome of the supervenience of the symphonic formal scheme over the generic” (p. 117). Such cadences thus act “as an immanent critique of [their] own formal function” (p. 118), where the cadential dissolutions “denude the units of their generic reference. In other words, the process of closing the section gradually obliterates the generic code, as this code serves the needs of formal function. The process itself becomes characteristic: the play of genres leads inevitably to ‘negative fulfillment,’ a signifier of destruction, at its end” (p. 118).

For Samuels, the generic character of the Mahlerian scherzo itself signifies the dance of death. Samuels makes a convincing case for the relevance of this topos with respect to the scherzo of the Fifth Symphony, where an explicit invocation of the waltz supplies a solid musical connection. For the Sixth Symphony, however, the case is less certain. Here, Samuels must argue in a rather roundabout way that a general generic connection among all Mahler’s scherzos is sufficient to make the dance of death a plausible referent for the Sixth Symphony as well. Samuels, to his credit, recognizes a problem here, though he never really succeeds in overcoming it. The evidence he musters is meager at best: a close historical connection between the *ländler* and the waltz on the one hand and the association of the xylophone with the *danse macabre* on the other (pp. 129–31). Samuels must therefore invoke an abstract “fencing with kitsch” (p. 119), rather than any convincing concrete generic fingerprint to motivate the interpretive leap to the dance of death. If this leap fails it is not because his methodology is “speculative in the extreme” as he fears (p. 131); but rather his leap fails because the dance of death remains such an abstract referent for the Sixth that we are not certain that it really is a referent of this music at all.

After genre, Samuels turns to narrative, the “most abstract, or extroverted, mode of reference” (p. 133). Where his interpretation of the scherzo is unconvincing, his reading of the symphony as representing “the suicide of the Romantic symphony” (p. 157) is much more satisfying. Like much of the book, this provocative thesis is culled from Adorno’s wonderful writings on Mahler, an influence that Samuels readily admits (p. 16). For

Adorno, the Sixth's "grandiose immanence of form" gives the work a tragic character in which the work follows this immanence to its own demise.⁴ The immanent coherence of the work, Adorno writes, "allows for no escape, so that the life that pulsates in the great finale of the Sixth is not destined for destruction by the hammerblows of fate, but to an internal collapse: the *élan vital* stands revealed as sickness unto death."⁵ Following Adorno's hint, Samuels develops an analogy to the Sixth not with the familiar spiral quest of the *Bildungsroman*, but with a closely related reverse image of it—one ending in catastrophic closure of suicide and a self-wish for the end. As Samuels notes, this latter archetype—"the story of the protagonist struggling with forces that crush his or her individuality, promising and then denying freedom" (p. 150)—is not uncommon in the nineteenth century, occurring in such notable novels as Goethe's *Werther*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.

Samuels argues that Mahler's Sixth, like these novels, reveals the institutional oppositions and social contradictions of nineteenth-century bourgeois society.

It is precisely the desire for individuality within formal convention that causes the semiotic conflict between function and content. . . . Just as the musical outworking of this tension drives first to a positive conclusion (in the end of the first movement) created out of reified musical objects, and then to a negative conclusion (in the Finale) created out of the patient working through of each developmental possibility of the material, so, in the novel, suicide is both willed and forced upon the heroines (pp. 156–57).

Samuels points out that the suicide archetype tends to involve a female protagonist, which helps him account for the prominence of the second theme—coded feminine in general and even more so in this symphony since Mahler explicitly identified this theme with Alma (p. 157). While Samuels is no doubt correct in noting that female protagonists are usual in novels that invoke the suicide archetype, he probably goes too far when he suggests that this archetype "is one that virtually necessitates a female protagonist" (p. 155), if only for the important exception of *Werther*. Certainly, some tensions of novelistic form are better exposed with a female protagonist as a result of the place women hold in bourgeois society,

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 100.

⁵ Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992), 91.

which is the setting of the novels and provides their tacit morality; but likewise the archetypal plot will unfold somewhat differently with a male protagonist simply because he, too, occupies a different cultural position. All the feminine features in the world do not make Werther female, for instance, and so the pressures that lead to his suicide will be somewhat different than those that affect the heroines of Tolstoy's and Flaubert's novels. Given the cultural associations of the symphony as a masculine musical discourse⁶ and Mahler's well-known love for Goethe, it is arguable that *Werther* would have served as a better model for a symphonic suicide plot than would *Madame Bovary* or *Anna Karenina*. If Samuels's choice nevertheless seems the correct one, this is probably because of the catastrophic sense of closure with which this symphony ends.

"The bodily violence of narrative closure in *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*," Samuels writes, "[arises] from a lost struggle with system and authority" (p. 158). Likewise, the ending of the Symphony is violent, even terrifying, and arguably it too is the result of such a lost struggle. The final chord records the sacrifice of the individual and the particular to the system, even though a conventional cadential progression is avoided. The so-called "fate" motive, which always seems to remain stubbornly outside the musical flow, here yields to the demands of the tonal system only to bring the musical flow to an end as well. To see why this is a plausible interpretation of the end of the work, we need to consider the role of the fate motive in the work. Example 2 represents its first appearance. After a dissolution of the motivic material of the first theme, the snare drum and timpani break in with a rhythm characteristic of the funeral march; this is followed by a sudden, radiant A-major chord. The prominent trumpet sonority hints at a vision of something transcendent, something beyond the world, compressing all the potential of a utopian breakthrough into a single chord.⁷ But the world weighs heavily on this chord as it is drawn inexorably back to A-minor. The visceral, deflating effect of this moment thoroughly belies the seeming banality of its conception with a bare alternation of major and minor chords. This kind of alternation has a symbolic character that is almost linguistic in force, even if it is difficult to put into words the exact "meaning" of shifting from major to minor. Set off from the first theme group by both the thematic dissolution with which the section concludes and the stark timbre of the drums, the fate motive is musically isolated and so semiotically marked. The fate motive intervenes

⁶ See Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 68–90.

⁷ "Breakthrough" is one of the analytical categories Adorno develops in his discussion of Mahler's music. See Adorno, *Mahler*, 4–14.

Example 2. Mahler, Symphony no. 6, I, mm. 57–60.

57

trumpet, oboe

timpani

snare

ff

pp

f

sempre f

in the musical course like a leitmotiv (p. 161), arresting the musical flow as though it were a linguistic sign. It is, as it were, a semantic irruption into the purely musical flow, which is defined by the smooth operation of functional, syntactic relationships.

The alternation of major and minor is a musical relation not easily handled on a purely musical level. Rhythmically indistinct as it is, Mahler's motive resists coherent introversive analysis because harmonic theory does not functionally distinguish between major and minor tonics. Moreover, unlike the similar major-minor figure in the famous opening fanfare of Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, where a distinct rhythmic profile encourages us to hear the first note of the pair as an appoggiatura, it is difficult to imagine Mahler's motive this way. Mahler's major-minor shift also lacks what is usually taken as fundamental to an explanation in terms of functional harmony: root progression.⁸ The very ease of labelling the function of these chords masks a deeper theoretical problem concerning musical grammar. The succession of I to i is *syntactically* nonsensical; it is less a "progression" than simply a substitution of one musical sign for another, an ornamental coloration. As Samuels notes, "slipping from major to minor is normally a subtle process involving retrospective recasting of experience and ambiguity of chord progression. . . . The stark presentation of a major triad in close spacing and its minor version banishes the possibility of such effects" (p. 161). I and i are musical signifiers whose signified, "tonicity," exists only discursively, that is, outside music. As such, the movement from I to i (or vice versa) is symbolic rather than syntactic; it operates under the auspices of semiosis, which is characterized by displacement, substitution, and deferral. Taking either the major or minor as fundamental and ordinary—that is, as the ultimate musical signified of the motive—misses what is so crucial about it: namely, the alternation

⁸ Carl Dahlhaus "Harmony," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie 8 (London: Macmillan, 1980), 177.

between the signifiers of the same (unsounding) signified.⁹ If the motive “sounds incapable of development” as Samuels suggests (p. 161), it is perhaps because this alternation is rather too obvious and too potent to sit easily in an economy of music that constantly sets syntax and function above semantics and semiosis. In this sense, although the fate motive is a purely musical sign, it is also, to the extent that it operates on a symbolic level as a “sign” protruding from and impeding the syntactically governed musical flow, profoundly unmusical.

A quirky chorale (ex. 3) responds to the disruption and perturbations that the semantically-charged fate motive introduces into the work. These bars seem to fulfill the formal function of a transition between the first and second theme group except that the chorale really goes nowhere, remaining, as Constantin Floros among others points out, wholly within the sphere of A minor.¹⁰ The introduction of B \flat toward the end of the first-theme group and the abatement in the dissolution field with which the section concludes arguably make a transition between first- and second-theme groups tonally and syntactically unnecessary and even superfluous. Samuels, for instance, admits that F has already “been prepared . . . by the occurrence of B \flat s in the melodic line earlier on” and notes that the augmented triad on which the chorale ends really leads no further toward F than did the close of the first-theme group (p. 145). The chorale is therefore a section with the formal function of a transition, but one whose actual syntactic transitional character seems intentionally minimized. In any case, the entrance of the second theme would hardly have been more abrupt there than after the chorale, where, as Adorno points out, the entrance of the theme seems calculated to appear as an unmediated interruption.¹¹ Moreover, chorales do not usually serve as transitions in symphonies.¹² Thus, its use here “foregrounds the artificiality of the choice. . . . The myth of formal succession is rewritten as fiction, narrated by the

⁹ The relation between the first and second statements of Strauss’s motive—the first minor, the second major—is closer to the effect of Mahler’s motive, though it is arguable that the relation between the statements in *Zarathustra* involves a “retrospective recasting of experience” and so it would not place syntax under pressure as Mahler’s motive does. However, the *Zarathustra* fanfare resembles Mahler’s motive in that it also lacks an underlying root progression, entailing nothing but an alternation between minor and major.

¹⁰ Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*, trans. Vernon and Jutta Wicker (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus, 1993), 167.

¹¹ Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia*, 108–109.

¹² Samuels is simply mistaken when he intimates that the genre of the chorale lies outside symphonic technique (p. 145). Indeed the chorale is the very embodiment of symphonic transcendence, the musical symbol, as it were, of symphonic self-overcoming. But Samuels is correct to note that the deployment of the chorale here as a transition is anomalous.

Example 3. Mahler, Symphony no. 6, I, mm. 61–76.

61 w.w.

strings

66

72

f

music" (p. 145). At the same time, the chorale retains its generic association with symphonic transcendence within the symphony, confirming the possibility of breakthrough represented by the A-major chord. As the work progresses, the chorale material becomes associated with the utopian Otherness of what Floros calls "distant" music.¹³ But this chorale is wholly unlike the glowing, *ad astra* chorales associated with the breakthroughs of the earlier symphonies, especially those of the First and Fifth Symphonies. Here, the chorale maps breakthrough onto the trajectory of the fate motive. Stripped of its sacred quality, its aura of transcendence, breakthrough has in the Sixth Symphony become worldly and mundane, no longer striving toward a Heaven beyond the world but seeking it instead within.¹⁴

What then is the function of this "transition" if not to bridge the first and second theme? This question returns us to the fate motive. The chorale fulfills its transition function by making a first attempt to integrate the

¹³ Floros, *Gustav Mahler*, pp. 169, 181.

¹⁴ Cf. John Williamson, "Liszt, Mahler, and the Chorale," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 108 (1981–82): 115–25.

fate motive into the tonal flow of the Symphony by presenting a context in which the major-minor shift makes sense. As Example 3 shows, the many descending chromatic lines in the chorale often give rise to major-minor shifts that, unlike the fate motive, operate on a syntactic level (for example, m. 63). If the passage into the second theme nevertheless remains abrupt, so that the fate motive and chorale seem an intrusion that draws attention to the disjunction between first and second theme, the chorale makes a first attempt to come to terms with the semantic irruption, to create a proper musical syntax for the major-minor shift. The chorale, in other words, tries to mitigate the effects of this irruption by channelling the impulses of this tonally recalcitrant material back into the musical flow. That the motive nevertheless remains a sign impervious to proper musical syntax and so continues to resist the musical flow—this signifies a musical failure that encodes the tragedy of the work on a purely musical level.

Samuels spends the last full chapter of his book tracing the fate motive through the Symphony, where he discovers “an alternation between the model and increasingly distant forms of it” (p. 162). The motive, he says, reinforces “the contours of symphonic form. It is less an interruption than it seems: rather, its distribution shadows the progress of the form of the entire work” (p. 162). Samuels charts the various appearances of the motive throughout the work, dividing the motive into two fundamental components—the funeral rhythm in the drums and the major-minor tonal shift (p. 161). He finds clear instances of the motive in all the movements except the *Andante*, in which the motive appears, he claims, only “vestigially” (p. 161). While the motive admittedly never appears in definitive form there, Samuels’s decision to allow only the horn melody of m. 127 into the motivic paradigm is surprising and somewhat arbitrary, especially given that earlier he had noted how the “modal equivocation” of the E♭-major theme, which he explicitly associated with the major-minor shift, was the result of a persistent chromatic alteration of scale degrees (p. 25). The chromatic fluctuations of this melody, he wrote in his chapter on the *Andante*, “can be linked with both the specific motivic features of the major/minor triad which appears in all the other movements . . . and with the more general voice-leading mixture of major and minor tonality which is prevalent in the work as a whole” (p. 25). Nowhere in the *Andante*, it is true, does the fate motive itself appear, but the movement contains many moments that allude to the basic paradigm every bit as much as the horn melody does.

Samuels is surely correct in identifying a bodily violence, a “brutally physical impact” (p. 162), with the fate motive, though—perhaps reflecting a general musicological bias—he reverses the terms, associating the

semantic properties of the motive with society and the musical system with the individual. The fate motive, he suggests, is an image of “mob violence” linked to an oppressive system external to music. This is an arguable position, though not quite a persuasive one. Certainly, there is a sense in which the various appearances of the fate motive, the cowbells, and especially the hammer strokes, seem outside, even foreign impediments to, the musical flow. They are touches of tone painting that inspire, indeed, almost seem to demand programmatic interpretation, Mahler’s attempt to delegitimize such interpretation notwithstanding.¹⁵ As such, these elements function as traces of the external narrator who made this music, who dictated the direction and form of the sonic world without regard for the consequences on the individual musical processes. In this sense, the semantic, semiotic properties of the fate motive—for instance, its resemblance to a leitmotiv—might be viewed as sonic remnants of an external linguistic force, which the tonal flow must absorb, erode, or eliminate in order to set its own course and secure its autonomy. However, this argument ignores the fact that the closure at the end of the work is a musical closure rather than a linguistic one. The fate motive, Samuels suggests, follows a musical imperative for closure after all developmental options have been exhausted (p. 163). The finale, however, does not actually come to a close because the material has been fully developed—further developmental episodes could always be devised—but rather because the material no longer has space to develop. In the course of the finale, the flow of the development is ruthlessly channelled toward a single catastrophic moment, in which the material, in particular the fate motive, is revealed as caught in an unbearable contradiction between the particular and the totality. Adorno outlines the “desperate choice” that this contradiction inflicts on subjective consciousness: “Either [a subjective consciousness] must harmonistically stylize the contrary course of the world and heteronomously obey it, against his own better insight—or, doggedly loyal to his own definition, he must act as if the world’s course did not exist and must perish by it.”¹⁶ Mahler’s symphony, like the protagonist of the suicide

¹⁵ In a footnote to m. 198 of the first movement, Mahler writes: “The cowbells should be played with discretion—so as to produce a realistic impression of a grazing herd of cattle, coming from a distance, alternately singly or in groups, in sounds of high and low pitch. Special emphasis is laid on the fact that this technical remark admits of no programmatic interpretation” (cited and translated in Hans Redlich’s “Critical Commentary” for the Eulenburg study score of the symphony [Mainz, 1968], p. xxix). Mahler no doubt feared an overly literal programmatic interpretation that would, cinema-like, suddenly cut to a herd of cows coming down off the mountain whenever the bells sounded.

¹⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 152.

archetype, chooses to preserve subjectivity, the motivic definition of the major-minor shift, and so perishes by this choice.

The final chord (m. 820) lands like the ax of an executioner, representing a bodily assault on the fate motive in which the motivically incomplete but musically proper minor chord substitutes for and displaces the motivically complete but musically improper major-minor shift. The motive here acquiesces to the tonal demand for proper syntax, its decapitation the route to the properly musical. The final chord is therefore not a simple instance of musical overcoding in which functionally "the concluding part of the motive is used to conclude" (p. 163); rather, this overcoding points to the site of decapitation, to the sacrifice of semiosis and intelligibility that accompanies the closure necessary to constitute the authentically musical time so crucial to musical autonomy.¹⁷ The closure at the end of the symphony is terrible for the way it emphasizes this sacrifice without glorifying it, or even making it comprehensible. With it, not just the piece, but both the musical flow and the whole process of internal semiosis necessary to sustain the music itself, collapse as well: the irreducible, motivic core of the major-minor alternation, which had supplied the work its identity, is at this moment obliterated, as the motive—now reduced to a minor chord—is purified of semantic content, absorbed into a tonal flow that now has nowhere to go. Semiosis finds stability, its point of anchorage, in death, and the tonal flow that had seemed opposed to and impeded by the semantic content of the fate motive dissipates into silence as semiosis ceases. Semiosis turns out to be not just an impediment to the tonal flow but its enabling condition as well. The conclusion of Mahler's Sixth thus raises the existential horror that nothing musical exists—neither the extramusical nor indeed the purely musical—without the presence of the sign as a sign. Beyond the sign lies only the death of music, music as an empty, syntactic core.

If Samuels associates the protagonist with the musical flow and the oppressive system with a semiotic entity such as the fate motive or the hammer stroke due to a musicological bias that posits a link between music and individuality, he runs into similar difficulties with his theoretical aims. For this remains an exceedingly cautious book, more beholden to the interpretive security offered by standard music-analytical practices than his invocation of structuralist and post-structuralist methodologies would seem, at first glance, to suggest. Samuels proves curiously reluctant to follow his deconstructive trajectory to, as it were, its logical conclusion. This becomes clear when he confronts Nattiez's objections to narratological

¹⁷ James Buhler, "Breakthrough as Critique of Form: The Finale of Mahler's First Symphony," *19th Century Music* 20, no. 2 (1996): 143–61.

analysis. Nattiez believes that if music were narrative like language, "it would speak directly to us" (cited on p. 135). Samuels, on the contrary, recognizes that language does not speak directly to us either. "The gap which is so obvious in the case of musical interpretation is nevertheless still there in the case of written narrative. . . . A 'narrative frame of mind' is necessary in literature too; the question is rather whether any other sort of 'frame of mind' is equally viable in approaching music" (p. 135). The listener and reader occupy structurally similar positions in that they both "construct" a narrative from a material trace, in one case musical, in the other literary (p. 135). Even so, Samuels is more in agreement with Nattiez than not when he insists that the arbitrariness of a musical narrative "is of a different order from that involved in reading a book" (p. 136). No doubt, literary and musical narratives are not identical, but it is questionable whether this difference lies principally in the arbitrariness of interpretants. Narrative applied to music is certainly "a hermeneutical metaphor"; but then so too is all analysis, including semiotic analysis, to the extent that it feigns—as all analysis must—to represent the work adequately within itself.

Samuels, like Nattiez, worries about the promiscuity of more extroversive modes of analysis. He views extroversive semiosis in general with suspicion, necessary to his analytical project to be sure, but always threatening "to take leave altogether of the musical trace" (p. 90). For Samuels extroversive semiosis is an "arbitrary," subjective force that, if not properly circumscribed, imperils the concrete particularity of the purely musical procedures identified with introversive semiosis. He valorizes, for instance, the "advantage" of signifiers that "are constituted solely by musical material" (p. 64) and believes that his approach avoids "the tendency toward unsubstantiated metaphorical interpretation founded on anecdote or solipsistic hearing" (p. 115). He is careful to remind his readers, for instance, that his own attempts at genre and narratological analysis derive from the thing itself, arising "directly from the consideration of motive, form and tonal process" (p. 90). Yet this is a claim that one could make for most modern hermeneutic analyses as well, even when, like Samuels's discussion of the scherzo in relation to the dance of death, the results are less than convincing. No musicologist nowadays sets out to interpret music verbally without directly considering the music. For one thing, the profession simply does not allow it. That an interpretive performance is sometimes unconvincing is undeniable, but then so too are the results of more traditional modes of analyses: if formalized music analysis (Schenker, motivic analysis, etc.) were adequately satisfying for the musicological community as a whole, hermeneutic modes of interpretation would hardly be seductive.

Samuels blames the extroversive interpretants for their tendency toward promiscuity, contending that “any attempt to link non-musical, or extroversive, interpretants to symphonic composition is more likely guilty of partiality or arbitrariness than analyses based on the introversive investigation of motivic working or formal construction” (p. 115). This point, too, is debatable. In “introversive” analyses, partiality and arbitrariness have simply been concealed in an underlying methodology, whose institutionalization has obscured an original partiality and arbitrariness. At times, especially early in the book, Samuels is willing to concede the point (p. 13), but he continually returns to the apparent interpretive security of formalized introversive analysis when attacking extroversive modes on account of the supposed slipperiness of their interpretants. For along with the insights that extroversive interpretants allow, each expansion of signifying scope also introduces unwanted subjectivity into the analysis. In the later part of the book, Samuels is preoccupied more with combatting the encroachment of subjectivity on analysis than with using the overt subjectivity of extroversive analysis as an opportunity to explore the inherent subjectivity of introversive analyses.

Nowhere does Samuels’s acceptance of the basic structure of traditional musicology become clearer than in his refusal to challenge or even question the basic premise of that practice: the division between the musical and the extramusical. The musically “pure,” introversive semiosis is associated with the individual and the particular; the extramusical, extroversive semiosis with the system and the general. As with his analysis of the fate motive, where he associates the musical with the individual and the extramusical with the system, it is arguable that the terms should be reversed here as well. In analysis introversive methods are systematic and general, seeking to eliminate from its view what is merely subjective. Thus the individual and particular—the concrete specificity of the music—accrete almost by default to the extroversive rather than the introversive interpretants. Caught between the institutional pressure to produce introversive analysis and the individual desire to embrace the extroversive other, Samuels leads analysis along the same suicide plot trajectory his analysis identifies in the symphony. The promiscuity of extroversive interpretants mirrors the promiscuity of the female heroines in the suicide archetype, and both transgress the strictures of an implicit institutional morality. Just as female infidelity offends bourgeois propriety, so too the perceived promiscuity of extroversive interpretants offends the standards of proper analysis. These moral strictures impose the same grim alternatives on both the protagonist and the extroversive interpretant as well: death or conformity. Samuels’s semiotics leads us to the edge of an interpretive abyss, the same one marked out by Mahler’s *Symphony*; but unlike the *Symphony*,

Samuels's analysis refuses to take the leap, to negate itself in order to preserve itself. Humanistically, Samuels preserves the extroversive other only to deliver it broken to the system, as nothing but an empty shell. He ultimately sides with the system rather than the subject, with properly formalized interpretants rather than improperly informal ones. Mahler's Symphony, on the contrary, is bolder, resisting the system till the end. It prefers death, even the end of music, to the fate that awaits a subject cut to fit within the system.

The possibility of "producing the text" narrated by music is located in the desires of the interpreter; the code of narration is the trace of desire within the musical text. And the path from the detection of isolated "moments of narration" within the movement, through the more holistic treatment of literary archetypes, to a final, thoroughly deconstructed, ironically self-aware state of aporia, is itself a suspiciously Romantic narrative of increasing mastery of the musical substance, or at least of the substance's signifying potential; and as such it too should perhaps be resisted. (p. 165)

What needs to be resisted, however, are not just the "ironically self-aware state of aporia" (if such a state is even attainable) and the interpretive excesses of extroversive analysis, but the systematic element within analysis itself, including, of course, the systematic element that would transform musical narratology or semiotics into yet another highly formalized mode of music analysis. Herein lies the desire for narrative, for a mode of analysis that is informal, extroversive, and hermeneutic, while still figuring the work as something beyond the interpretation, as an object resisting interpretation. Deconstructive analysis, assuming that such a thing exists or is indeed even possible, should be a necessity rather than a choice: it would follow the logic of the work to its point of incoherence and disintegration in the analytical discourse, where the analytical discourse and so also ourselves become complicit in the incoherence.¹⁸ This does not mean that analysis can do without a system, without theory, any more than than thought can do without concepts. Thought that seeks to see further, to expand horizons must use its concepts against itself so as to see what escapes the conceptual net. Likewise analysis that seeks a wider signifying scope must deploy its systematic element against itself so that the system

¹⁸ See, for instance, Brian Hyer, "'Sighing Branches': Prosopopoeia in Rameau's *Pigmalion*," *Music Analysis* 13, no. 1 (1994): 7-50.

not only opens itself to the supplementary path of "semiotic exegesis" but also reveals the informal, nonsystematic element at its very core.

At his best, Samuels approaches this kind of understanding. He recognizes, for instance, that formalized, introversive analysis has its limits, indeed that an "aporetic state of affairs is both the limit of interpretation—an inherent shortcoming of language as a hermeneutic medium—and a definition of the essentially fluid signficatory capabilities of music itself" (p. 165). However, he misconstrues the significance of this thought. Rather than eliminating informality from our musical observations as Samuels continually urges, we need instead to preserve that informality within the most rigorously introversive procedures themselves; to recognize that the purely musical exists not outside the extramusical as a thing apart, but within it as its moment of most emphatic intensification. Pure formality is the trace of a dead analytical practice; informality, a sign of analysis yet to be done.

—*James Buhler*