

# ONTOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS AS A CATALYST OF MUSICOLOGICAL DISCOURSE: A FEW SKETCHES

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## ABSTRACT

From the invention of language, the phenomenon of Greek *hermēneía* to biblical *exegesis*, interpretation is one of the crucial paradigms of culture and civilization. Joined with general ontology, hermeneutics offers original and intuitive theoretical insights. In this paper the author proposes and examines several possibilities of productive influence of ontological hermeneutics on musicological discourse. Starting with the dilemma concerning the relationship on the axis *text—being*, the first answers have been found in different definitions of discourse. A more elaborate debate continues in the field of ontology, from Aristotle to meta-ontology. Finally, cross-references that intersect types of hermeneutics/ontology and musical phenomena are offered.

KEYWORDS: ontology, hermeneutics, discourse, musicology, music existence

To be or to be in the text (to be text/ual/) is a questionable and problematic proposition/dilemma, as long as it remains in the sphere of ontic properties/ontology/being. It is a mental crossroads unavoidable for any genuine viewpoint. Any chosen path, however, is not without certain consequences, particularly outside the textual frame. If one chooses to exist (or to acquire the specific worldview which does not need any form of assignee) without any sustenance, then, from the discursive perspective, all that remains, in the end, is Maeterlinck-like *grand silence*, bottomless void, self-sufficient being (or non-being in negative ontology). Standing in the field that

grows on such a kernel makes any discursive or theoretical system superfluous. On the other hand, going to the other extreme seems to set aside material/factual/tangible or cultural/spiritual/transcendent instances. All that remains is the text in its signifying form, deprived of any kind of obligatory relation to anything other/Other/Real/tangible. The Question remains current.

One more paradox is hidden behind the cloak of discourse. In addition to this area there is a linguistic (and not only linguistic) problem exemplified in the pair: musicological discourse or discourse of musicology? First, we will attempt to outline the discursive network. Discourse is:

1. Merely a word
2. A specific meaning derived from dis-course etymology
3. A multilayered and discordant term
4. A process
5. A dialogue (written or spoken)
6. The central philosophical notion of the past few decades
7. The product of the thought horizon
8. A distinctive type of text
9. The general domain of all statements
10. An individualisable group of statements
11. A regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements
12. An institutional legitimating context
13. Something else

Our path through a labyrinth of meaning always stays polyvalent. Discourse provides the thinker with various strains from which one can make the first (or a new) step. Before we start any other written textual dispute, it is essential to put the emphasis on the preconceptual (re)configuration of plural metadiscourse that is planned to be created. Proposition number one:

*Text, discourse or sign order is a product and/or extension of Reality.*

What is Reality is impossible to comprehend/define, especially by words, sentences etc. If it were possible, it would mean that reality is a product of the text itself. Our basic claim is quite the opposite. Beings are moving from illiteracy /unconscious to literacy/conscious/symbolic thought capacity. Therefore, the capability to express anything was brought to the fore at a certain moment in history. To express it in the form that is known to us in the twenty-first century, ontic properties are ground-level in every formulation of sense, system, hypothesis, theory etc. If there is no Being, beings, phenomena, there is no text either. Nevertheless, it is only the first step on our journey. Knowing the path is conditioned by effective knowledge (which is the hermeneutic key). The awareness of Reality of Being is valued only by profound and solid understanding of itself and others (Other). Combined, these strains give Life to, in our case, musicological discourse. Music lives without text, but the opposite

is not valid. Empty signifiers, discourses stem and die in vain from Nothingness. To recognize Being in Music and clarify Sense by an hermeneutic grip puts us in a position to revive musicological discourse and to elevate speech-about-music onto a different level or to remove it from sterile and fixed/closed/limited positions. Text as text has to be returned to its source: not as trash to be recycled, but as a transformed and refreshed Voice, sounding as music, liberated as music, powerful and uncontrolled like Music. Why do we need ontology and hermeneutics to do that? Ontology, by which we presume the root of ancient Hellenic philosophy, presupposes the existence of alive, active liberty of being. Isness is a precondition of fundamental ontology. No other discipline could give such an advantage to music. The second step is important to avoid a largely overrated organic, natural, materialistic view. Once reached, the level of ontology is complemented by the hermeneutical apparatus. The thing itself is not sufficient. The hermeneutic circle serves as a channel between the incomprehensible "it" and manifest level. This passage in particular defines "how" and "why" in larger superstructures such as culture, religion, civilization etc. No hermeneutics usually means that there is no reflection whatsoever. Music as content critically depends on the level of hermeneutical development and its potential to stand for something, to make a text advocate and perform an interpretational act. Intertextuality begins to appear on the horizon of the mind. This moment brings us closer to the second statement.

*It is fair to say that vulgar 'objectivism' – the quasi-scientific belief in our ability to know objects 'as they are in themselves', independently of any prior discursive or theoretical presuppositions – is largely discredited as an epistemological doctrine (Hooper 2006: 90).*

Ontological hermeneutics, in this text, refers to the intentional act of interpretation applied with regard to the intrinsic, essential substance of an analysed subject/object/thing. Hermeneutics of being accounts for the basic, fundamental understanding of the subject matter of interest. In his *Categories* Aristotle identifies ten possible types of things that may be the subject or the predicate of a proposition. For Aristotle there are four different ontological dimensions:

1. According to the various categories or ways of addressing a being as such
2. According to its truth or falsity (e.g. fake gold, counterfeit money)
3. Whether it exists in and of itself or simply "comes along" by accident
4. According to its potency, movement (energy) or finished presence (Cf. Aristotle 1998)

It could be said that ontology is the research of what there is. Some would challenge this articulation of what ontology is, so this is merely an initial approximation. Many classical philosophical problems are problems born in ontology: the question whether or not there is a God/Supreme being, the problem of the existence of universals, etc. But, ontology is usually also taken to circumscribe problems concerning the general features and relations of the integers which do exist. There are also a number of classical philosophical knots that are problems in ontology understood in this way.

These kinds of challenges quickly turn more generally into metaphysics, which is the philosophical discipline that engirds ontology as one of its parts. The borders here are a little foggy. But we have at least two parts to the overall philosophical project of ontology, on our preliminary understanding of it: first, say what there is, what exists, secondly, say what the most general features and relations of these things are.

This way of looking at ontology comes with two sets of quandaries which lead to the philosophical discipline of ontology being more complex than merely answering the previous questions. The first set of problems is that it is not clear how to approach answering these riddles. This leads to pondering ontological commitment. The second set of sticky wickets is that it is not so clear **what** these questions really are. This leads to the philosophical debate about meta-ontology.

One of the troubles with ontology is **how** to settle questions about what there is, at least for the kinds of things that have traditionally been of special interest to philosophers: numbers, properties, God, etc. Our **how** may greatly impact the outcome. Ontology is thus a philosophical discipline that encloses the study of what there is and the study of the general features of what there is, and also the study of what is involved in clarifying questions about what there is in general, especially for philosophically challenging cases.

How we can find out what there is cannot be answered easily. It might seem simple enough for ordinary objects that we can perceive with our eyes, such as my notebook, but how should we decide it for such things as, for example, properties or numbers? One first step towards making progress on this question is to see if what we believe already settles this question on a rational basis. That is to say, given that we have particular beliefs, do these beliefs already introduce with them a rational commitment to the response to such questions as "Are there numbers?" If our beliefs bring with them a rational attachment to an answer to an ontological question about the existence of certain bodies, then we can say that we are committed to the existence of these entities. What precisely is required for such an adhesion to occur is subject to debate, a consideration we will look at presently. To find out what one is committed to with an exact set of beliefs, or acceptance of a particular theory of the world, is part of the broader discipline of ontology.

As we have seen, it is not so clear what an ontological question really is, and thus what it is that ontology is supposed to accomplish. Thus, hermeneutics has its role in illuminating these shades. To figure this out is the task of meta-ontology, which strictly speaking is not part of ontology, but the study of what ontology is. However, like most philosophical disciplines, ontology, when more broadly interpreted, contains its own meta-study, and thus meta-ontology is part of ontology, more vastly construed. Nonetheless it is efficacious to separate it out as a special part of ontology. Many of the philosophically most important questions about ontology are really meta-ontological questions.

Meta-ontology has not been much in vogue during the last couple of decades, partly on account of one meta-ontological view, often associated with Willard Van Orman Quine. Finally, ontological hermeneutics can be seen precisely as a more

acceptable catalyst,<sup>2</sup> not only for ontology itself but even more significantly for musicological discourse. *Nota bene*, the discourse of musicology as a discipline may contain multiple heterogenous discourses borrowed or appropriated from other disciplines/fields. Musicological discourse is, on the contrary, only and exclusively, a way of textual expression which autochthonously stem from disciplinary competence.

What is the question that we should aim to answer in ontology if we want to find out if there are ideas, that is, if reality contains ideas besides whatever else it is made up of? This way of putting it suggest an easy question: "Are there ideas?" But this seems easy to answer. Can ontology be that easy? The study of meta-ontology will have to arbitrate, amongst others, as to wheter "Are there ideas?" really **is** the question that the discipline of ontology is supposed to answer. And more generally, what ontology is presumed to do. The larger discipline of ontology can thus be seen as having four parts:

1. The study of ontological constancy,
2. The study of what there is,
3. The study of the most generic features of what there is, and how the things there are relate to each other, in the most general ways, metaphysically
4. The study of meta-ontology, i.e. saying what task it is that the discipline of ontology should aim to accomplish (if any), how the questions it aims to answer should be understood, and with what methodology they can be answered.

Starting with Aristotelian ontology as a basic knowledge of primary/first causes/principles of things as a frame for research, a person needs to find at least traces of prime in selected artefacts. A quest for musical substance is an old task. How does music exist? Several propositions are available when discussing this issue of musical ontology:

1. Exists, but on an unspeakable level
2. Exists in itself
3. Exists as text
4. Exists as a material-textual relation
5. Does not exist, it only appears to be
6. Exists as a score
7. Exists as a performance/happening
8. Exists as a celestial phenomenon
9. Exists in a subject's consciousness
10. Exists as sound
11. Exists as an ideal referent locus (score, performance, perception)
12. Exists as an object in human memory

2 A catalyst is a substance that speeds up a chemical reaction, but is not consumed by the reaction; hence a catalyst can be recovered chemically unchanged at the end of the reaction it has been used to speed up, or catalyze. Accordingly, ontological hermenutics can penetrate musicological discourse without being consumed by it.

13. Exists as a digital trace
14. Exists as a metaphysical entity
15. Exists ...
16. Does not exist ...
17. ...

In Roman Ingarden's studies one can find enough space, words and aporias for debate/discussion (Ингарден, 1991). However, our goal was to present different propositions considering this matter. If we make an agreement on point 11 as the mediative solution, it is plausible to turn our attention again to ontological issues. Types of ontology not only separate the existential field but also point out to some kind of parallel between onto-core principles and music. Therefore, these associations should be taken with some reservation. It seems that plunging into structuring of ontology simultaneously gives space for the appearance of a metaphoric resemblance between existential categories and paradigmatic phenomena in music (history). The following list is, thus, more a sketch than *summa summarum*.

1. Ontology of Being (acoustics, Schenkerian *ursatz*, primordial music by Busoni)
2. Ontotheology (Music of the spheres, cosmic music, *musica mundana*)
3. Worldly ontology / Metaphysics ontology (*musica instrumentalis*)
4. Conditional Ontology (*musica humana*, *open work* concept)
5. Absolute Ontology (The Tone, concept *opus absolutum et perfectum*)
6. Negative Ontology / Existence of Nothingness - Nihilism (Silence)

As ontology can be observable on different manifestational levels, seen or un-seen, the same may be true when we discuss pure sound in several acoustic phenomenal shapes. Being may not be always prone to senses. The same is valid when music is taken into account. Sometimes, silence is more important than the sound itself, in regard to dynamics, formal process, rhythmic structuring etc. A ground-level, basic and unchangeable ontology of Being is mirrored in the notion of *ursatz* which can be discovered in the root of almost every piece of music. The existence of primordial music as a concept is regulated through the fixed ideality from which the work of art proceeds. This concept is more platonic in nature. *Musica mundana*, often associated with movement of celestial bodies, seems to be the perfect embodiment of ontotheology. Music of the spheres reveals ontic properties of divine existence. Belief in perfect conformation of the universe naturally fabricated the notion of supreme and pure resonance between its elements. The artificial character of instrumental music, and its bond with the human creative side, forces a strong connection with worldly actuality. The lack of text, which is fundamentally united with music in vocal practice, inherently pushes instrumental music towards an external, metaphysical criterion in order to validate itself. Such a confirmation is not necessary for examples of conditional ontology, such as *open work* in modern and avant-garde music. On the other side of the acceptance paradigm lies *opus absolutum et perfectum*. Its finitude and eternal set of properties that defines self-sufficiency incarnates the Absolute. Independent and

forever stable Tone survives all the distortions and silences of the ever-spinning wheel of Life. In order to address the next point in the discussion we will change scenery. Yet again, an interpretational turn is required. Starting with the types of hermeneutics:

1. Absolute (radical) hermeneutics – every act or statement is, first and foremost, interpretation by itself; everything is interpretation; nothing can enter the text (or become a text) or any other system of representation as if already interpreted in some way;
2. Contextual hermeneutics – making an interpretation is discovering a context of a phenomenon; the analyzed object is configured by its surroundings;
3. Mediative hermeneutics – understanding means a reconciliation between different angles/perspectives;
4. Literal hermeneutics – things are what they are or what they look like; explanation is not necessary, but description is.

Ontology of music mainly falls into the first two categories. The first proposed definition deals with the fundamental explanatory pre-existent set of conditional factors. These tools/axioms finished their course long before subjects came into play. The state of things therefore is always found-state/found by individual subject/consciousness. Here, the first similarity comes forth. Our perception of music is found-state, we are the ones who entered its realm. Therefore, every contact with music, from a radical perspective, occurs in a hermeneutical circle. This notion is not left without consequences.

Ricoeur cautions against the “disturbing fecundity of the oblivion” of a circular discourse on the impossibility of mastering the rhetorical field in which such a discourse operates. Nevertheless, the allure of reducing this discourse’s circularity to the aporias unleashed by the destruction of the metaphysics of presence was tactically irresistible (Davidson 2010: 215).

Contextual hermeneutics and its full application in research and theory enabled the rise of postmodern (critical, new) musicology. Without the tools of interpretation, it would be almost impossible to create “new” surroundings for observations offered by new musicology in the last decades of twentieth century. No discipline ever could directly import terminology, definitions, logic and other things from external fields of competence. Hermeneutics possesses the means to adapt external insights to a new discursive environment. This “translation” is a subject for individual debate. At this moment, it is important to underline the significance of ontological hermeneutics for, in our case, musicological discourse. In some cases interpretation include representation by text, particularly when we dealt with new or imaginative procedures.

However, many concepts/words/notions/terms characteristic for musicological discourse (melody, chord, rhythm, interval, tone, timbre, pitch (class), tonality, concerto, key, vocal, fugue...) owe, especially generically, their own inception to the explanatory devices of hermeneutics. When hermeneutics has ontological incli-

nations, then all of them revive, bring into play, start to breathe, join the flux of intra and extra-courses connected to the domain of Music. The power to include vitality and anthropological dimension in theory, text and practice indicates a high disseminational level of ontological hermeneutics.

According to Holy Scripture, God gave Adam the right to name beings/creatures below him, thus including the crown of own creation in the creative process. *Nomen est omen*. Similarly, disciplines through time yield things/objects/phenomena. Even before naming them we sense their presence and the certainty of a soundly alive dictionary of musicology.

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## ИГОР РАДЕТА

ОНТОЛОШКА ХЕРМЕНЕУТИКА КАО КАТАЛИЗАТОР МУЗИКОЛОШКОГ ДИСКУРСА:  
НЕКОЛИКО СКИЦА

## (РЕЗИМЕ)

Да ли је све текст? Ако јесте, на шта се тачно односи оно „је“ у питању? Ко или шта постоји у тексту? Какав је његов однос према свету? Покушали смо да одговоре на ова питања потражимо под окриљем онтологије, полазећи од хипотезе да бит/бивство/битак остају темељ проблема којим се бавимо. Утврђујући контуре почетне апорије наилазимо на појам дискурса и неколицину његових дефиниција. Испоставља се да је дискурс оквир који нам омогућава да прецизније дијагностификујемо корен дилеме о начину постојања текстуалних формација, нарочито у односу на реалност као такву. Разумљиво, шира расправа по овом питања је немогућа без развијеније дискусије на платоу опште онтологије. Ипак, пре ње, наведена је пропозициона сентенца о критици објективизма и епистемолошким препрекама „чистог“ сазнања. Њена функција је да укаже на сложеност методолошког разрешења, између осталог, феномена интертекстуалности и приступа „самој ствари“.

Нотирајући предуслове теоријске платформе која би могла дати основ за постуирање одговора, почели смо онтолошки дијалог Аристотеловим димензијама постојања. Одмах затим, изложена је расправа о јестеству, филозофским и теоријским последицама постојања/непостојања а покренута су и мета-онтолошка питања. Логичан продужетак дебата добија кроз онтологију музике. Наведена је, према нашем мишљењу, већина модалитета постојања музике/музичког дела. Подвлачећи везу са онтологијом, посебно је издвојен једанаести начин постојања. Музика као идеалитет ка коме, као референтном месту, истовремено инклинирају партитура, извођење и перцепција јесте, у овом тренутку, компромисни теоријски модел који нуди довољну ширину за даље проблематизације егзистенцијалне мистерије музичког дела по себи. У завршном сегменту текста аутор је покушао да повеже, са једне стране, типологије опште онтологије и херменеутике и, са друге стране, различите манифестације музичке историје. Испоставило се да се различите врсте онтолошких поља прожимају са феноменима (теорије) музике као што су шенкеријански *ursatz*, Бузонијева прамузика, музика сфера, концепт отвореног дела, *musica instrumentalis* и тишина. Сличну везу можемо лоцирати и у односу између различитих усмерења унутар херменеутике и музичких парадигми.

Схватање музике као аутономног поља у које увек улазимо као други и настанак нове/критичке музикологије виђени су као одрази радикалне и контекстуалне херменеутике. Коначно, указујући на неколико појмова карактеристичних за музичку теорију потврдили смо значај онтолошке херменеутике за музиколошки дискурс. *Nomen est omen.*

Кључне речи: онтологија, херменеутика, дискурс, музикологија, постојање музике