

## **Ethnomusicology Seminar**

### **Charles Seeger and The Study of Music Semiotics**

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The writings of Charles Seeger have long been regarded as one of the most complex and rich body of literature in the history of 20th century musicology. This paper, a product of Seeger Seminar in Spring 2008 at Pitt, specifically addresses the question of Seeger's covert connections with the study of the system of signs known as semiology/semiotics. The paper is organized into two parts: (1) the influence/connections of Swiss/French semiologist F.Saussure to Seeger's writing, and (2) Seeger's view on musical meaning and its implication as particularly discussed by music semiotitian Jean-Jacque Nattiez in his book:*Music and Discourse, Towards a Semiology of Music*. Important ideas and notions of Seegers that are discussed and re-interpreted with this newly discovered connection include, but not limit to: the systematic and historic orientations of musicology; linguocentric predicament; music as a function in a nest of functions; the nature of musical meaning; etc.

## Charles Seeger and The Study of Music Semiotics

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One of the most persistent concerns through Charles Seeger's writings is the relationship between speech and music, more specifically, the "linguocentric predicament" we are in when we try to talk about music using language. While Seeger has never known to label himself as a semiologist/semiotician<sup>1</sup>, or to be explicitly linked to the later development of studies in music semiotics, we find his writings being quoted in a book dedicated to the comprehensive study of music semiotics. In his book *Music and Discourse—Toward a Semiology of Music*, Nattiez spent more than two pages on Seeger's writings as the introductory section for the second part of the book: "the semiology of discourse on music". Summarizing and quoting various Seeger articles also in elsewhere in his book, Nattiez commented, "...he [Seeger] was one of those rare musicologists who systematically undertook a metareflection on his own discipline." Nattiez also felt that there is a need for more systematic and critical studies on Seeger's thoughts, and "...certain basic ideas of Seeger's, notably his model for systematic musicology, are well worth being reexamined and discussed".

In his article published in *Music Theory* (translated from French version) in 1989, Nattiez summarized the history and current state of research of music semiology/semiotics. Reviewing literature from Europe and America, Nattiez argued that the development of semiology/semiotics has resulted in a highly diverse field of music semiotics, with no unified theory of reference

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<sup>1</sup> The term semiology is more a French use, whereas 'semiotics' is mainly a American use. They originated from different school of thoughts, but currently in music we use them interchangeably.

whatsoever. In the light of this summary, there are many writings on music that were not self-labeled as semiotics but concerned the subject with great devotion. Seeger, on the other hand, as a music philosopher, especially with his interest in speech about music, seems to me well fit into this category, and made contributions to some aspect of semiotic thoughts on music.

The purpose of the current paper is to explore Seeger's ideas in relation to the study of music semiotics, in particular, Nattiez's writings on music semiology. The first part of the discussion will be based on Seeger's own perspective: there are evidences suggested that Seeger was in fact aware and influenced partly by the theory of semiology at his time, particularly by Ferdinand de Saussure and so forth. The second part deals specifically with the relationship between Seeger and Nattiez's writing.

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Ferdinand de Saussure is the only linguist known to me whose writings Seeger quoted explicitly from time to time. When Seeger wrote in "Music as Concept and as Percept" that "while during the last 150 years linguists have developed a superb discipline of speech about speech, musicologists have done nothing at all about a discipline of speech about music", what he had in mind must have involved the revolutionary speculations Saussure had on the discipline of linguistics. One may be so amazed by the brilliant analytical mind that Saussure had for effectively distinguishing the diachronic from the synchronic orientation of linguistics on his own, which was significant in the foundation of the modern linguistic studies. His other speculations on what was later known as semiology, his critique on traditional grammar, historical linguistics, and comparative linguistics, as well as on the geographical studies of

language, etc, are also quite sharp. Upon reading Saussure, Seeger must have been attracted and inspired by his linguistics studies and began to speculate on his own discipline.

Although Saussure is now most well known as the father of French semiology, it seems that Seeger was not so much attracted by his ideas on semiology as he is interested in the two orientations of linguistics, which Seeger applied explicitly to musicology<sup>2</sup>. Seeger also mentioned briefly on Saussure's linguistic distinctions among "*langage/langue/parole*" and discussed their relevance to musicology<sup>3</sup>. Elsewhere Seeger seems to refer to language and music as "different semiotic systems" to discuss the issue of linguocentric predicament.

On the other hand, a glance through Saussure's classic lecture notes *Course de linguistique generale* suggests that the influence Saussure had on Seeger could be much more than what we realized, seen in Seeger's other writings without directly mentioning the ideas from Saussure. In order to make clear such covert influence, a quick review of Saussure's idea on synchrony and diachrony in linguistics might be helpful.

Let's start from an example:

Anglo-Saxon	*fôt/fôti	*tôd/tôdi	*gôs/gôsi
	foot/feet	tooth/teeth	goose/geese

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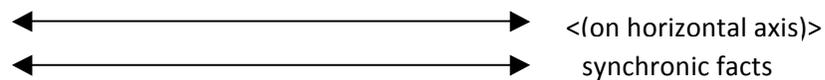
<sup>2</sup> In "Systematic (Synchronic) and Historical (Diachronic) Orientations in Musicology", SIM pp.1-15.

<sup>3</sup> In "Speech, Music, and Speech About Music", SIM pp.25.

These are single and plural forms in the early Anglo-Saxon language, whereas later two things happened: (1) the *i* influenced *o* and changed it to *e* : *fôtt* → *\*fêti*; (2) another development removed the final *i*, so one has now: *fôt/fêt*, *tôd/téd*, *gôs/gés*.

Today we have a mechanism of forming plural in these words by vowel contrast; formerly it was quite different, by an extra element in the end of the word, not by a different vowel.

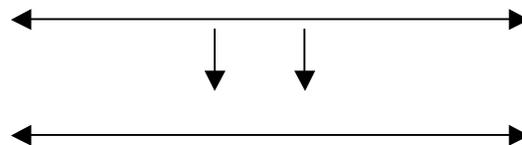
Saussure sees this in the framework of synchronic and diachronic views. The relation between terms, whatever they may be, which marks singular and plural can be indicated thus:



And the facts, whatever they may be, which constituted the transition from one to the other can be indicated thus:



In other words we have this diagram:



In elaborating the significance of studying the laws of languages in this framework, Saussure states that:

“ [in this example] the synchronic fact is always a meaningful fact, one which involves meaning. It requires the co-presence of at least two terms. It is not ‘feet’ that contains the idea of plural. It is the contrast of foot-feet that gives rise to the idea of plural. If we take the diachronic fact, [opposite to the synchronic view above], the condition for the existence of ‘feet’ is that *fôti* should disappear. We are dealing with terms succeeding one another instead of with terms coexisting.” He goes further: “In the synchronic perspective of language, there would be as many entirely different systems as periods, but they can be studied within the same science because they are based on similar relations [like the one between singular/plural] (on synchronic relations).”

From this, if we do not see strong connection on the specifics between Saussure’s original plot for the two orientations of linguistics and for Seeger’s plot for two orientations in music, that is certainly because of the difference between language and music. How Seeger sees the merit of these two orientations, and how he argues that the systematic is the foundation of historical might have stem from this difference in adopting the methodology. However, Saussure didn’t stop on the specific technical aspects of linguistics in proposing these two orientations; rather, he went on to a more philosophical look at the two, which in my view, cast enormous influence on Seeger’s thoughts, including how he understands the distinction between “what it is/used to be” and “how it came to be what it is”, and the distinction between “structure” and “function”, themes that persistently seen throughout his writings.

Saussure stated the merit of the two orientations in an analogy with a chess game:

“ In the game of chess, a given position is comparable to a language state in these three aspects: (1) you feel that the value of the pieces is determined only by their relative positions in a system like foot/feet (singular/plural); (2) you feel that the system on which these values depend is always temporary. The value of each piece depends on the temporary system; (3) what brings about the transition from one position of the pieces to another, one system to another, one synchrony to another? It is moving ONE PIECE ONLY, not changing all the pieces around. In this third fact we have (1) the diachronic fact with all its implications and everything that distinguishes it from the synchronic facts that it affects. Each chess move physically involves only one piece, like the diachronic fact. In the second place, (2) in spite of that the effect of the chess move on the system is incalculable. The change in value which results for each of the pieces may, depending on the case, be either none, or change the entire situation <even affecting the pieces overlooked on the board>”. (Saussure 1993)

From this analogy we see the implications derived from synchronic and diachronic perspectives beyond the study of different linguistic features. This should remind us of Seeger's notion of structure vs. function: while structure is "perceivable as facts, past or present phenomena in the physical, external universe of the senses...universe of things", "data—things given", "one can observe them objectively", function, on the other hand, according to Seeger, "has to do with action, movement, force, process toward an end" (Seeger 1977:142).

By now, it should be safe for us to view the dichotomy of function and structure, one of the most essential dichotomies in Seeger's writings, in the light of the synchronic and diachronic orientations of Saussure. It is interesting, though, to observe what Seeger has taken from Saussure and what Seeger himself developed into later. Saussure is the father of European semiology; although he has many research focuses in linguistics, the notion of synchrony and diachrony is not only a matter of orientation for linguistics. It is also closely linked to the science that Saussure created known as semiology, the study of languages as signs, in relation to other signs used in human communication. However, Seeger did only take the dichotomy to serve as his basic ideas for the discipline of musicology, as well as his philosophical writings based on the dichotomy of structure and function. On this point, it seems that Seeger was unrelated to semiology, at least the Saussurian semiology<sup>4</sup>.

On the other hand, Seeger's many other concerns, notably the linguocentric predicament, do have great implications of a semiotics study of music, as suggested by Nattiez in the 1980s. These theories, as far as I'm concerned, did not display a direct influence from Saussure.

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<sup>4</sup> There seems to be one exception, when Seeger wrote "traditions are distinguishable from one another (1) in the selection of materials and (2) in the manner of forming them in discrete productions." (Seeger 1977:158) This statement is similar to Saussure's basic idea on language as a system of signs.

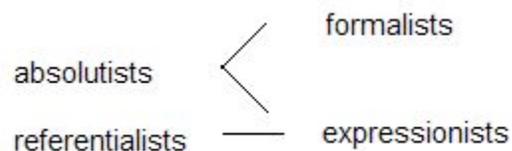
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This second section will examine Seeger's thoughts through the lens of a general study of music semiotics, and particularly focused on Nattiez's writing on music semiology. As mentioned previously, there exists far from a unified theory or approach in the study of music semiotics; however, one may speak of a fundamental question that all music semioticians have tried to answer, often in the first place: that is the question of the musical meaning.

According to Nattiez, the manifestation of the formalist perspective of Western music, who argues that music express nothing more than itself, dates back to a slim volume by Hanslick, *On Musically Beautiful* (1854), and this conception finds its direct musico-semiological echo in the theoretical definitions of Jakobson (1970) and the practical research of Ruwet (1972). (Nattiez 1989) Meyer summarizes the different views on musical meaning in the following chart:



According to Meyer, there are on one side *absolutists* who believe that musical meaning is based exclusively on the relationships between the constituent elements of the work itself, and on the other *referentialists* for whom there cannot be meaning in music, except by referring to an extramusical universe of concepts, actions, emotional states, and characters (Meyers 1956). But this dichotomy is mirrored in another that does not exactly correspond to it: the *formalists* who

do not acknowledge that music can provoke affective responses (it has an intrinsic significance given to it by the play of its forms), and the *expressionists* who acknowledge the existence of feelings.

Seeger's perspective on musical meaning rests mainly upon the comparison of music and language as different semiotic systems. In his article "The Music Compositional Process as a Function in a Nest of Functions and in Itself a Nest of Functions", Seeger views the music and speech as two "sound signal systems", as are also used by many other animals such as nonhuman primates. Seeger concluded in the end that despite the fact that they are both sound signal systems, music, considered in its own terms, does not function as a symbol as speech does, that is, if we consider the definition of symbol as referring to "something that stands for something else that it does not or is not believed or intended to resemble". (Seeger 1977:164) As Seeger pointed out, this definition of symbol is indeed intended for a sign/symbolic system such as language. Music, if we consider it functioning as a sign/symbol at all, is intrinsically a different type of sign/symbol than that of language, as clearly defined here. When American semiologist Pierce re-defined sign as just "something that stands for something else for somebody", the scope of sign/symbol is broadened, and thus music could be included. But this is not in the Seeger's presumption. Judging from this, it seems that Seeger did not so much influenced by the American semiology school developed primarily by Pierce and so forth, but rather stayed in the classic European semiology, with general notions derived probably from Saussure.

Meanwhile, if we examine the view on musical meaning of Seeger, he would belong to the absolutist category, but I'm not sure whether he belongs to formalist or expressionist category

listed by Meyer. It is interesting to see that Seeger did not devote whole articles to such topic. Rather, there are brief discussions in various articles, notably, in the one about structure and function mentioned above. This suggests that Seeger did not have serious interest in explore the various possibilities of interpreting musical meaning, or he'd rather think it is a simple matter that doesn't invite much debate. Nonetheless, here are some quotes of the related passages:

“The common error has been to cite a musical datum, for example, the ascending diatonic third, and immediately to correlate it with nonmusical data. Thus, the major third is said to symbolize or stimulate cheerful affects; the minor, sad. Soon all major and minor intervals, ...are similarly characterized.” (Seeger 1977:160)

“No one has ever shown that music distinguishes a cat from a dog, black from white, true from false, good from evil, any two concrete phenomena or abstract concepts...Continued association of particular speech symbols with particular musical structures can, to be sure, become conventionalized and may, like the bell for Pavlov's dog, serve as a substitute symbol. But it would be a substitute speech symbol, not a music symbol...Association of the symbolism “Victory for the Allies” to the beginning of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony during WWII did not alter the music message or the music semiotic understanding of the work in any way whatsoever. Unusual dissonance, especially if insisted upon and not resolved in the approved fashion, has been long associated with evil, and in the early 1920s brought about the denunciation of Schoenberg's music by one conservative musician as ‘dirty, evil, of the gutter’. Coincidence, however, of musical sounds and some natural sonal and rhythmic events in physical and cultural phenomena is not to be taken as symbolization unless words to that effect are involved, in which case the symbolization is words”. (Seeger 1977: 158-9)

These two is more obscure but speaks of his core viewpoint:

“(1)the extensive structuralization of music throughout the world by the art of speech and (2) the many social uses and functions it is said to serve (3) tend to blind one to the possibility that music functions in a universe of its own...in this model of the case, music would not embody and would not communicate with respect to particular speech meanings, which is to say, referent in the universe of discourse or the universe of the senses, or thoughts or emotions distinguished, named, and classified by speech techniques, but would mainly paradromize—run parallel to the dynamics ( tensions, tonicities, and detension) of what is not music, in the manner peculiar to its signal-message syndrome.” (Seeger 1977:166)

These comments may be viewed as semiological materials on the semiology of music; however, what Nattiez made use of Seeger's writing is mainly in the second part of his book, about the "the semiology of *discourse* on music". This is based on Seeger's concern for the "linguocentric predicament". After two pages of quotation which traced the main ideas of the linguocentric predicament, Nattiez commented: "Seeger's reflections on the subject underline one critical fact: that musicological and analytical discourse, because it is language, has a semiological nature quite different from that of music. The statement clearly begs for further elaboration. Because analytical discourse is a metalanguage, it has a particular semiological specificity: to what does it refer?"

As Nattiez stated, his second part of the book, devoted to the semiology of discourse on music can be seen as an elaboration on Seeger's writings about the linguocentric predicament. Although there is no evidence that Nattiez's discussion stems from Seeger, it is safe to say that Seeger would be very glad and interested in seeing these discussions, and he would thought that it could perfectly fit into his argument for the linguocentric predicament. The only obvious difference between the two is that while Seeger is concerned with any talking about music using language, Nattiez confined himself in dealing with the discourse in music analysis, a specialized kind of talking about music. He shows that even within the discourse of music analysis, there are very different kinds of talking according to the mode of the analysis, and there are difference between the talking of musicologists and composers.

Nattiez gives concrete examples for different kinds of analytical discourse. For instance, on the analysis of melodic domain alone, Nattiez wrote: "if we examine theories of melody, and the

analytical techniques that are associated with them, we can tentatively classify different modes of using language—modes that seem, to me, representative of musical analysis in general.” He classifies these analytical discourses into three main categories: (1) non-formalized analyses; (2) formalized analyses; and in between, (3) an intermediate model. He further divides these into subcategories, for instance, for non-formalized models, there are (a) impressionistic analyses [that explains the melody’s content in a more or less high-literary style], (b) paraphrases [basically a matter of “re-speaking” a musical text in plain words, without adding anything to that text], and (c) hermeneutic readings of the text. He gives examples for each of these types of talking.

In the discussion of the so called “intermediate” model of analysis, Nattiez talks about one of his major change in his attitude towards formal analysis, which is interestingly relevant to Seeger’s contention for a balance of fact and value in musicology studies. (Nattiez didn’t state whether it was influenced by Seeger’s notion of fact and value). Nattiez wrote, “Formalist reductionism’s great mistake is to proceed as if gaining precise knowledge of a work were possible only by working through the constraints of formalization. The contemporary intellectual landscape, however, persuades me that the opposite is true: if, in the course of an elegant hermeneutic reading, a writer allows him/herself critical appreciations and aesthetic judgments, this does not preclude discovering and describing configurations that nonetheless constitute the germ of some systematic organization.” He also thinks we should “assign a specific place to analyses that make use of graphics without appealing to a system of formalized rules.” Then he goes on to admit that “ten years ago, I would have come down on the side of formalized models without any hesitation”. I imagine Seeger would be very glad to see such change and a shifted focus of music analytical discourse to critical methods closely related to value.

From this comparison we can see clearly that Seeger's concern on the linguocentric predicament served as a fundamental introduction for Nattiez's elaboration. However, we should keep in mind that Seeger comes from a different training than Nattiez: while the latter is a systematically trained semiologist, Seeger's thoughts were shaped due to the influence of probably broader range of disciplines, mostly through his own learning; meanwhile, what he came up tends to show a blend on the complex of thinking rather than specially trained systematic thinking in some certain discipline. This is also seen in the studies of Seeger in relation to other disciplines, such as sociology, history, or anthropology.

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To conclude, I have revealed in this paper that Seeger has a rather interesting relationship with the study of semiology and music semiotics. On the one hand, he is very much influenced by Saussure, the father of European semiology, but the influence turns out not so much focused on semiological thoughts. Rather, Seeger primarily took the notion of synchronic and diachronic study from Saussure to develop his own essential theory on the orientations of musicology, as well as his essential notion of structure and function. On the other hand, Seeger's concern on the linguocentric predicament (which seems to have been his own original idea without direct influence from others) served as a precursor on the later study of music semiotics by Nattiez.

These relationships are briefly discussed in the current study. Nonetheless, I feel that the relationship between Saussure's writings and Seeger's thoughts might call for a further exploration, since they are both vast [although Saussure's writings are not physically vast] and

contain numerous rich ideas. This task is not thoroughly completed in the current study and I await an extended study on this topic in the future.

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