An Interpretive Model for Conceptual Music

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Statement of Originality

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision.

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University’s Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and any approved embargo.

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Acknowledgements and Dedication

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Abstract

Conceptual music is defined as music which is primarily concerned with the presentation of ideas and concepts. This is a broad category. It encompasses a variety of approaches to musical composition and production including, for example, program music, mash-ups, ekphrasis, and graphic scores. There have been previous studies of some of these sub-categories of conceptual music. However, to date, no musicological research has adequately recognised or dealt with conceptual music as a single field, unified by the pivotal role of ideas and concepts. For this reason, there exists no generally accepted terminology or established methodology for the exegesis of works of conceptual music – as conceptual works, first and foremost – regardless of any other musical styles or genres into which they might also be classified. This is “the exegetical problem of conceptual music.” Until now, it has remained largely unrecognised.

The aim of this thesis is to make a contribution towards addressing this problem, by developing an interpretive model suitable for the analysis and interpretation of conceptual music. The model developed here proposes a typology of five modes of conceptual music. Each mode is defined in terms of the different types of ideas or concepts which have been intentionally shifted into the interpretive spotlight by the artist or composer. Specifically, the five modes are labelled (1) identifying, (2) signifying, (3) crafting, (4) referring, and (5) worldmaking.

This five-category model is developed and justified through a detailed and wide-ranging argument which draws on observations and insights from a number of fields, including musical psychology, semiotics, and philosophy. In particular, the model integrates key aspects of the writings of three thinkers on the topic of human discourse – Charles Sanders Peirce, Paul Ricoeur, and Juri Lotman. The philosophical and theoretical writings of these three figures are, in many fundamental respects, sympathetically aligned. This is a point which has not been previously noticed in the research literature. Thus, this thesis is the first in-depth study to bring together, into a single overall interpretive framework, the complementary approaches of Peirce, Ricoeur and Lotman. It is also the first time that Stanley Salthe’s basic principles for coherent heuristic representations of natural systems have been consciously applied to the challenge of building an interpretive model adequate to the hermeneutics of music and the arts.

In order to prove the viability of the typology which has been proposed, each of the five modes is considered in turn, and used to enrich the detailed exegeses of selected genres and works of conceptual music (including some from the accompanying creative portfolio of original works by the author). From this, it is concluded that the proposed interpretive model – and the associated typology of five modes of conceptual music – represents a useful and novel contribution to musicological study of music in which ideas and concepts are paramount.
Conventions Used in This Thesis

Style

I generally follow the prescriptions of *The Chicago Manual of Style*, sixteenth edition,\(^1\) using the “notes and bibliography” system. For citations of specialised materials, such as music scores, sound recordings, and films I adopt the recommendations in *VCA Citation Guide for Specialised Resources*, Version 1.6.\(^2\)

Spelling

Except in quotations and citations (where the spelling of the original is retained), spelling conforms to the first-listed entry in the *Macquarie Dictionary*, seventh edition.\(^3\)

Proper Names

a. Juri Lotman

For the sake of consistency, I have standardised the spelling of Juri Lotman’s name in the Roman alphabet to “Juri M. Lotman,” or “Juri Lotman,” regardless of the different transliterations from the Cyrillic (Юрий М. Лотман) found in translated sources.

b. Arnold Schoenberg

I have retained the spelling “Schönberg” wherever it appears as such in quoted sources or bibliographic citations. Otherwise, I use “Schoenberg,” the spelling the composer himself adopted in his later years when living in the United States.

Abbreviations

I adopt the usual scholarly conventions for abbreviated references to the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce. See Bibliography for details.

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1. *The Chicago Manual of Style*, sixteenth edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). My main departure from *Chicago* recommendations is that I do not quote Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs) where these are available. For internet only items, I quote the URL, but (as recommended by *Chicago*) without including date accessed information. See *Chicago* 14.184 and 14.185 for a discussion.


Wer will was Lebendigs erkennen und beschreiben,  
Sucht erst den Geist herauszutreiben,  
Dann hat er die Teile in seiner Hand,  
Fehlt leider nur das geistige Band.

- Goethe, Faust

4 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Faust, Erster Teil, lines 1936-39. The following English translation is given by Walter Kaufmann:

Who would study and describe the living, starts  
By driving the spirit out of the parts:  
In the palm of his hand he holds all the sections,  
Lacks nothing, except the spirit’s connections.

See Goethe’s Faust, the original German and a new translation and introduction by Walter Kaufmann, Part One and Sections from Part Two, (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 199.