

The Designation of Concepts in Studies of Multipart Music

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Abstract

The starting point of this article is Hilary Putnam's idea of getting away from the picture of the meaning of a word as something like a 'list of concepts'. That a term may have different uses rather than one absolute meaning is all too familiar in ethnomusicology. The vast diversity of the musical practices focused on, the local terminologies, the manifold worldviews of the individuals involved in them, and the significant impact the terminology of studies of "Western art music" plays are all decisive in this context.

In studies of multipart music the designation of concepts is connected both with the different understandings attributed to terms already in use, such as 'polyphony', 'multipart music' or the German term *Mehrstimmigkeit*, and with the establishment of new terms. The newly established terms focus on the one hand on the musical outcome, as in the cases of *Schwebungsdiaphonie* and 'polymusic', and on the other hand on the role of the music makers, their understandings and the complexity of their interactions during the performance and in discussions about it, as in 'singing in company'.

These different approaches are attempts to verbalize the actions of the (re)creation of acoustical forms based on the interactions of "individualists in company".

1. Introduction

"Theoretical terms in science have no analytic definitions [...]; yet these are surely items (and not atypical items) in the vocabulary of natural languages." (Putnam 1975: 146; italics in original) The term 'natural language' is understood in philosophy as a "human language like English or Japanese, as opposed to a computer language, musical notation, formulas in logic, and so on" (Pinker 1994: 478). Hilary Putnam formulates the statement on *theoretical terms* in the article "Is semantics possible?" in which he suggests the need "to get away from the picture of the meaning of a word as something like a *list of concepts*" (Putnam 1975: 146; italics in original).

In metaphysics and especially ontology, a concept is a fundamental category of existence. According to Eric Margolis and Stephen Lawrence there are "two dominant frameworks in contemporary philosophy" concerning the question of what is a concept. "One proposes that concepts are mental representations, while the other proposes that they are abstract objects." (Margolis, Lawrence 2007: 561)

As far as mental representations are concerned Steven Pinker emphasizes that "the theory of thinking called 'the physical symbol system hypothesis' or the 'computational' or 'representational' theory of mind [...] is as fundamental to cognitive science as the cell doctrine is to biology and plate tectonics is to geology." (Pinker 1994:

77–78) Another supporter of this orientation, Jerry A. Fodor, states that if

the computational theory of the mind is true (and if, as we may assume, content is a semantic notion par excellence) it follows that content alone cannot distinguish thoughts. More exactly, the computational theory of mind requires that two thoughts can be distinct in content only if they can be identified with relations to formally distinct representations. (Fodor 1981: 227)

This perspective is helpful to comprehend the importance of the discussion about the designation of concepts both in a broad sense and in more specific contexts. Studies on multipart music are under-represented in this context. This is obviously one of the reasons why this subject is also being given more and more space in the discussions of the Study Group on Multipart Music of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM).

The view of concepts as "abstract objects" goes back to the German philosopher and mathematician Gottlob Frege, who introduced the terms *Sinn* (sense) and *Bedeutung* (reference) into the philosophical discourse in his article of 1892 "Über Sinn und Bedeutung" ("On sense and reference"). "The Fregean tradition maintains that the meaning of a declarative sentence is a proposition, where propositions are understood to be