

Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music by V. Kofi Agawu. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Review-Article by Daniel Harrison

Clearly, a remarkable analytic speciation of tonal music is underway. I do not refer to the standard style-historical divisions—Baroque, Classic, Romantic, etc.—but rather to the appearance of analytic techniques designed expressly for specific styles. Perhaps I speak too generally: what seem to be appearing are analytic techniques designed expressly for Classic music. Leonard Ratner's *Classic Music: Expression, Form, Style* was the first sign of this trend, and it has been followed by works by Wye Jamison Allanbrook, Robert O. Gjerdingen, Mark Evan Bonds, William Rothstein, and now Kofi Agawu.¹ The rewards of this analytic specialization are easily identified and too valuable to question: we get a set of fine-tuned techniques that work very effectively with the repertory in question, which can only deepen our appreciation for the structural resources of Classic music. Truly, if the accomplishments of the authors mentioned above are any sign, we can fairly say that a golden age of Classic-music analysis is upon us, one that is offering many fresh and stimulating insights into this important repertory.

¹Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980); Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: Le Nozze di Figaro and Don Giovanni* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Robert O. Gjerdingen, *A Classic Turn of Phrase: Music and the Psychology of Convention* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); Mark Evan Bonds, *Wordless Rhetoric: Musical Form and the Metaphor of the Oration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); William Rothstein, *Phrase Rhythm in Tonal Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1989). It might be argued that Rothstein's work does not belong in the company of these works because it treats Romantic as well as Classic music, but its implicit treatment of Classic-music phrase rhythms as normative earns it admission. Robert Hatten has also been working in this area for a number of years and has recently completed a book-length manuscript "Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation" (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming).

Who can find fault with such a program? Who, after all, is against fresh insight? But there is a downside. In this rush to claim special, marked status for classic music—whatever that status entails—other style periods of tonal music are subtly being left behind. Baroque music, especially, is being unhooked from Classic music and, in the new regime, is becoming something rather alien and impenetrable. Rothstein says as much when he alludes to “the profound differences that exist between the phrase rhythms of the Baroque and those of Classic and Romantic music.”² In throwing more light on Classic music, are we inadvertently putting Baroque music into deeper shadow?

If so, a troublesome ontological fault appears in the great rock of “tonality,” a theoretical Gibraltar which theorists as diverse as Schenker, Riemann, and Lerdahl & Jackendoff have assured us easily shelters Baroque, Classic, and Romantic music. For it is being asserted that Classic music has special structural features—which we are only now able to target with style-specific analytic tools—that Baroque and Romantic music do not have. Though these features do not impinge upon the basic structural properties of tonality, as Agawu’s work attempts to stress, they do influence profoundly the way in which these properties are used. Though a IV chord, say, is a IV chord regardless of whether it appears in the work of Bach, Beethoven, or Brahms, we are shortly coming to the point where we can understand differences in its structural uses and behaviors, as well as in its characteristic voicings and rhetorical meanings, for each composer and each style. I thus think it likely that we will lose tonality as it is now construed; in its place will appear—indeed, is already appearing—tonalities more descriptive of and sensitive to stylistic differences. The present view of an all-encompassing common-practice tonality will become a kind of clearinghouse for standard harmonic and voice-leading structures, made as value-free and purely technical as can be. But the further flowering of the “golden age” of Classic-music analysis, as well as the likely appearance of works focusing on other styles, will direct us towards more refined and custom-built concepts of tonality suitable for each style period. Soon it may, in fact, become theoretically unpalatable to juxtapose musical examples from various tonal style periods in our textbooks

²Rothstein, *Phrase Rhythm*, vii.

as we so blithely do now: greater sensitivity to stylistic differences may weaken our appreciation for style-neutral features of harmony and voice leading.

But I grow prophetic. At hand is a work completely unaware of its destabilizing potential,³ and it is to its merits and defects that I now turn.

I

Kofi Agawu's *Playing with Signs* is a weighty book despite its slender size of 153 pages. The author has a firm grasp upon two potentially ponderous subjects: semiotics and music theory, yet he manipulates these with the ease and strategic vision of a general drilling troops on the parade ground. Despite this admirable strength, *Playing with Signs* cannot always sustain its own weight, for the many ideas it plays with occasionally prove too much for the author to handle effectively. Even though Agawu plainly states in the Preface that his is a work of analysis rather than theory [ix], it is in the analytical portions of the book—where the general's troops find themselves at the front instead of the barracks—that the stresses upon Agawu's conceptual structure are felt most strongly, even to the point of discomfort. Interestingly, the author occasionally admits to this problem by means of various disclaimers planted in both main text and footnotes. When, for example, I found myself increasingly resisting analytic assertions while working through the middle portion of the book, I remembered the following passage from the Preface:

My title includes the article "a" not to deflect attention from the book's shortcomings by acknowledging the possibility of multiple interpretations of the same piece of music, but rather to recognize—indeed, to celebrate—the activity of music analysis as a never-ending process. I know of no analysis that is finished or complete; the best analyses, in my view, are those that spur the musician on to further analysis. It is my hope that some readers will

³But see pp. 32–33, footnote 25. Agawu there resists the idea that "later eighteenth-century music could form an 'independent system'," though his own work is, in fact, an analysis of such a system.

find it difficult to resist arguing with the book's premises and method. [ix]

So, by disagreeing with the author, I am fulfilling his hopes. Therefore, my mixed review of *Playing with Signs* proves that the book is as provocative as the author wants it to be. What, I wonder, would a glowing review signify?

When Agawu writes, "Doubtless it would have been a better book had I waited another decade to write it. . . ." [x], the reader is—perhaps unintentionally—invited to speculate about deficiencies in the present book. All the ones I have spotted, apart from analytical disagreements that the author is apparently glad to provoke, center on the relationship between semiotics and music theory. In short, another decade of "barrel time," another decade of maturation and blending would have produced a smoother, more complex, and more satisfying vintage than the one now offered. The work has simply been bottled too soon, and the competing flavors and essences are the source of the unwelcome stress the reader senses in the book.

Agawu is well-known as a musician and analyst, so his credentials as a music theorist are not in question. As far as semiotics goes, it is clear that he has read widely in its literature, and that his knowledge of the subject is quite thorough. But I do not think he is a semiotician just yet. That is, he is an expert user of semiotic ideas, but not an original thinker in the field on the order of a Nattiez, Keiler, or Hatten. It is clear, however, that he is poised to join this company, and sooner than the decade he seems to have allowed himself. Chapter 7, an outline of an original semiotic theory for Classic music that lays bare the foundation if not the full structure of his analytic assumptions, is a solid abstract for the work of semiotics that will earn him admission.

On occasion, the difference between original thinker and expert user in the present book makes for some heavy going. A good deal of the Introduction is spent browsing through the semiotic store, picking through authors and ideas that could be of any use to Agawu's project. Although perhaps a necessary act of definition and of orientation, the continual stuffing of congenial ingredients into the shopping bag results in a weighty load as the chapter goes on, and also makes one wonder whether Agawu will gently simmer these items to make something complex yet clear, or simply slice and dice them into conceptual hash. Perhaps it is actually for the

good that we are made aware of the latter possibility, for Agawu points out that “semiotics” is hardly a monolithic enterprise on the order of, say, “organic chemistry.” That is, the reader is appropriately informed that significant differences in interests, terminology, and method exist between various authors who have been associated with semiotics in one way or another. (Indeed, the choice of name itself—“semiotics” or “semiology”—identifies the user with a particular school within the discipline.) But a critical and original appraisal of the ideas he engages—a necessary step to joining any scholarly community—is not much in evidence. Fortunately, in the end no hash is served. But, while what he serves is indeed complex if not always clear, it still seems to be from a recipe that the cook followed, not wrote.

Another sign that Agawu is not yet entirely at home in semiotics is the subtle change in writing style that occurs when semiotic issues are discussed. Though generally dense with gusts up to opaque, Agawu’s writing can be polished and even playful when dealing with music. When he writes about semiotics, however, it becomes rather stiff, and the jargon seems ponderous and self-conscious, as if too much freight were loaded on individual terms instead of distributed evenly across sentences and paragraphs. Of course, the use of technical language is no vice; given the hard task of marrying semiotics to music theory, it is, in fact, unavoidable. But it is unfortunate that more care was not taken in smoothing the language and tone for an audience whose acquaintance with semiotics is bound to be less than Agawu’s.

Putting aside the problems arising from conceptual systems that are betrothed but not yet married, *Playing with Signs* achieves notable advances on a number of theoretical fronts. I believe its greatest contribution is putting Leonard Ratner’s concept of topic upon firmer theoretical footing, while at the same time providing additional demonstrations of its analytic utility.⁴ The semiotic component of the work seems virtually necessary given the focus upon topic: it is a concept extraordinarily amenable to semiotic interpretation. As Agawu puts it:

⁴Ratner succinctly describes topics as characteristic figures, manners, or types available to a style. Topic is discussed in detail in Ratner, *Classic Music*, 9–29.

Topics are musical signs. They consist of a signifier (a certain disposition of musical dimensions) and a signified (a conventional stylistic unit, often but not always referential in quality). . . . The world of topic, like its parent world of the sign, is potentially open, so that one cannot—and need not—specify the total number of topics current in the eighteenth century. [49]

Agawu devotes an entire chapter to the nature of topics as signs, and his account is simply the best available, on account of both its sensitivity to problems in topical analysis and its depiction of the rewards of such analysis. Yet an undercurrent of dubiety makes itself felt in this chapter; Agawu does not have faith that topic by itself can lead to satisfying analytic endeavors. It is for this reason that some issues about topics are left up in the air—issues concerning relationships among the elements of the universal set of topic, as well as issues about how topics produce meaning. The solution for bolstering the topic as an analytic approach involves playing it off of more traditional theoretical constructs such as harmony and voice leading (analyzed in Schenkerian terms), musical forms and their stereotyped functions, and a crude but still effective compass for determining location within a given musical unit that Agawu calls the “beginning-middle-end” paradigm.⁵ Clearly, there are a lot of players in this game, and, as we will see, Agawu occasionally is an ineffective referee of their interaction.

II

The heart of *Playing With Signs* is three analytical essays dealing with the first movement of Mozart's C-major Quintet, K. 515, the first movement of Haydn's D-minor Quartet, op. 76, no. 2, and the first movement of Beethoven's A-minor Quartet, op. 132. The interesting restriction to chamber music for strings I will

⁵Much of Chapter 3 is devoted to the compass paradigm, and its ability to treat aspects of formal dynamics is rightly stressed. Agawu is quite fond of the paradigm, and he uses it to describe the ideas of Heinrich Schenker and Leonard Ratner almost in one breath (pp. 52–56), a juxtaposition that Ratner would vehemently resist. Ratner would sooner be coupled to Riemann than to Schenker in this matter.

discuss later. The further restriction to first movements, however, makes clear the almost obsessional attention that Agawu pays to them throughout his book. This mania is not obvious, largely because the book lacks an index of musical examples and references, where it could not very well be hidden. But even a desultory listing of references reveals a pronounced bias towards first movements. My reading of this eccentricity is that Agawu finds first movements to be the best venue for his many analytic players, and especially for his stars: topic, form, and the beginning-middle-end “compass” paradigm. In four-movement works, the variety of topics is greatest in the outer movements; minuet and trio are by nature quite restricted in this regard, and second movements usually do not pursue the trope of topical succession as obviously as do outer movements. Last movements, too, would seem fertile ground for topical relationships, but they do not enjoy the assuredness of formal structure that Agawu needs in order to play with topic, form, and compass paradigm; the “trouble” they caused composers is an oft-repeated undergraduate-lecture commonplace.⁶ And so, because first movements are invariably set in Sonata-Allegro form—a compositional structure that has been thoroughly examined and discussed at length in the theoretic literature—they are perhaps the best vehicle for displaying Agawu’s analytic tools and, as a result, become the principal focus of his book.

But putting so many analytic interests in play can be dangerous because it is easy to lose track of so complicated a game. When this happens, the play that Agawu wants to engage in becomes overly ritualized and, indeed, no longer fun. The analysis of the Mozart Quintet movement, for example, begins with a diachronic “guided tour” through the traditional formal sections. But the tour is rife with tension between the normative functions of sonata form and the actual presentation and formal argument of the piece itself. When, for instance, Agawu states that “the alternative tonal premise of this movement is G major, the dominant of the home key, [and] its purpose is to undermine the key of C,” [82] we are given an opinion of what a second-key area *should* do. But the question of whether the alternative tonal premise *as expressed in this piece* does, in fact, “undermine” C is entirely begged. Indeed, his

⁶See, for example, Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style* (New York: Norton, 1972), 274ff.

analytic reading of the second key area could support an answer in the negative. "One of the principal achievements of the second key area," he writes, "is not merely an emphasis, but perhaps an overemphasis on closure," which is interpreted as "part of the strategy of undermining the authority of the first key." [50] But it is also possible that this emphasis indicates an *inability* to undermine the first key, that the obsession with closure might reflect failure of the G major section to, in fact, "open." The sense that the second-key area is a series of closings in search of an opening is terrifically boosted in the recapitulation, where it is finally—and perfectly—matched to the material of the first key area.⁷ Agawu seems to be writing about a case where Mozart played with sonata form, and sonata form won.

Another case where the piece appears beaten by theory concerns the close of the first key area. Appropriately, Agawu has us listen for the immense breadth of the opening period—fifty-seven measures—rightly held up as one of the longest Mozart wrote. But, interpreting the appearance of a second C major cadence after that in m. 57 (what Ratner would call an "Area of Arrival"⁸) as a sign that the m. 57 cadence is too weak to close the period, he completely misses the extraordinary strength of cadential approach to m. 57—indeed, one of the strongest Mozart wrote. The clue here is the emphasis given to pre-dominant harmonies in the cadential syntax; a strong $\flat\hat{6}$ in the bass in m. 48 announces the approach, and so many additional pre-dominant features are heaped on in the next six measures that anticipation for the expected authentic cadence becomes almost overwhelming. Moreover, that Mozart leaves the pre-dominant stage by means of an augmented-sixth chord only confirms the unusual cadential strength being built up here. (Mozart seems hardly ever to use an approach via an

⁷Agawu feels somewhat inconvenienced by the fact that both exposition and recapitulation end similarly, and he halfheartedly attempts to shoo the problem away on p. 68, footnote 16. In rhetorical terms, the use of large-scale structural repetition is peculiar to music (no orator would recapitulate the opening of an address the way a composer does in sonata form), and it is a central problem in the theorizing of a musical rhetoric. Agawu does not do the point justice here.

⁸Leonard Ratner, *Harmony: Structure and Style* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), 127–133.

augmented-sixth to close the tonic period; it appears more often in the setting up of the dominant period, as in mm. 30–37 of the “Haffner” symphony finale.) Despite these signals (signs?), Agawu fastens upon the repetition of the cadential moment in mm. 57–60 as indicative of cadential *weakness* in mm. 48–57, as if the m. 57 cadence were unable by itself to close the tonic period. But the reasoning strikes me as dubious.

The analytic problems the Haydn Quartet movement presents are quite different from those in the Mozart piece, and Agawu makes the most of these differences in order to illustrate the flexibility and power of his analytic approach. Whereas sonata-form functions, topic, and compass paradigm were juggled in the Mozart analysis, the compass paradigm takes center stage here and is played off against motivic content as well as sonata-form structure.

The Mozart analysis unfortunately conditioned me for resistance and skepticism where analytic assertions are concerned. And since the opening gambit in the Haydn analysis—an examination of the motivic and structural role of the perfect fifth in this movement, aptly nicknamed “Quinten”—fails to come off in my opinion, these unworthy attitudes are not, alas, dispelled. The problem, as Agawu acknowledges, is that the principal motive also happens to be the quintessential structural interval of tonal music. When does a fifth participate in motivic but not harmonic structure, and vice versa? And what about the overlap between the two? He defends his analytic path thusly:

To refuse to accord the fifth-inspired process any sort of priority, however, is to fail to appreciate a crucial aspect of the movement’s semiotic: the use of a commonplace in ways that expand its universe, thus exposing different, sometimes startling, connections with others, while retaining its essentially fixed signification within the tonal system. We will therefore distinguish between various fifths in the thematic process, invoking the general principle that significance is measured either by the coincidence of more than one signifying factor, or the retention of a salient previous identity, one that arises either by force of contiguity—in which case it may be immediately perceptible—or by association—in which case it may be less perceptible, but no less significant.
[102]

This is a worthy response. But, despite the promise to the contrary in the later portion of the quotation, he then proceeds to identify—and confuse—*bona fide* fifths of the theme, fifths that accompany cadential action, melodic skips that happen to be fifths, and various noncontiguous fifths plucked from the surface according to one criterion or another. In other words, Agawu actually *fails* to distinguish satisfactorily between various fifths, and thereby fails to demonstrate a “crucial aspect of the movement’s semiotic.” Instead of taking the double-duty of the fifth as a warning sign to use extreme care in analysis, Agawu takes it as an excuse for what strikes me as unbridled analyzing.⁹ There seems to be no distinction between the *bona fide* and the bogus. When is a fifth meaningful and when not?

Despite the problems of its opening, the analysis then settles into a fine examination of formal development in light of the compass paradigm, and Agawu has much to say here that is provocative and insightful. As in the Mozart analysis, sonata-form functions are occasionally imposed on a recalcitrant composition, resulting in unfortunate closing down of promising avenues of inquiry. For example, in considering the “alternative tonal premise of the movement” to be F major—because, presumably, that is standard for sonata-form pieces in D minor—Agawu must downplay the significance of the remarkable F-minor section of mm. 32–44, a passage that cries out to be taken as seriously an alternative tonal premise as F major. Though Agawu focuses upon its parenthetical character-traits in order to indenture it to the “correct,” F major premise, these traits are by no means dominant, and one can discern a more forceful and independent character on the basis of sheer length, let alone on its hot-blooded content.

III

For the analysis of the Beethoven movement that concludes the central portion of *Playing with Signs*, I could continue in the same

⁹In this light it is surprising, given Agawu’s fondness for ferreting out fifths, that he analyzes a long passage in the development as being in the control of the “dominant of the mediant minor” of F (i.e. the key of A) instead of pointing out that F’s mediant happens to be the fifth of the tonic key D.

manner as in the previous two analyses—which is to say, some praise for the effort, some niggling criticisms for the execution. Suffice it to say that the analysis is detailed, thick, rich (particularly in Schenkerian-based and topical insights), not without its moments of obscurity, rewarding, and provocative. The piece itself is quite a challenge, and the attention Agawu gives it is commensurate with its levels of meaning.

But I want to close with some observations about a general issue that is part of the foundation of *Playing with Signs*, an issue whose problems need to be exposed if Agawu's achievement is to be appraised fairly. The issue is a problem in what semioticians call "pragmatics"—the relation between signs and their users/consumers.

"How do composers reach their audience?" writes Agawu in the opening sentence of Chapter 1. The working out of an answer to this question can be taken as the motivating force of the book: "If the central task of the composer is to reach his audience, then a central problem for the analyst is to uncover the various dimensions of this communicative process." [4] But to carry out this program, it is necessary for the analyst to "play" audience, and not just any audience, but an eighteenth-century one.

The primary condition for the perception of topic is listener-competence. In order to be able to locate a given piece of music within the class of contemporary eighteenth-century discourses, the listener needs to be schooled in the idiom of the eighteenth century. . . . Although, with the benefit of hindsight, it is possible for a twentieth-century listener to acquire competence in an eighteenth-century idiom, the primary epistemological appeal of a topical analysis is to a contemporary eighteenth-century view. [49]

Now, let us consider the problem of reconstructing an eighteenth-century audience. First, the notion of "audience" itself. One always encounters troubles (no matter what the epoch) in generalizing any kind of sign-reading competence because, ultimately, the interpretation of complex signs is a highly personal act only weakly dependent upon group validation. (This state of affairs is responsible for the activity of criticism—the bringing before a group one's interpretation for discussion, approval, rejection,

modification, etc.) But let us grant the fiction of audience, since much of linguistics and semiotics requires it.

Next, the notion of “eighteenth-century audience,” and the assumption—implicit in the quotation above—that it was “competent” while we in the twentieth century are not, though we can “acquire” competence. It is in the reconstruction of such an audience that I think Agawu runs into trouble, for he retrofits the abilities of an expert, competent, yet *twentieth-century* audience upon an idealized eighteenth-century version. That is, he projects the competence *he* has acquired upon an eighteenth-century listener, completely oblivious to cultural factors that affect competence in the first place.

Consider: the number of Classic pieces Agawu knows is far greater than that known by an eighteenth-century counterpart, thanks to mass-media saturation by both broadcast and recording industries; to a concert life that in small college towns like Ithaca might rival that in Salzburg, Bratislava, and Ljubljana—no mean cities in the Habsburg empire; and finally to the positivist phase of nineteenth- and twentieth-century German musicology that produced Collected Works and Monuments of Music in which even minor composers of the era are well represented.

Let us now notice that late-twentieth century Western culture allows enormous numbers of musical styles to coexist simultaneously. Classical, Jazz, Rock, Rap, Country, and various styles of newly arrived immigrant groups—these are but a few that are viable today, and many have overlapping listenerships. Further, each of the generic styles just listed has various stylistic species to which initiates can become sensitive. Listening for stylistic differences and subtleties—the principal activity of topical analysis according to Agawu—is thus extraordinarily natural and, in fact, easy for us.

In this light, I venture that an eighteenth-century audience would be far less competent than Agawu wants us to believe. Let us not be taken in by the apparently unassailable conceit that the inhabitants of some culture are more knowledgeable observers of that culture than are outsiders—outsiders, in this case, by historical remove. On the contrary, we in the twentieth century have the ability to be more than competent insiders for any culture for which we have sufficient documentary evidence. We know far more, for example, about the decline of agriculture in the late Roman empire than did the hapless farmers of the time; we are more

knowledgeable about the forces leading to the Protestant Reformation than was either Luther or Calvin; closer to home, we often find that the most trenchant and perceptive critics of American culture have been foreigners, Tocqueville being the leading example. As for the Viennese Classic—the rows and rows of books and records in our libraries are ample testimony that we have far, far richer and more detailed knowledge of stylistic idiom than had even the most ardent—and competent—music lover of the time.

And what about the less ardent, who certainly account for the majority in any audience, eighteenth-century or not? A colonel garrisoned for years on the Turkish frontier, but who attends a concert while in Vienna on a month's leave—would such a person be stylistically competent? Would the ambitious young man from a minor noble family, who attends fashionable concerts as willingly and with as much interest as a professor attends committee meetings—would this person be competent?

But perhaps I personalize too much, and thus violate my agreement to allow the creation of a general audience. In truth, I spy only two eighteenth-century candidate groups for the kind of stylistic competence Agawu's work presupposes. The first is, obviously, composers and professional musicians. These people have a stake in musical style and are obsessive noticers of music and of its stylistic nuances. Moreover, just as linguistic competence involves the ability to communicate in and, therefore, understand a language, so musical competence really involves the ability to generate original musical utterances. Composers, in this light, are the only people competent enough to communicate in this way. Everyone else, in varying degrees, is incompetent.

Agawu inadvertently points out the privileged competence of eighteenth-century composers early in his first chapter, where he cites a letter from Mozart to his father that describes the composition of portions of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. Agawu writes:

Mozart . . . anticipates the likely impact of certain passages of music. He plans to use "Turkish music" to inject a note of comedy into the scene in which Osmin expresses his rage. There is no question that the composer bears his audience very much in mind, for he is certain that this strategy will "have a good effect." In other words, Mozart expected his audience to be able to

identify Turkish music and its traditional associations, and to react accordingly. [3]

No, Mozart expected his *father*—a fellow composer—to know what he meant by Turkish music. The typical operagoer of the time (the presumed eighteenth-century audience) could hardly be expected to note “Oh yes, Turkish music. Meaning: comedy.” A fellow musician might, and Leopold Mozart, certainly—not to mention twentieth-century music scholars. Ultimately, what can we possibly say about the surely inchoate responses and interpretations of some eighteenth-century audience?

The other group that might qualify for some measure of stylistic competence of the kind Agawu himself possesses is, as I put it above, the ardent and informed music lover. Such persons as J. F. M. Lobkowitz, Baron van Swieten, and Prince Nikolaus Esterházy spring to mind. Significantly, all three were musicians and probably sporadic composers as well, which strengthens their credentials for competence. Having conjured up these personages, as well as the kind of musical entertainments they favored and sponsored, we perhaps can now understand better why the three analytic essays in *Playing with Signs* treat works of chamber music—not opera, not symphony or concerto, not sacred music, and not keyboard sonata. Among the non-composers, the audience for chamber music was that which had the widest understanding of and sensitivity to style, allusion, convention, effect, artifice, etc.—in short, the whole range of expressive possibilities of Classic music. It would be this audience that, after composers themselves, would be the most like ourselves in competence.

I bring up this issue not to knock out the foundation of Agawu's book, but to point out that what he has done is not what he thinks he has done. This book is not an account of how some idealized eighteenth-century audience understood musical meaning, but a *rational reconstruction* of a semiotic system from the perspective of a twentieth-century music scholar, and it is this reconstruction that makes clear the ways in which meaning is transmitted in that system. *Playing with Signs* is not, as the author hoped, an investigation of how this music “meant” to an audience of the time, but an exposition of how it “means” to us who have knowledge of the semiotic system. It is, in other words, a work of music theory, not of hermeneutics. Thus, “the primary epistemological appeal of a topical analysis,” as Agawu put it

above, is to us twentieth-century analysts, not to a reconstruction of a fictive, eighteenth-century audience.

IV

I began this review with an observation that *Playing with Signs* manifests a trend in music theory towards specialized, repertory-based theories. I then remarked on the intrepid attempt at integrating semiotic concerns into music theory, proceeded to detail strengths and weaknesses in this attempt, and critiqued the analytic methods used to illustrate Agawu's theories. Finally, I commented upon an unnecessary epistemological conceit used to bolster the validity of the book. All in all, despite my occasional carping and clucking, I count *Playing with Signs* as an important contribution to music theory, one that must be consulted by anyone interested in semiotic applications, Classic music, and novel analytic techniques. (The concluding chapter dealing with Romantic music will likewise be of interest to scholars of that style period. It also reinforces my opening remarks about style-based analytic theories.) I concur with Agawu that "it would have been a better book had [he] waited another decade to write it," but only because the work does not marry its different concerns as well as it could, and because the framework needs a few more structural beams if it is to support the weight Agawu wants to place upon it. But even in this youngish form, I am better informed for having read the book, and come away from it with new ideas, questions, and methods. The author, I am sure, would be satisfied with this state of affairs.