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A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO OPEN NOTATIONS

Ambiguity as Opportunity

Tristan McKay



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Abstract: Along with twentieth-century developments in playing techniques, technologies, and concepts of musical sound, the notations employed by composers have also changed. Composers of what Umberto Eco calls “open works” often utilize intentionally ambiguous music notations. These open notations ask the performer to play a radical and active role in cocreating the musical work. In this text, I consider intersections of ambiguity, authority, and identity in works with open notations. Scores that feature open notations have been part of the Western classical music landscape since the mid-twentieth century, and continue to attract a vibrant community of practitioners today. I develop a semiotic approach to open notation analysis and put it into practice with in-depth analyses of works by Earle Brown, Will Redman, and Leah Asher.

Keywords: open notations, ambiguity, semiotics, open work, Earle Brown

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Contents

Introduction	1
1 Ambiguity as Opportunity	3
2 A Semiotic Approach to Open Notations	21
3 Into the Wilderness: Semiotic Analysis in Practice	35
4 Final Thoughts	67
Appendix: Prompts for Analysis	70
Bibliography	72