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On Musical Topics and Tropes. Definitions, History, Theoretical Amplifications, Pedagogical Applications, and Extensions

I. DEFINITIONS AND SCOPE OF THE THEORY

A musical *topic* has its origin in "a familiar style type with easily recognizable musical features, ranging in complexity from a simple figure (fanfare, horn call), to a texture (learned style as polyphonic and/or imitative; chorale or hymn as homophonic), a complete genre (various dance and march types; French overture), a [characteristic] style (*ombra*, *tempesta*, *Empfindsamkeit*), or some overlap of these categories."[1] Such familiar types become topics when they are imported–with at least some recognizable part of their characteristic identity–into a new or larger musical context; for example, a composer may choose to import a march to serve as the first theme for a sonata or a symphony. Obviously, the theme need not appear as a fully-formed and independent march; rather, the most characteristic features of a march (e.g., its metre, texture, typical rhythms and figuration) will suffice to cue the listener that the first theme has imported a march-like topic.

Recognizing the topical reference to a style type also involves recognizing its general affective associations, as further specified by its strategic use in the context of a new work. The tension between an imported topic and its new context can give rise to a *trope*–namely, the emergent meaning that arises from their interaction. For example, a heroic march might be introduced in a symphony by brass instruments, recalling a military band, or it might be played in a high register on the piano in a sonata, suggesting a music box and hence a decidedly less heroic affect–perhaps involving playful irony.

A trope may also emerge from the interaction of two or more topics appearing either simultaneously or successively within a clearly-bounded formal location (e.g., a theme). For example, the finale of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in A Major, Op. 101, launches with an eight-bar theme that combines heroic fanfare simultaneously with authoritative learned style (2–3 suspension chain) in its first four bars, shifting in response to a pastoral musette topic for next four measures.[2] The fanfare + learned (generally correlating with the heroic and the authoritative, respectively)

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[1] R. Hatten, *The Troping of Topics in Mozart's Instrumental Works*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. D. Mirka, New York 2014, p. 514.

[2] This example is discussed in R. Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven. Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation*, Bloomington 1994, p. 171.

here merge to create an emergent meaning, perhaps a sense of victorious determination (corresponding to Beethoven's verbal indication in the score, "*mit Entschlossenheit*") that is then softened by the musette (generally correlating with the pastoral as serene) to suggest an inner victory of the spirit rather than simply an outer victory of the will. The remainder of the movement will then work out the expressive significance of this tropological premise; these initial, striking juxtapositions thus are *thematized* by their foregrounding and subsequent use.

What these brief examples suggest is that a topic is not a simple sign with a single meaning, but rather a *token* of a *type* that must receive contextual interpretation to be comprehended in a stylistically warranted manner.[3] Nevertheless, the more general expressive associations that listeners will have for a range of familiar style types ("heroic", "authoritative", "pastoral/serene") provide obvious cues for interpreting the expressive purport of a non-programmatic symphony or sonata. Thus, topics are critical tools for theorists and performers in their quest for deeper meaning.

II. ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF TOPIC THEORY SINCE 1980

Modern topic theory may be said to have begun in the United States with Leonard Ratner, who presented evidence for such familiar styles and types as found in later eighteenth-century music.[4] I met Leonard Ratner at Stanford University in California, where I was invited to give a lecture in the mid-1990s. Remarkably, he told me that he had included the chapter on topics almost as an afterthought. Clearly, as demonstrated by his students, Wye (Wendy) Allanbrook (1983, 2014) and Kofi Agawu (1991, 2009), and later by Raymond Monelle (2000, 2006) and myself (1994, 2004, 2014), Ratner had opened an interpretive window that could complement the overly structural and formal approaches of other theorists, although much

more work would need to be done to adequately theorize the slippery concept of a topic.[5]

Just three years later, Allanbrook published a groundbreaking and sensitive interpretation of two Mozart operas based on their use of a range of dance and march topics.[6] Besides demonstrating the significance of topics for close interpretation, she took a step towards organizing topics based on their metres (see my elaboration of her "metrical spectrum" in section IV, below). In 1991, Kofi Agawu brilliantly demonstrated how topics (as *extroversive*) could be coordinated with Schenkerian analysis (as *introversive*, in this application of Roman Jakobson's distinction) in order to create a more integrative analysis of Classical instrumental works, although further expressive interpretation of those labelled topics and their potential interaction remained to be done.[7]

My own contribution in 1994 involved a theoretical reorganization of the topical hierarchy, demonstrating how larger topical fields (e.g., pastoral, heroic, religious) could contribute to expressive genres, based on trajectories involving fundamental oppositions among modes (major, minor) and stylistic registers (high, middle, low).[8] These expressive genres could then coordinate entire dramatic trajectories (e.g., tragic to triumphant, or tragic to transcendent), depending in part on the kind and sequence of topics being imported.

In 2000, Raymond Monelle offered a semiotic model for topical interpretation that clarified the different motivations of a topic that sounds like its "referent" (e.g., a bird call), and is thus *iconic*, but that also references a *cultural unit* (e.g., "harbinger of spring"), and is thus *indexical*.[9] This emphasis on

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[3] For more on the distinction between *tokens* and *types*, and applications to music interpretation, see ibidem, pp. 44-56.

[4] L. Ratner, *Classic Music. Expression, Form, and Style*, New York 1980, pp. 9-29.

[5] Precedents for what would come to be theorized as topics and topical fields may be found in the Greimasian-inspired categories of semes and isotopies in the work of Eero Tarasti and Márta Grabócz. See E. Tarasti, *Myth and Music. A Semiotic Approach to the Aesthetics of Myth in Music, Especially that of Wagner, Sibelius, and Stravinsky*, Helsinki 1978, and idem, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics*, Bloomington 1994; and M. Grabócz, *Morphologie des oeuvres pour piano de Liszt*, Budapest 1986. Note, by contrast, their initial featuring of Romantic and early twentieth-century musical semes.

[6] W. Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart. Le Nozze di Figaro and Don Giovanni*, Chicago–London 1983.

[7] K. Agawu, *Playing with Signs. A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music*, Princeton 1991.

[8] R. Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven…*, op. cit.

[9] R. Monelle, *The Sense of Music. Semiotic Essays*, Princeton 2000.

cultural units as opposed to actual referents was key to his 2006 book featuring core historical studies of three topical fields–what I would come to call *modes*: the pastoral, military, and hunt.[10] In this all-encompassing historical/cultural study he drew upon literary and visual (iconographic) as well as musical evidence. Monelle demonstrated how much further one could go in garnering historical evidence for the semiotic reality of topics, even if they were not so theorized at the time. This is an important point first made by Monelle as part of his critique of Ratner in 2000.[11] Two helpful summaries of the state of topic theory appeared in 2007, by Nicholas McKay and Kofi Agawu.[12]

In 2004 I demonstrated how topics could integrate with more figural *gestures* (including both conventional and newly conceived gestures) in providing expressive motivations for, e.g., unusual tonal and thematic designs in Schubert's Piano Sonata in A Minor, D. 784.[13] Such demonstrations of the integration of topics with other analytical approaches could provide convincing evidence of their significance beyond mere surface expressive interpretation.

Byron Almén's contribution to (and extension of) topic theory appeared in his 2008 book on narrative in music, in which he argued that an initial topic might not be determinant of, in my terms, an expressive genre.[14] His persuasive analysis of the Schubert's Piano Sonata in Bb, D. 960, demonstrated how the first theme's pastoral topic, which would have cued the Romance narrative (akin to my pastoral expressive genre), included a "tragic flaw" (the scale-degree ♭6–5 premonitory trill in the bass at the half cadence in measure nine), which, based on further analysis, could instead support interpretation of a Tragic narrative. Michael Klein also demonstrated the significance of topics for a narrative analysis of the Chopin's

Ballade in F Minor.[15] My later analysis of the Ballade integrated further topical analysis with implications for virtual agency and performance, further exploring the post-classical drama of that remarkable work.[16]

However, Michael Spitzer critiqued topic theorists for sidestepping emotion in the pursuit of cultural units. His important essay also references a study by Carol Krumhansl that purports to establish the psychological reality of topics in two Classical works, Mozart's K. 515 and Beethoven's Op. 132.[17]

Nearly completed just before her untimely death in 2010, Wendy Allanbrook's *The Secular Commedia* appeared in 2014 thanks to the editorial efforts of her distinguished colleagues at Berkeley.[18] This exploration of the comic surface in Mozart's time is filled with historical and literary-dramatic insights. Topic theorists will be especially interested in her provisional inventory of over a hundred "musical commonplaces" from the "known topical cosmos", and its wide ranging inclusion of figures, genres and formal functions, specific instrumental and vocal styles, and broader stylistic categories.

The publication of Allanbrook's book coincided with and had an impact on the next major contribution to topic theory, the compendious *Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* edited by Danuta Mirka. Her extensive introduction provides a comprehensive overview of the historical evidence for topics and their subsequent theorization since Ratner.[19] In her role as editor, Mirka limited the scope of the invited essays to the longer eighteenth-century (including Beethoven), with the exception of a final essay by Julian Horton.[20] The collection begins with significant

[10] Idem, *The Musical Topic. Hunt, Military and Pastoral*, Bloomington 2006.

[11] Idem, *The Sense of Music*…, op. cit., pp. 24–33.

[12] N. McKay, *On Topics Today*, "Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie" 2007, vol. 4, nos 1–2, pp. 159-83 (http://www.gmth.de/zeitschrift/artikel/251.aspx (access: 12.28.23); K. Agawu, *Topic Theory. Achievement, Critique, Prospects*, [in:] *Passagen, IMS Kongress Zurich 2007. Fünf Hauptvorträge, Five Keynote Speeches*, Hrsg.. L. Lütteken, H-J. Hinrichsen, Kassel 2008, pp. 38–69.

[13] R. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes. Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert*, Bloomington 2004, pp. 187–200.

[14] B. Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative*, Bloomington 2008.

[15] M. Klein, *Chopin's Fourth Ballade as Musical Narrative*, "Music Theory Spectrum" 2004, vol. 26, pp. 23–55.

[16] R. Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music*, Bloomington 2018, pp. 244–259.

[17] M. Spitzer, *The Topic of Emotion*, [in:] *Music Semiotics. A Network of Significations* (In Honour and Memory of Raymond Monelle), ed. E. Sheinberg, Farnham 2012, pp. 211–223. C. Krumhansl, *Topic in Music. An Empirical Study of Memorability, Openness, and Emotion in Mozart's String Quintet in C Major and Beethoven's String Quartet in A Minor*, "Music Perception" 1998, vol. 16, pp. 119–134, cited by M. Spitzer, *The Topic*…, op. cit., p. 211.

[18] W. Allanbrook, *The Secular Commedia. Comic Mimesis in Late Eighteenth-Century Music*, ed. M. A. Smart, R. Taruskin, Oakland 2014.

[19] D. Mirka, *Introduction*, [in:] *Oxford Handbook*…, op. cit., pp. 1–57.

[20] J. Horton, *Listening to Topics in the Nineteenth Century*, [in:] *Oxford Handbook*…, op. cit., pp. 642–664.

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chapters on opera, symphony, and chamber music by distinguished musicologists Mary Hunter, Elaine Sisman, and W. Dean Sutcliffe, respectively. The following sections include detailed studies of individual or paired topics by other notable musicologists and theorists, as well as essays on the relationship of topics to metre (Mirka), harmonic schemata (Vasili Byros), formal functions (William Caplin), tonal processes (Joel Galand), and form (Agawu). In addition, several articles address other theoretical concerns, such as the troping of topics (Hatten), the significance of topics both for performance (John Irving, Tom Beghin, Sheila Guymer) and listening (Melanie Lowe, Elizabeth Margulis), and the status of *figurae*, those basic identifiable features that are not exclusive to single topics but that can be incorporated as parts of various topics (Stephen Rumph).[21]

A critical review of this volume by John Rice noted the lack of clear historical evidence for many of the topical designations–a concern that had already been addressed by Monelle (see above).[22] Joan Grimalt's *Mapping Musical Signification* provides rich historical contextualization of topic theory as a central part of a more wide-ranging exploration of musical signification from the Renaissance through Mahler.[23]

Further, wide-ranging critiques of topic theory emerged at the 2022 joint conference of the Society for Music Theory (SMT), the American Musicological Society (AMS), and the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM) in New Orleans, notably in a session organized by SMT's Music and Psychoanalysis Interest Group featuring provocative perspectives by Dylan Principi, Nathan Martin, Aaron Harcus, Jessica Narum, and Noel Torres-Rivera.[24] Concerns included the increasingly

loose ascription of topics and the consequent dilution of topic theory's initial premises, as well as the epistemological status of those very premises.

In the next three sections I offer my own suggestions for how one might both theorize and effectively teach topics and their tropological mixtures from the perspective of markedness theory. I begin by addressing the presumed gaps in historical evidence for topics, countering with a defence of topic theory as the reconstruction of a *tacit competency*.

III. REFLECTIONS ON RECONSTRUCTING A TACIT COMPETENCY FOR INTERPRETING TOPICS AND TROPES

Modern topic theory is a speculative construction largely based on interpretive inferences from the practice of many composers. To be sure, many of the labels in use today were not commonly applied as descriptors in the eighteenth century, as Monelle and others have noted. But extensive evidence of common style types, however we might choose to name them, may be found in notated scores, if not always clearly specified in theoretical treatises, the writings of composers, or the reactions of contemporaneous critics and other listeners. Our current theoretical construction might best be considered a partial *re*construction of a tacit competency, one that not only went unspoken, but that was messy and incomplete.

Thus, we should not expect to recreate a precisely defined taxonomy of topics, since the historical evolution of commonplaces is never that systematic. Rather, familiar stylistic types become familiar through use, and they are as likely to be carved out as marked entities against an unmarked background as they are to arise from systematically paired oppositions and hierarchies. This irregular growth process will result not in a logically tight system but rather in an evolving network of relationships among common types, subject to infinite variations in their tokens,

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[21] For a model in which *figurae* appear as the lowest level of a topical hierarchy, see E. Boisjoli, R. Hatten, *Topics. Theoretical Background*, [in:] *The Cambridge Haydn Encyclopedia*, ed. C. Clark, S. Day-O'Connell, Cambridge 2019, p. 377.

[22] J. Rice, *Review:* The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory *[ed.] by Danuta Mirka*, "Journal of the American Musicological Society" 2015, vol. 68, no. 2, pp. 446-53.

[23] J. Grimalt, *Mapping Musical Signification*, Cham 2020.

[24] The session was titled *Roundtable. Rethinking Topic Theory*, chaired by Dylan Principi and Amy Bauer (New Orleans, November 11, 2022). Participants were D. Principi (Princeton), *Historicizing Topical Knowledge*; N. Martin (Michigan), *Musical Topics as Pathosformeln*; A. Harcus (North Carolina), *Genre, Topicality, and the Social Stratification of Musical Experience in the Twentieth Century*; J. Narum (Baldwin Wallace University), *The Problem of Schoenberg's "Nocturne". Interpreting Topics in Op. 11, No. 2*; N. Torres-Rivera

(Missouri), *Thinking Electronic Sounds. Liquidity and the Music of Luis Quintana*. Principi's recent dissertation is entitled *Historicizing Topic Theory. Toward an Anti-Philosophy of Absolute Music*, Princeton University 2022.

and even cross-pollination through various combinations (as tropes).

We might begin to theorize *prototypes* for such style types, but as noted above, what turns a style type into a topic is its importation into a new context.[25] And importation may range from complete insertion to the most minimal of allusions. This raises the stakes for interpretation, because we cannot be sure to what degree previous expressive associations of the style type are also imported into that new context, and to what degree those associations may change through interaction with that context. The new context may be generic, or it may already be characterized by style types or other topics that may or may not combine in predictable ways with a particular imported topic. These combinations, whose merger I consider to be a species of musical trope, may exhibit degrees of *compatibility*; they may either merge almost transparently to create a new expressive meaning, or they may exhibit resistance through difference.[26] In the latter case, interpretation may lead to a striking tropological merger, along the lines of a creative metaphor. However, stubborn resistance to such a merger may signal the trope of irony.

Thus, as emphasized above, the importation of a style type not only defines it as a topic, but also as a trope. There are four axes along which we might interpret the interaction of an imported style type (hence, a topic) with its new environment. A high degree of *compatibility* means that the tropological merger is so transparent that it may go unnoticed, as in the case of the opening of Mozart's Piano Sonata in F major, K. 332, where a *Ländler* melody in $\frac{3}{4}$ metre combines readily with melody-and-accompaniment texture, pedal point, reference to the subdominant, and even a proto-yodel, as very compatible, if distinctive, parts of a larger pastoral mode. Note the hierarchy that is implied here between the embracing pastoral

mode and various more or less distinctive figures as topics within that mode.

Another hierarchical distinction may be made along the axis of *dominance*. Topics may be employed with varying degrees of parametric involvement, as noted in my example of dance melody vs Alberti accompaniment; more specifically, one figure (yodel) may occur in the melody and another figure (pedal point) in the bass. Such distributions and sharing of registral or parametric space may result in one or more topics being represented by perhaps only one distinctive feature, leading to the part-for-whole signification known as synecdoche. The dominant topic may also control the expressive field, with subordinate topics providing nuances.

Dominant topics can also help create topical fields, or what I call *modes*, and these may also help determine the expressive genre of a work.[27] Along my third and fourth axes, when topics are tropologically inserted they may be *creatively* and *productively* employed to direct an entire discourse and/or dramatic trajectory. For example, in the first theme of the Mozart sonata just referenced, *Ländler* eventually gives way to minuet (in measure nine). These two topics are productive as a premise for the movement, and they are also creatively troped as a kind of "solution" to the tension of their high/low opposition when they appear juxtaposed in the closing theme of the exposition (in measure 71). However, as emphasized earlier, one should not assume a simple lexicon of topical or tropological meanings, since they are too flexibly deployed in too many original contexts. Careful hermeneutic and contextual interpretation is needed for every situation.

In *Musical Meaning in Beethoven* I proposed an oppositional matrix for the Classical style in terms of two axes, major-minor and high-middle-low styles, in order to demonstrate the markedness of topical areas as situated within a larger semantic field.[28] If we consider the *galant* style to be the prototypical and hence *unmarked* style of the era, the tragic mode would be prototypically marked by minor keys and high style, whereas the *buffa* mode would be prototypically marked by major keys and the low style. I introduced the no-

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[25] See D. Mirka, *Introduction*, op. cit., p. 2, as echoed by R. Hatten, *Troping of Topics…*, op. cit., p. 514.

[26] Compatibility and the other axes discussed in the following paragraphs are introduced in R. Hatten, ibidem, pp. 516–533. Note my specification, "species of musical trope," since not all tropes are topical. For an example of troping that results from unusual syntactic rather than topical juxtaposition, see R. Hatten, *On Metaphor and Syntactic Troping in Music*, [in:] *Music Semiotics. A Network…*, op. cit., pp. 87–103.

[27] My terminological shift from "topical fields" to "modes" is explained with respect to the "pastoral mode" in R. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures…*, op. cit., p. 53.

[28] R. Hatten, *Musical Meaning…*, op. cit., pp. 74–90.

tion of expressive genres to describe the progression of works (regardless of the formal genre) through this matrix. For example, the so-called victory (or rescue) symphony could be viewed as a progression from minor to major, as in the Fifth Symphony of Beethoven, moving within high or high-middle style. On the other hand, late works of Beethoven might lead from tragic to more transcendent states, predominantly within a high style. Another option would be for a tragic expressive genre to offer a vision of transcendence only to return, perhaps through a sudden reversal to tragedy, as found in the three movements of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in F Minor, Op. 57 (*Appassionata*). A pastoral expressive genre would have the opposite trajectory, moving from positive bliss (major, whether low, middle, or high style) to threats of tragedy (minor) that would then be overcome by a return to major and possibly an elevation to high style (as seen in the transcendent outer-voice extremes ending the first movement of Beethoven's Op. 101).

Of course, these prototypical expressive genres will become more complex when other topics are introduced. For example, the second movement of Op. 101 blends march and pastoral topics, and the trio is decidedly rustic despite its learned-style imitations (thereby forming its own witty trope). The truncated third (slow) movement is high-tragic in minor, with thematic and textural evocations of the Baroque; and the transition to the finale, after quoting the opening of the first movement, leads to the troping of fanfare, learned, and musette topics discussed earlier. There is a turn to the slow movement's tragic key of A minor to launch the development section, and in the recapitulation and even further in the coda, we find a restoration of the pastoral in which low-style figures are interpretable as a kind of inner transcendence of the spirit.[29]

IV. A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH TO CATEGORIZING TOPICS AND TROPES BASED ON MARKEDNESS THEORY

The following outline suggests how marked oppositions can provide theoretical and cognitive support

for a more systematic distribution of topics (and their typical mixtures, or tropes) across the semantic field from Haydn through Beethoven, with application into the nineteenth century and beyond. The outline serves as a practical framework for introducing topics, one that I have found successful in my analysis classes.

1. Broader **MODES** (akin to literary modes) are defined by *marked oppositions*
   a. **TRAGIC** (marked minor mode; further enhanced by dissonant intervals and harmonies)
   (1) slow tempo (marked with respect to moderate tempo): *Empfindsamkeit*, *pathétique*, *ombra*, *chiaroscuro* effects
   (2) fast tempo (also marked with respect to moderate tempo): *tempesta* (formerly **Sturm und Drang**), *appassionata*
   b. Within the unmarked major mode we find the prevailing *galant* style (which can itself appear topical whenever it is inserted into works beginning in other prevailing styles). Further marked oppositions are needed to differentiate the following modes:
   (3) **COMIC** (*buffa*): marked by fast tempo, swerves/rhetorical gestures, patter rhythms.
   (4) **PASTORAL**: marked globally by the opposition of simple vs complex; typically featuring simplicity through use of pedal point, slow harmonic rhythm, initial move to the subdominant, parallel thirds and sixths. Also marked by undercutting and amelioration of climaxes. Topics include *siciliano* (featuring the dotted-eighth–sixteenth–eighth rhythmic pattern in 6/8), *pastorale*, *gigue*, and *musette*. (See 3-d below.)
   (5) **HEROIC**: marked by dotted rhythms, tonic and triadic *fanfare*/arpeggiations, **Mannheim rocket**, *march* metres, public (French) heroic style featuring monumental textures and *concertato* effects
   (6) *HUNT* as troping of pastoral and heroic: e.g., 6/8 *gigue* metre + **horn fifths**
   (7) **RELIGIOUS**: marked by *learned style*, or *chorale/hymn*, monumental texture, *sarabande*, **French overture**, etc. (solemn/serious) The **funeral march** topic may be

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[29] A more extensive analysis of this sonata cycle may be found in R. Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven…*, op. cit., pp. 92–111.

understood as a troping of tragic, heroic/noble, and religious modes.

2. Marked oppositions among textures
   a. Unmarked (*galant*) melody-and-accompaniment (Alberti-bass) texture: *singing style*
      (1) *air*: marked as lower style, simple, song-like; *sensibility* (i.e., not as expressionistic, though filled with sentiment); *galant* balance; Alberti bass; often troping with *pastoral* elements
      (2) *aria*: marked as higher style; *Empfindsamkeit*, *opera seria*, with extravagant leaps, sighs, play of registers, *portamenti*, other embellishments, coloratura diminutions, fermatas, cadenzas
   b. Marked (with respect to *galant*) chordal/hymn-like texture = *chorale* or *hymn*
   c. Marked (with respect to *galant*) polyphonic/imitative texture = *learned style*
      (1) serious trope: *polyphonic minuet/scherzo*[30]
      (2) ironic trope: *parodized imitation*, e.g., mock fugato in Mozart, K. 332, i, mm. 5–8
3. Marked *metres*
   a. Ecclesiastical vs earthly (based on Allanbrook [1983], see below for her spectrum of metres for *marches* and *dance*s)
   b. Marked *grooves* (characteristic agogic/dynamic/grouping patterns for specific metres)
      (1) *sarabande*: $\frac{3}{4}$ with agogic or dynamic accent on second beat
      (2) *bourée*: $\frac{4}{4}$ with quarter upbeat
      (3) *gavotte*: $\frac{4}{4}$ with two-quarter upbeat
   c. Marked *motives* (characteristic rhythms/contours/pitch patterns)
      (1) *minuet*: $\frac{3}{4}$ with motto rhythm: three quarter-notes on repeated pitch
      (2) *siciliano*: $\frac{6}{8}$ with [dotted-quarter–sixteenth–eighth] rhythm
      (3) *musette*: $\frac{2}{4}$ with P5 drone, skirling stepwise melody (often in parallel thirds)
   d. Marked/unmarked *tempi* (marked as fast or slow, in opposition to unmarked moderate tempi)
      (1) $\frac{6}{8}$ fast = *gigue* (marked)
      (2) $\frac{6}{8}$ moderate = *pastorale* (unmarked)

      (3) $\frac{6}{8}$ slow = *siciliano/siciliana* (marked)
   e. Unmarked *metres* (hence, open to a range of affects, as constrained by additional, marked features)
      (1) C or common time, characteristic of the unmarked *contredanse*
      (2) $\frac{3}{4}$, whenever lacking an association with a particular dance

Figure 1: An oppositional framework for understanding topics and their common tropological mergers in the Classical style. Widely accepted topical labels are highlighted in bold italics; other plausible labels appear in regular italics.

In the following list, I collate my approach with that of Wye Allanbrook, as adapted from her Figure 1, "The Metrical Spectrum."[31] I have placed her less frequently used metres or dances in brackets with her initials, and my additions or emendations in brackets with my initials.

Ecclesiastical (exalted passions)
   [WA: $\frac{4}{2}$]
      C   exalted march
   [RH: $\frac{2}{2}$]
      $\frac{2}{4}$ slow march
      $\frac{4}{4}$ infantry march
      $\frac{4}{4}$ bourrée, gavotte, [WA: musette; RH: also $\frac{2}{4}$]
      $\frac{3}{4}$ sarabande, minuet, [WA: waltz] [RH: *Ländler*, German dance (*Deutche*, *Teitche*, or *alla dansa tedesca*]
Galant (terrestrial passions)
   [WA: $\frac{2}{4}$ contredanse]
      $\frac{6}{8}$ siciliano, pastorale, gigue, (musette)
      $\frac{3}{8}$ passepied, allemande, waltz, contredanse
   [WA: $\frac{9}{16}$]

Although not entirely systematic, Allanbrook's initial division of metres clearly supports an opposition of high ("ecclesiastical") vs low ("terrestrial") style ("passions"). In the following four bullet points, I offer further specifications from the perspectives of markedness and stylistic register (high/middle/low) that integrate her insights with my outline presented above.

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[30] For discussion of the "contrapuntal [minor key] minuet" category, see M. Riley, *The Viennese Minor-Key Symphony in the Age of Haydn and Mozart*, Oxford 2014, pp. 102–120.

[31] W. Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart…*, op. cit., p. 67.

- $\frac{4}{4}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$ can appear as *unmarked* metres (hence, neutral with respect to topic; this is akin to Rumph's concept of *figurae* as features that only contribute to signification when contextualized by other features).[32]
- The *contredanse* can be an unmarked topic (hence, neutral with respect to affect, and thus subject to other contextual features for its expressive purport).
- Troping (including context of importation) can shift the stylistic register of a topic:
  - a $\frac{4}{4}$ *march* in a *buffa*/comic mode is thereby lowered in stylistic register
  - a *siciliano* with *empfindsamer* character is thereby raised in stylistic register
- Certain pairings inherently suggest a **high/low** opposition in stylistic register:
  - *minuet*/*Ländler* (high/low)
  - *aria*/*air* (high/low)

V. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF TOPICAL TROPING IN THREE BRIEF CLASSICAL EXAMPLES

Two examples of several topics sharing a parametric space quite *compatibly* are found in the opening themes of the slow movements of Mozart's Piano Sonatas in A Minor, K. 310, and C Major, K. 330. The *dominant* topic in each theme is an aria, and in each movement the otherwise unmarked $\frac{3}{4}$ metre can allude to a minuet (although not projecting its typical rhythmic groove; instead, each theme features an atypical anacrusis). K. 310 features the aria topic more strongly by use of a vocal *portamento* on the downbeat, while K. 330 introduces a motivically significant three-repeated-eighth-note anacrusis. Harmonically, the K. 310 slow movement features the sacred hymn progression of I–V–VI (the first three members of the sequence known as the *Romanesca*) and the K. 330 theme also features a deceptive move that alludes to the progression.[33] The alternation of dynamics and

texture in measures two, three, and four of K. 330 suggest a *concertato* topic. In K. 310, the doubling of the melody in parallel thirds at the end of measure one may allude to the pastoral. Thus, multiple topics are compatibly merged in each theme, and the distinctive mixtures create distinctive expressive tokens of an already tropological type, a blend of aria and minuet. In each theme the merger is rather seamless, since each topic inhabits its own parametric space: melody for an aria, metre and rhythm for a minuet, harmony for a *Romanesca*/sacred hymn, textural and dynamic contrast for a *concertato* effect, and simple doubling of the melody for a pastoral inflection.

Example 1: Mozart, *Piano Sonata* in C Major, K. 330, ii, opening theme excerpt.

Example 2: Mozart, *Piano Sonata* in A Minor, K. 310, ii, opening theme excerpt.
Nathan Broder revised edition, *Mozart Sonatas and Fantasies for the Piano*, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania: Theodor Presser Co., 1960.

How might we interpret these *compatible* tropes? The sacred hymn allusion elevates the *dominant* aria style, providing solemnity and gravitas as suited to a more *opera seria* context. The minuet metre offers dignity coupled with grace, and the pastoral doubling provides a hint of simple elegance for K. 310. The K. 330 theme features a textural shift, and the *concertato* opposition creates a dialogical effect that

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[32] S. Rumph, *Topical Figurae. The Double Articulation of Topics*, [in:] *Oxford Handbook…*, op. cit., pp. 493–513.

[33] For more on the sacred hymn topic and the *Romanesca* schema-as-topic, see E. McKee, *The Topic of the Sacred Hymn in Beethoven's Instrumental Music*, "College Music Symposium" 2007, vol. 47,

pp. 23–52; O. Sánchez-Kisielewska, *Interactions Between Topics and Schemata. The Case of the Sacred Romanesca*, "Theory and Practice" 2016, vol. 41, pp. 47-80, and eadem, *The Romanesca as a Spiritual Sign in the Operas of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven*, [in:] *Singing in Signs. New Semiotic Explorations of Opera*, ed. G. Decker, M. Shaftel, Oxford 2020, pp. 163–191.

enhances the intimacy of the soft theme with a more public response.

By contrast, the opening theme of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in G Major, Op. 14, No. 2, begins with a *dominant* pastoral topic (tonic pedal point, slow harmonic rhythm) in which melody is generated from arpeggiation, as inflected by *galant*-style embellishing chromaticism (e.g., scale-degrees #2–3). Only the opening octave leap hints at the subsequent emergence of an aria topic in measure five, with an expansive (*portamento*-inspired) leap of a tenth followed by a lyrical, stepwise descent. The topical play is integrated with sentence structure: a *presentation* phase features a four-bar tonic prolongation, with each two-bar basic-idea unit comprised of a varied repetition of the one-bar motive.[34] A *continuation* phase is launched by the contrasting aria topic, which now dominates, and the acceleration phase is enhanced by half-bar fragmentations featuring the quasi-*portamento* leap as its focal motive. The cadence fuses (overlaps) with the last sequential limbs.

Example 3: Beethoven, *Piano Sonata* in G Major, Op. 14, No. 2, i, opening theme.
Heinrich Schenker edition, *Ludwig van Beethoven Complete Piano Sonatas*, vol. 1. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1975.

Expressively, one might interpret the emergence of aria from pastoral along the lines of an emotion emerging from a mood. The background of pastoral contentment (unmarked mood) leads to a foregrounding (as marked emotion) of more intense yearning (cued by the *portamento*) as the aria emerges.

Ultimately, that briefly intense surge yields through sequential descent to the cadence, suggesting that the pastoral mode is *dominant*, although shown to be highly *compatible* with aria.

With respect to the *productivity* of tropes, topics presented in opposition at the beginning of a work (or later, as in the case of a double fugue) are featured as dialogical, in that each topic constitutes the projection of a distinctive virtual agent. In such cases, a tropological merger may be postponed as the realization of an implication provided by the opposition. The merger may be conceived at a higher level, one that preserves actorial opposition even while embracing it as part of a singular virtual subjectivity.[35] Or the merger may suggest an integration of opposites within that higher subjectivity. An example of the latter is found in Beethoven's double fugal tropes in the finales of the *Hammerklavier* (Op. 106) and the Ninth Symphony (Op. 125). In the former, the heroic Bb major first subject is ameliorated by the pastoral/resignational D major second subject, creating a tropological merger akin to an inner victory of the spirit. In the latter, the gigue-like topical transformation of the *Freude* theme is merged with the *cantus* setting of "Seid umschlungen" ("be ye embraced"). Here, the tropological merger is that of joy (the dancing gigue) being fully (authoritatively) embraced by the *cantus* motive in an ecstatic sequence.

In the first movement of Beethoven's String Quartet in Bb Major, Op. 130, a topical opposition at the beginning appears beyond reconciliation, since the two topics are in different metres and tempos. The development begins a process of integration by accelerated juxtaposition of the two different themes, and when their juxtaposition in the coda supports an ascending step progression in the treble, the voice-leading continuity suggests an "impossible" merger of the two topics and their affects. In the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in E Major, Op. 109, the opening fast 2/4 features a topical *bagatelle* that is disrupted in m. 9 by a 3/4 *Adagio* featuring a *fantasia* topic. A reconciliation is miraculously suggested in the coda, where the diminished-seventh harmonies and quarter-note chords of the chorale-like *Adagio*

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[34] For sentence structure and related terminology, I am indebted to W. Caplin, *Classical Form. A Theory of Formal Functions for the Instrumental Music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven*, New York 1998. Note my emendation of Caplin's "presentation phrase" to "presentation *phase*," since the tonic prolongation, lacking progression, does not constitute a tonal phrase.

[35] For virtual actors and virtual subjectivity, see R. Hatten, *Virtual Agency*…, op. cit.

appear in the initial $\frac{2}{4}$ metre, suggesting an integrative resolution of tragic conflict within the contented bagatelle's metre and tempo.

Topics and tropes can also contribute to a stylistic web of *intertextuality*, even when they are not attached to specific quotations. Stylistic allusions to past works may be strengthened when they are supported by recognizable topics, and a further advantage is that a composer need not directly quote in order to incorporate the affective or ideological significance of another, earlier work. A familiar example is Brahms's invocation of Beethoven's *Freude* theme (without directly quoting it) in his similarly placed finale theme for his First Symphony. The topical hymn with mostly stepwise motion in a warm register, along with its structural placement and affective role in the expressive drama, are sufficient to reference Beethoven as an act of homage without any hint of plagiarism (or the anxiety of influence that would affect later composers' references to past styles).[36]

VI. CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORIZING TOPICS AND TROPES BOTH BEFORE AND AFTER THE CLASSICAL ERA

Topical importations of stylistic types is a basic means of signification found throughout Western music history, emerging alongside madrigalisms in the Renaissance and rhetorical figures in the Baroque, as Joan Grimalt explores in the first part of his comprehensive study, *Mapping Musical Signification*.[37] Gregory J. Decker provides an impressive inventory of Handel's topical use of dances types – as well as march, French overture, lament bass, *stile concitato*, and horn call–in arias from his Italian *opera seria*.[38] In his influential study, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention*, Laurence Dreyfus analyzes the hybridization of binary dance and concerto in the "Echo" from the Overture in the French Style, BWV 831, as an example of Bach's

"enlightened" musical response to Johann Adolph Scheibe's 1737 critique of Bach's music as "turgid and confused."[39]

Moving past the Classical era, Kofi Agawu addresses topics as one of his central criteria for the analysis of Romantic music; he includes inventories by Márta Grabócz for Liszt and Janice Dickensheets for a wider range of nineteenth-century composers.[40] Furthermore, Agawu notes Constantin Floros's work on Mahler as identifying musical types that would be considered to be topics today.[41] In an article on Bruckner's Fourth and Fifth Symphonies, I also made extensive reference to topics, including one that Constantin Floros first identified in his study, *Brahms und Bruckner*, and that I label as the "pilgrims' processional topic."[42]

Projecting further, Agawu also cites inventories of topics for twentieth-century music, referencing unpublished work by Danuta Mirka, as well as Márta Grabócz's (2002) set of ten recurring topics for Bartók.[43] In addition, Nicholas McKay and Scott Schumann have each explored topics in Stravinsky. McKay follows in Monelle's footsteps by identifying Stravinsky's versions of hunting, military, and pastoral topics as "prototypically employed in dysphoric

[36] For more on influence and the anxiety of influence, see K. Korsyn, *Towards a New Poetics of Musical Influence*, "Music Analysis" 1991, vol. 10, nos. 1–2, pp. 3–72, and J. Straus, The "Anxiety of Influence" in Twentieth-Century Music, "Journal of Musicology" 1991, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 430-447.

[37] J. Grimalt, *Mapping Musical Signification*…, op. cit.

[38] G. Decker, *Dance Music and Signification in Handel's* Opera Seria, [in:] *Singing in Signs*…, op. cit., pp. 131–161.

[39] L. Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention*, Cambridge, MA 1996, pp. 219-232. I demonstrate how Dreyfus's analysis suggests four levels of troping with the imported topic of concerto in R. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*…, op. cit., pp. 69–70.

[40] K. Agawu, *Music as Discourse. Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music*, Oxford 2008, pp. 41–50; M. Grabócz, *Semiological Terminology in Musical Analysis*, [in:] *Musical Semiotics in Growth*, ed. E. Tarasti, Bloomington 1996, pp. 195–218; J. Dickensheets, *Nineteenth-Century Topical Analysis. A Lexicon of Romantic Topoi*, "Pendragon Review" 2003, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 5–19. See also J. Horton, *Listening to Topics*…, op. cit.

[41] K. Agawu, *Music as Discourse*…, p. 47; C. Floros, *Gustav Mahler. The Symphonies*, trans. V. Wicker, Portland 1993.

[42] R. Hatten, *The Expressive Role of Disjunction. A Semiotic Approach to Form and Meaning in the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies*, [in:] *Perspectives on Anton Bruckner*, ed. C. Howie, P. Hawkshaw, T. Jackson, Aldershot 2001, pp. 145–184. This topic originates as a troping of chorale-prelude and march topics, as pioneered by Berlioz in his celebrated second movement from *Harold in Italy*. Subsequent examples may be found in works of Mendelssohn, Brahms, Wagner, and others; see C. Floros, *Brahms und Bruckner. Studien zur musikalischen Exegetik*, Wiesbaden 1980, pp. 160–168 and 178–179.

[43] K. Agawu, *Music as Discourse*…, op. cit., pp. 48–50; M. Grabócz, *"Topos et dramaturgie". Analyse des signifiés et de la stratégie dans deux mouvements symphoniques de B. Bartók*, "Degrés" 2002, vol. 109–110, pp. 1–18.

states."[44] Scott Schumann examines modernist tropings of dance topics in Stravinsky's neoclassical ballets.[45] Schoenberg has proven fruitful for topical inquiry in the work of Johanna Frymoyer and Jessica Narum.[46] And Yayoi Uno Everett has made extensive use of topical analysis in her work on a wide array of twentieth- and twenty-first-century composers.[47] Drawing on Esti Sheinberg's work on Shostakovich, in addition to that of literary theorists Linda Hutcheon and M. M. Bakhtin, she has deftly demonstrated how topical play can lead to various forms of irony, parody, satire, and the grotesque.[48] James Donaldson's recent dissertation examines postmodern music to demonstrate how topics emerge over the course of a work.[49]

Topics are also being examined from increasingly diverse perspectives. An innovative approach by David Heinsen explores the gendered, racial, and ideological associations with indigenous and popular dances as imported into works by Spanish art composers such as Turina, and de Falla between 1914 and 1938.[50] And Janet Bourne is pursuing a gendered approach to topics such as the lullaby, based on cultural evidence for how women might listen differently from men in the early nineteenth century.[51]

With respect to popular music in the United States, William Echard has proposed a number of topics for psychedelic music. He also makes a strong case for multiple competencies rather than a single competency presupposed by these works, and he demonstrates how some topics are more contemporaneous than others (i.e., closer vs distant in time).[52] Tim Koozin draws on Echard's temporal distinction in exploring Black gospel choral music as a topic that, as he notes, was fundamental to the genre of funk music in the 1970s and so pervasive as to touch virtually all styles of popular music.[53] As Koozin describes it, "when crossover artists including Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, and the Staple Singers redeploy elements of their gospel music in creating popular songs, this can be understood as a discourse involving the temporally near topic of Black gospel choral music," whereas "temporally distant topics, including Baroque harpsichord and honky-tonk piano, intermingle with the near topics of 1950s-style rock & roll guitar and doo-wop vocal harmony on the Beatles' *Abbey Road* album." Furthermore, "ironic juxtaposition of topics can result in an emergent comic discourse, in songs by a range of artists including Bob Dylan, George Clinton, and the band, Steely Dan."[54]

In addition to popular music, theoretical approaches to topics and tropes have been incorporated into the study of film music and video game music. Two significant book-length studies of film music by David Neumeyer and James Buhler appeared in 2015 and 2018, and a notable article on the pastoral by Neil Lerner appeared in 2001.[55] Three recent, groundbreaking articles on topics and tropes in video game music by Sean Atkinson, Thomas Yee, and joint-au-

[44] N. McKay, *Dysphoric States. Stravinsky's Topics—Huntsmen, Soldiers and Shepherds*, [in:] *Music Semiotics. A Network of Significations…*, op. cit., p. 250.

[45] S. Schumann, *Making the Past Present. Topics in Stravinsky's Neoclassical Works*, Ph.D. diss., The University of Texas 2015.

[46] J. Frymoyer, *The Musical Topic in the 20th-Century. A Case Study of Schoenberg's Ironic Waltzes*, "Music Theory Spectrum" 2017, vol. 39, no. 1, pp. 83-108; J. Narum, *Sound and Semantics. Topics in the Music of Arnold Schoenberg*, Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota 2013. See also J. Frymoyer, *Topics and Stylistic Register in Russian Opera, 1775–1800*, [in:] *The Routledge Handbook of Music Signification*, ed. E. Sheinberg, W. Dougherty, New York 2021, pp. 127–141.

[47] See, for example, Y. Uno Everett, *Pianto as a Topical Signifier of Grief in Contemporary Operas by John Adams, Thomas Adès, and Kaija Saariaho*, [in:] *Routledge Handbook…*, op. cit., pp. 333–344, and *Counting Down Time. Musical Topics in Dr. Atomic (2005) by John Adams*, [in:] *Music Semiotics. A Network ..*, op. cit., pp. 263–274.

[48] Y. Uno Everett, *Parody with an Ironic Edge. Dramatic Works by Kurt Weill, Peter Maxwell Davies, and Louis Andriessen*, "Music Theory Online" 2004, vol. 10, no. 4, https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.04.10.4/mto.04.10.4.y_everett.html (access: 12.28.2022). E. Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich. A Theory of Musical Incongruities*, Aldershot 2000.

[49] J. Donaldson, *Topics, Form, and Expression in the Music of György Ligeti and Thomas Adès*, Ph.D. diss., McGill University 2021.

[50] D. Heinsen, *Vernacular-based Musical Topics in Early Spanish Modernism, 1914–1936*, Ph.D. diss., The University of Texas at Austin 2024.

[51] J. Bourne, *"A Woman's Way of Listening" to Beethoven. Topical Competencies and Perceiving a Lullaby Topic in Beethoven's Op. 90/II*

and Op. 101/I, lecture, The University of Texas at Austin, October 26, 2022.

[52] W. Echard, *Psychedelic Popular Music. A History through Musical Topic Theory*, Bloomington 2017.

[53] T. Koozin, personal communication. See his book, *Embodied Expression in Popular Music. A Theory of Musical Gesture and Agency*, Oxford, 2024.

[54] T. Koozin, personal communication, ibidem.

[55] David Neumeyer, *Meaning and Interpretation of Music in Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2015 (see especially pp. 183–189). James Buhler, *Theories of the Soundtrack*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018 (see especially pp. 89-98). Neil Lerner, *Copland's Music of Wide Open Spaces: Surveying the Pastoral Trope in Hollywood*, "The Musical Quarterly" 2001, vol. 85 no. 3, pp. 477–515.

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thors Megan Lavengood and Evan Williams round out this brief survey.[56]

VIII. CONCLUSION

Topics and topic theory continue to be fruitful areas of investigation for theorists and musicologists. Evidence from composers' practices can often compensate for a lack of historical documentation, although further work is needed to clarify the epistemological status and methodological rigour of topic theory. Nevertheless, topics have found their justification in the speculative reconstruction of more general, stylistic expressive meanings. And through strategies of troping and other forms of contextualization, topics have contributed enormously to the expressive interpretation of musical works.

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[56] Sean Atkinson, *Soaring through the Sky. Topics and Tropes in Video Game Music*, "Music Theory Online" 2019 vol. 25, no. 2, https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.19.25.2/mto.19.25.2.atkinson.html; Thomas B. Yee, *Battle Hymn of the God-Slayers. Troping Rock and Sacred Music Topics in* Xenoblade Chronicles, "Journal of Sound and Music in Games" 2020, vol. 1, no. 1, 2–19, https://doi.org/10.1525/jsmg.2020.1.1.2 ; Megan Lavengood and Evan Williams *The Common Cold. Using Computational Musicology to Define the Winter Topic in Video Game Music*, "Music Theory Online" 2023 vol. 29, no. 1. https://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.23.29.1/mto.23.29.1.lavengoodwilliams.html

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SUMMARY

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On Musical Topics and Tropes: Definitions, History, Theoretical Amplifications, Pedagogical Applications, and Extensions

This overview of the current state of musical topic theory is organized in six parts: definitions and scope of the theory, origins and development of the theory since 1980, reflections on reconstructing a tacit competency for interpreting topics and tropes, a pedagogical approach to categorizing topics and tropes based on markedness theory, analysis and interpretation of topical troping in three brief Classical examples, and contributions to theorizing topics and tropes both before and after the Classical era.