

# From the Page to the Stage. *Musical Topics and Musical Performance* Edited by Julian Hellaby

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*The big gap between the academic world  
and the professional world<sup>1</sup>*

Leonard Slatkin

*Not because the conductors themselves are unmusical,  
but because they simply haven't read enough<sup>2</sup>*

Charles Mackerras

*What do you mean, meaning?<sup>3</sup>*

Leonard Bernstein

Routledge is publishing an interesting study connecting theory and practice, musicology and stage. The book centres on possible application of topic theory to performance, drawing on scores from nineteenth century and thereafter, as well as concerts and recorded material. It divides into ten chapters, each written by a different scholar. The intent of Julian Hellaby, the editor of the book, is to see its content travel from academia to performers. The above mentioned quotes, admittedly not recent, coming from leading conductors of the twentieth century, seem to indicate that this traveling between musicology and stage is easier said than done. The very existence of this book rests on the assumption that these opinions are not generalized, or at least not any more.

Regarding the meaning of music, other composers from the twentieth century, notably Stravinsky and Ravel, shared Bernstein's opinion that music refers to nothing else but itself. With all due respect to these extraordinary composers, let us remember that, for centuries, other celebrated composers explained, through books, treatises and programme notes, what their music "meant". Mahler, for example, spent much time and efforts writing copious letters and programme notes about the story that his music is intended to tell. When he stopped providing these programmatic notes, it was not because music ceased to have meaning for him, but because music, he realized, had different meanings to different people. It is in the nature of music to have multiple significations, which is not to say that it has no signification.

Regarding performers reading or not, it is to be hoped that things have changed in the last twenty years, and that performers do read about the composers, the pieces, the performance practices more

<sup>1</sup> L. Slatkin, [in:] *Conductors in Conversation. Fifteen Contemporary Conductors Discuss Their Lives and Profession*, ed. J. Wagar, Boston 1991, p. 261.

<sup>2</sup> C. Mackerras, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Conducting*, ed. J. Bowen, Cambridge 2003, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> L. Bernstein, *The Joy of Music*, New York 1954, p. 30.

than they did in the past, not least because more and more musicologists are also performers, and more and more practitioners venture into musicology. This would be an incentive for musicology to provide the highest possible quality of research and keep in mind this demanding—and arguably very busy—readership. Finally, the big “gap” between stage and academia belongs to the domain of prejudice. Performers and musicologists both love music, but not in the same way. An apple may be eaten, for sure, but it may also be painted. It may be analyzed, juggled with or beautifully decorated. So with music: it can be performed, but it can also be reflected on and explored in many ways: stylistically, psychologically, structurally and otherwise. This book muses with the idea that topic analysis unveils important aspects of music and can assist performers to provide a deeper and more authentic interpretation.

In his article *Words about Music, or Analysis versus Performance* Nicholas Cook coins the expression “Words about words about music”<sup>4</sup> to designate musicology—which would then make my review “words about words about music”. Admittedly, words explaining music are often too numerous, sometimes too few, and occasionally inappropriate. Choosing the adequate type and amount of words is of the essence if musicology is to attract performers, whose life is a daily challenge, having to choose among bending shelves of masterly works, meeting today’s high standards of performance quality and attracting an increasingly “digitalized” audience. In that respect, a way to appeal to this readership would perhaps involve the publication of an “anthology” of musicology, as they exist for poetry and songs, where the very best musicological insights would be summarized in short texts that would kindle the interest of the “professional world” to which Slatkin alludes. Another avenue of thought that could add to the attractiveness of musicological studies would be to constitute dedicated websites that document the recordings referred to in books such as this one.

This study is educational and interesting in many ways. Out of respect for every writer who did their utmost to present their research, I do not intend to

critique systematically every chapter. Rather, I have summarized them with the same passion that I felt while reading them, which probably does not come even close to the passion of the writers writing them. Yes, to me sometimes words are too limited and lack precision to get to the heart of music, sometimes they are off-putting with their sharpness. Sometimes the field of investigation is too vast, sometimes the author’s bias or over-interpretations are too apparent, sometimes the thinking line lacks rigour. Sometimes identifying a topic is only the beginning of the exploration, as similar topics may have an infinite variety of shades, sometimes unverifiable impressions are presented as facts, sometimes the ideas presented are very marginal to the musical phenomenon, and sometimes the concepts developed in this book would benefit composers, in their search for topical strategies, rather than performers. However, in spite of it all, I would like to reiterate the pleasure I got from this highly interesting and educational book. I also salute the fact that it offered the possibility for younger researchers to present their work alongside very distinguished musicologists. This book is a beautiful stone of a greater house: the house where the “gap” between academia and stage will hopefully continue melting.

## AROUND INTRODUCTION BY JULIAN HELLABY

The book starts with Julian Hellaby’s introduction and offers helpful clarifications about the subject. In the first section ‘Background and Context’ Julian Hellaby reminds the reader of the various attempts that have been made in the past to analyze and describe music, using tools devised by Schenker, Derrida or Saussure. He then refers to authors who developed the concept of topic as an alternative to structural analysis: Donald Francis Tovey and Charles Rosen, Leonard Ratner, Deryck Cooke, Wye Jamison Allanbrook, Robert Hatten, Raymond Monelle, Janice Dickensheets, Wallace Berry.

The next section, ‘Reflections on the Term “Topic”’, deals with a more in depth study and takes as semi-otic reference Charles Sanders Peirce and his triple tripartition: icon, index, and symbol, with their further

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<sup>4</sup> N. Cook, *Words about Music, or Analysis versus Performance* [in:] N. Cook, P. Johnson, H. Zender, *Theory into practice: Composition, Performance and the Listening Experience*, Leuven 1999, p. 9.

developments. The concept of “code” is addressed, as well as the issue of contemporaneous perception of music versus subsequent perception of music from the past. A number of musical topics are identified: march, fanfare, tarantella, water, waltz. The discussion then expands to identifying meaning into musical forms (e.g. sonatas and dance suites), categorizing dances into high and middle-style, and reflecting on the difference of perception between specialized and non-specialized listeners, hence returning to the concept of “code”.

The next section of the introduction describes each author’s contribution, which I will further develop as I explore every chapter separately. Finally Julian Hellaby proposes a performance model to help the reader locate the concept of topic within the more general umbrella of “performance study”.

### **AROUND CHAPTER 1: TOPICS AND MUSIC PERFORMANCE. SOME REFLECTIONS AND PROPOSAL FOR A THEORY BY EERO TARASTI**

In the first chapter of the book, Eero Tarasti reflects on the nature of topic theory: how much of a theory can it be, since it is largely based on empirical observations? In the first part of the chapter he pays tribute to Leonard Ratner’s foundational work on the subject. Musicology seems to apply topic theory to Western “erudite” music, perhaps forgetting that Viennese Classical music owes its appeal to various social classes precisely because listeners of various levels—not only erudites—were able to find pleasure at their own level of expertise. Furthermore, does topic theory help performers understand music better? Are performers expected to evidence those topics in their performances? To what level of understanding do we refer? Is it the communication of the outer envelope (the signifier) such as musical genres, forms, and topics, or the expression of a deeper level of signification (the signified) that the composer lodged in this outer envelope, such as feelings and atmospheres? The dialogue between envelope and signification is a recurrent subject in musicology, and more broadly in semiotics.

Eero Tarasti then cites some musical case studies, while at the same wondering what help music theory, musicology and semiotics—notably the complex Peircean triple tripartition—could be to the practising performers. How are they supposed to deal with the numerous concepts and categories proposed by scholars when scholars themselves grow critical of topic theory? Tarasti turns to Baroque music, interpretation treatises and rhetoric rules, to see how musical signifiers and signified articulated in the past, keeping in mind the tension between the score and the performance of it. Turning again to Classical music, Tarasti evokes Mozart and Greimas’s isotopies, which he sees as prerequisite to topic theory. This discussion reiterates the question: how much of a theory topics really are?

On the basis of musical examples, Tarasti goes on shaping a theory of topics, offering three categories: 1. primary topical systems (direct reference to the infinitely varied reality); 2. secondary topical systems (reference to previous musical productions) and 3. tertiary topical systems (substantially transformed reference to previous musical productions, including parody). With this in mind, Tarasti gives examples of well informed applications of topics, and counter-examples of too rigid applications of topics, which disregard the general evolution of music and musical taste.

In the second part of his chapter ‘Towards a Theory of Topical Performance’ Tarasti connects topic theory with the “zemic” model from his “existential semiotics”, which he explains with references to Greimas, Peirce and Lévi-Strauss. The “z” represents the movement between the poles of the model, and “emic” alludes to the phenomenon being seen from within. He suggests using this tool to organize the vast array of musical topics. By their very nature, topics can only function in a community of composers, within a broader social community, which makes them belong to the *Soi2* category of the model (social institutions and practices). The topics’ physicality makes them belong to the category *Moi1* (first degree physicality). A good dialogue between *Moi1* and *Soi2* is essential for a proper application of topics in a musical performance. Performers need integrating *Soi1* (abstract social norms) and developing a proper *Moi2* (educated *Moi1*) in order to properly

understand *Soi2*. The dialogue between the four poles (*Moi1*, *Moi2*, *Soi1*, *Soi2*) is a prerequisite to convincingly apply topics in performance.

Finally, Tarasti tests his model by categorizing various musical topics according to his four pole model. The way performers will internalize the topic/zemic theory and apply it to their performance will affect the naturalness of it and induce a genuine receptivity from the listener. Performers acting as demonstrators and listeners as critics is the one thing to be avoided. "Heavens, that is certainly not the purpose of topical analysis of music" concludes Eero Tarasti.

## **AROUND CHAPTER 2: "RHETORICAL" VERSUS "ORGANICIST" PERFORMANCES. A PRAGMATIC APPROACH BY JOAN GRIMALT**

Joan Grimalt also links music analysis and musical performance. He focuses on topical and rhetorical analyses, which can provide the performer with useful tools to get into the heart of music, as opposed to structural analysis that may remain on the surface of the musical discourse. Taking a historical perspective, and grounded in the vast literature of previous studies, Grimalt points to Germanic countries prioritizing motivic, harmonic and structural analyses, which he also calls "organicist", "unitarist" and "formalist". He sees in this analytical ideology a risk of losing other levels of the music, notably its all-important signified.

Whereas eighteenth century treatises focused on variety, contrast and coherence, it seems that from the second half of the nineteenth century academia removed itself from praxis in the quest of an inaccessible "oneness" of the work. Analytical theories such as Schenker's add to the problem by not taking into account the essential rhythmical parameter of music. Grimalt locates in this ideological discussion one of the causes for the separation between academia and praxis.

Around 1980 the HIP movement (Historically Informed Performances) proposed a new approach to music, performing music on period instruments, reading manuscripts and ancient sources, and pub-

lishing new editions of old works. Grimalt sees in *Music as Message* by Constantin Floros a first attempt to propose an alternative ideology to the structural approach. Can we attribute any meaning to music? Can we turn the timeless beauty of music into a more circumstantial beauty, more in phase with human temporality? How could we hear the music as it was first composed? This new approach to music analysis would be more appealing to performers and would open new avenues of musical thoughts: improvisations, paraphrases and variations.

One essential shortcoming of structural analysis is the lack of attention to pulse and agogic. With no references to topics such as marches and dances, or to rhetoric styles, musical performers may resort to arbitrary mannerisms for their interpretations. Joan Grimalt gives musical example from Beethoven's piano sonata Op. 2 n°1 and *The Creatures of Prometheus*, and Mozart's piano sonata K. 331. Anatole Leikin points to a shift in musical interpretation dating to 1930. As musical performances disconnected from references to dance—which lost some of its prestige in the nineteenth century—and from topics such as military marches or rhetoric styles, tempos became increasingly polarized: very fast in fast movements and very slow in slow movements. As a result, the fast movements lost a great part of their inner diversity and the slow movements were disconnected from their singing model. On the contrary, a topical and rhetorical analysis would result in a performance with greater tempo flexibility that would match the musical situations unveiled by the analysis.

Joan Grimalt then addresses the musical situation of "retrospect" where music conveys memories from the past—comparable to the cinematographic "flashback"—usually good memories versus a difficult present, a recurring topic in Romantic music. The author analyses Brahms's *First Symphony* and Chopin's *Second Piano Concerto*. Changes of tempo are adequate ways to convey these retrospects, as are changes of tones—*sotto voce*— or timbres—*una corda*. Joan Grimalt briefly discusses the impact of instrumental tuning on musical colours.

Finally, the author advises a three step analytical method: (1) identifying marches and dances; (2) locating rhetoric and vocal parameters, such as breathing points; (3) constructing a narrative coherence with

the help of Greimas's square. Joan Grimalt discusses musical examples: the tension between the *Ancien Régime* and the new philosophy of fraternity and justice impacts Beethoven's use of old dances and the reference to sarabande and minuet in the *Egmont Overture*; in his *Second Piano concerto*, Chopin refers to breathing in the bowings and to *pianto* in the piano recitatives; a discussion about Brahms's initial 6/8 metre in his *First Symphony* revolves around tempo and subdivision of beat, which are essential parameters of music that clarify—or blur—the musical signified.

As a conclusion, Joan Grimalt advocates the performers' informed intuition and a prudent distancing from too structuralist analyses that may leave aside musical significance.

**AROUND CHAPTER 3.**  
**'ES BRENNT MEIN EINGEWEIDE'.**  
**AGITATO SETTINGS OF NUR WER**  
**DIE SEHNSUCHT KENNT BY**  
 WILLIAM P. DOUGHERTY

The author devotes his chapter to the *Agitato* topic as conveyed by various composers in their settings of Goethe's poem *Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt* (*Only he who knows longing*). William Dougherty opens his text with a short discussion about the benefits of topic theory as a musicological and analytical tool, which enables a wider understanding of musical works. He discusses the particular situation where performers are to interpret a composer's rendering of a poem. He also reflects on the *Agitato* topic within the broader frame of *Tempesta*, be it the description of an external storm or the exploration of an inner state, akin to the *Appassionato* topic. The *Agitato* topic, however, is not necessarily fast and may present the following characteristics: minor mode, fast(er) note values, restless and active rhythmic motion, syncopation, tremolo figures, disjunct melodies, and chromatic harmonies.

Dougherty first analyses Beethoven's Lied, WoO 134/4. We are told about the genesis of Beethoven's work and the composer's four different settings of Goethe's poem, as well as his publishing strategy. Dougherty analyses the score and identifies several

topics: Sicilian, Pastoral and *Agitato*. He also contextualizes the poem within Goethe's production, notably his novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship), and more generally the budding German literary Romanticism. The author describes the character of Mignon, who sings the poem in Goethe's novel, a fact that impacts the significance of the song. However, the poem was also published independently of the novel, thus possibly acquiring a new signification. Dougherty's chapter then displays a comparison between two of the six settings composed by Schubert (D 359 and D 481), exploring both how the composer negotiates the *Agitato* topic and how performers may convey it. Elements of the score such as keys, modulations, piano accompaniment, dynamics are examined. The author then discusses the setting of the poem by Theodor Friedrich Fröhlich, a student of Carl Friedrich Zelter and Bernhard Klein, both of whom composed songs on this poem as well, but who developed the topic of *Lamento* rather than *Agitato* in their settings.

The music composed on Goethe's poem by Johann Anton André displays new expressive tools in order to convey the *Agitato* topic: vocal effects, agogic indications, tempo changes, recitative style and piano lament-like chromaticism. Finally, Josephine Lang's setting is composed for mezzo-soprano or alto voice rather than the more common soprano versions. The piece displays new compositional strategies, notably the combination of two topics: *Agitato* and *Lamento*, which then becomes a trope. The composer repeats some lines from the poem in order to fit her expressive agenda and displays contrasting elements, notably regular against irregular structures, descending chromatic lines versus episodes of dotted "heroic style". William Dougherty discusses three interpretations of Lang's piece and the impact of their interpretive choices, notably their tempos. In a situation where a poem is set into music, the interpreter's role is to negotiate harmoniously between the expressiveness of the text and of the music, thus creating a shimmering network of intertextual significances.



**AROUND CHAPTER 4.  
EXPANDING THE PARAMETERS  
OF HISTORICALLY INFORMED  
PERFORMANCE, TOPICS  
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY  
MINIATURES FOR STRINGED  
INSTRUMENTS BY  
GEORGE KENNAWAY**

George Kennaway walks us through various situations where stringed instruments convey musical topics. When vocal music is transcribed for stringed instruments, vocality becomes a topic in itself. In nineteenth century piano music, musical features such as tempo indications, evocation of the harp, arpeggiation, asynchrony of the hands, or *rubatos* are meant to evoke specific topics. How does string literature deal with similar situations? Taking as case study several reviews of Romberg's performance in 1815 of his own cello concerto Op. 31, the *Concerto militaire*, the author identifies several military topics. Then, in 'Dead March' from Handel's *Saul*, transcribed for violin by Edouard Reményi, the violin conveys the topic of funeral march through dotted rhythms and double stops, suggesting low and high drum rolls. A cadenza then hints to angelic voices. Kennaway proposes that portamento technique can allude to the warmth and nostalgia of human voice, thus relating the effect to the performance rather than the composition. Specific articulations and harmonics can also convey human agency, as is the case in various transcriptions of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*. In Grützmacher's cello transcription of a Schumann's song from *Dichterliebe*, the author notes the use of a wider pitch range and more performative indications than in the original piece.

Kennaway then discusses two transcriptions, one for cello and one for violin, of Schubert's *Ständchen*, respectively by August Lindner and Eduard Reményi. Higher registers are used, as well as a wider dynamic range and specific instrumental techniques, such as passage-works and double stops. Changes of strings for identical notes are seen by the author as a *chiaroscuro* effect on the musical discourse. The portamento and *mesa di voce* technique may be conveyed by stringed instruments through rapid glissandi and short crescendos-diminuendos indicated by hairpins. Going

back to the use of harmonics, Kennaway suggests also possible reference to the supra-natural world or picturesque effects.

The author further discusses the subject through Fauré's song *Après un rêve*. He compares several renderings of the original piece by Olga Haley and Ninon Vallin with the transcription of the song for cello by Pau Casals. Kennaway uses a notated score to signal the different instrumental portamentos performed by the cellist W. H. Squire and Casals himself. Finally, Kennaway proposes the concept of "sophisticated performances", which feature very subtle bowing technique as in pieces by Giovanni Battista Viotti.

The author then suggests that the above mentioned discussion may inform interpretations of nineteenth century music. He also identifies a new relationship between arranger/performer/audience, paralleling the more customary relationship: composer/performer/audience. Finally, Kennaway suggests that topical awareness could become a tool in musical performance, similar to rhetoric in Baroque music.

**AROUND CHAPTER 5.  
PIANO SCHOOLS, TOPICS AND LISZT'S  
SONATA IN B MINOR BY  
DANIELA TSEKOVA-ZAPPONI**

The author analyses twenty-three performances of twenty-one celebrated pianists of Liszt's Sonata in B minor. The pianists belong to four pianistic schools, each divided into three chronological groups:

1. Hungarian school:
  - a. Géza ANDA (1921–1976), Georges CZIFRA (1921–1994), Annie FISCHER (1914–1995)
  - b. Tamás VÁSÁRY (1933)
  - c. Jenő JANDÖ (1952), Dezső RANKI (1951)
2. French school:
  - a. Alfred CORTOT (1877–1962), Yuri BOUKOFF (1923–2006), France CLIDAT (1932–2012)
  - b. François-René DUCHÂBLE (1952)
  - c. Vahan MARDIROSSIAN (1975), Caroline SAGEMAN (1973)
3. Russian school :
  - a. Vladimir HOROWITZ (1903–1989), Sviatoslav RICHTER (1915–1997), Emil GILELS (1916–1985)

- b. Lazar BERMAN (1930–2005)
- c. Mikhail RUDY (1953), Mikhail PLETNEV (1957)

#### 4. American school :

- a. Jorge BOLET (1914–1990)
- b. Leon FLEISHER (1928–2020)
- c. Stéphane BLET (1969–2022)

Except for two recordings by Horowitz and Richter, the author analyses one recording for each pianist. Her structural division of Liszt's sonata is based on Márta Grabócz's narratological analysis as well as Grabócz's topical analysis according to Robert Hatten's and Raymond Monelle's definitions of the word. She identifies seven main sections, different musical units (themes, mottos, refrains, variations) and various topics:

1. Introduction (bars 1–100). Topic: Macabre quest and struggle.
2. Exposition of the first theme (bars 101–204). Topics: Heroic and Pastoral-amoroso.
3. Development of the first theme (bars 205–318). Topics: Heroic-macabre struggle, recitativo style.
4. Exposition of the second theme (bars 319–452). Topic: Pastoral-religioso
5. Development of the second theme (bars 453–599). Topic: Macabre quest-variation
6. Recapitulation (bars 600–710). Topics: Pantheist-pastoral and heroic
7. Coda (bars 711–760). Topic: Religioso, pantheist.

Her analytical criteria are tempo, dynamics, nuances, agogics, phrasing, pedal work, climatic choices and touch. The score editions used by the author are: Edition Musica Budapest (Boronkay Antal, 1984), Moscow Musica edition (Heinrich Neuhaus, 1985), and the composer's original manuscript. The author is assisted in her aural analysis by the Sonic Visualiser program (version 1.8) developed by the Centre for Digital Music at Queen Mary University of London. She recognizes from the outset the challenge of analyzing aural documents dating from different times and using different recording technologies and musical instruments.

Tsekova-Zapponi points to particularities of each pianistic school regarding their treatment of the musical topics and possible departures from the score, as well as the individual pianists' implementation of these particularities. The author concludes with ten observations regarding the schools. She notes

generational differences between pianists, some pianists' individual specificities, commonalities among the European schools, and the possible authoritative-ness of the Hungarian school given its connection to Liszt. Tsekova-Zapponi remarks on Horowitz's influential role and the tendency of the younger generation of pianists to break free from tradition. She also identifies differences between generations regarding the respect for the composer's indications.

### **AROUND CHAPTER 6. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS, THE SONATA CYCLE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PERFORMANCE. A READING OF BRAHMS'S PIANO SONATA NO. 2 IN F-SHARP MINOR BY JANICE DICKENSHEETS**

Janice Dickensheets parallels Brahms's piano sonata No. 2 in F-sharp minor with the literary styles of E.T.A. Hofmann and Jean Paul Frideric Richter, within the broader context of the German Romantic literature. The composer was reading these authors (likely Hofmann's novel *Kater Murr* and Richter's *Flegeljahre*) while working on this sonata. He signed the score "Johannes Kreisler Jr", as a possible hint or tribute to Hofmann's character, Johannes Kreisler. The author triangulates the score and novels with Sviatoslav Richter's rendition of the sonata, which, consciously or not, seems consistent with Brahms's possible literary inspiration. The Romantic sonata (both the form and the cycle) shares common traits with the Romantic novel, notably the inclusion of other genres, such as idylls or epics in novels, and dances or songs in sonatas. These inclusions may evoke past or present art forms and styles, and low or high art. It is not unlikely that Brahms took the Romantic novel as an aesthetic model for his composition. If literary influences impact the musical outputs of composers such as Schumann, Brahms and Mahler, and perhaps also the reception of their works by the public, they may inform the performative choices of the interpreters as well.

Compositional peculiarities of Brahms's piano sonata no. 2 (melodic lines, ornamentations, harmonic centers, unexpected dissonances, local and

overall structures, chromaticism, virtuosic passages) may be better understood with reference to literary themes, notably the idea of unattainable love and the insecurity of the young man facing this unattainable love. The author identifies three characters in the sonata: the protagonist, the lady and the poet, as well as specific keys assigned to each of them. She also attributes the absence of repetition in the first movement to the necessary continuity of the narration, leading to the monologue of the second movement, whose literary counterpart would be the *Minnelied* (love song). Again, characters are evoked through specific keys and compositional styles, such as the serene D major for the lady or the archaic style for the poet. Other signifiers are used such as the diminished seventh for pain, dissonances for passion and clumsiness, and monophonic lines for insecurity.

Janice Dickensheets sees the third movement as an extension of the second, with new topics such as hunt, chivalry, and trumpet calls, all of which reminds the listener of the Romantic fascination with the old. The structure of the piece hints to digressions, disruptions and memories, as found in Hoffman's and Richter's literary styles. The fourth and last movement then hints to bardic music, not only alluding to the character of the poet and encapsulating the "old" within the "new", but also, in doing so, points to the Romantic novel's three-dimensionality informing Brahms's piece. The fourth movement also evokes Gypsy music and the persona of the wanderer, possibly as Brahms's alter ego. It suggests the Schubertian Lied and the Beethovenian fate motif, perhaps as Brahms's tribute to these composers. The last movement also points to the opera and the stanzaic ballad, which is a token of the protagonist's further confusion, diverting the listener's attention from the story itself to the character of the story teller. The narrator then retakes control of the musical discourse. However, the sonata's deep dramatic crisis is not settled, and confusion floats in the air after the last notes are played.

## **AROUND CHAPTER 7. 'HERE ONE MUST CONJURE WHILE PLAYING': TOPICAL PERFORMANCE IN THE PIANO WORKS OF SCRIBIN BY DARREN LEAPER AND CECILIA XI**

Formalist and topical analyses are both valid approaches to Scriabin's music. The harmonic language that the composer developed over the years and his structural novelties certainly deserve a formal exploration. However, topic analysis is likely to reveal other important aspects of Scriabin's musical world and inform performers in their quest. Whereas Scriabin was keen to explain his music through the use of metaphors and references to religious, ecstatic or mystical experience, he refrained from delving into thorough explanations about his harmony and structures. He preferred to rely on sensations and convey his aesthetic ideas through suggestive titles. His philosophical beliefs were rooted in the Russian Silver Age striving for unity and ecstasy. In many of his works, Scriabin developed topics such as languor, longing, impetuous striving, dance, ecstasy, and transfiguration. Not only did he evolve his musical language and come to represent the Russian avant-garde, but also progressively took distance from celebrated composers, notably Chopin and Wagner, whom he once cherished. Scriabin's piano playing documented by piano rolls evidences his search for immaterial fluidity.

The topics that Darren Leaper and Cecilia Xi identify in Scriabin's music can already be found in the composer's early works, some of which align with topics found in Classical and Baroque music. The Prometheus chord, a superposition of diminished, perfect and augmented fourths, is better understood as a unifying element in Scriabin's music rather than a topic in its own right, contrary to the fanfare topic, expressed by dotted rhythms—often initiated from the short note. The topic of femininity labelled by the authors as "eternal feminine" is conveyed by an array of musical characteristics such as major mode, arpeggiated and improvisation-like accompaniment that blur the downbeat, lyrical melodic line often featuring rising semitones. This topic may be deeply rooted in Scriabin's psyche and connected to the protective role played by women in the composer's



life and the absence of his father from the family context.

Trills and *tremolandos*, as well as the composer's performative indications such as "luminous", signal the topic of light and may be intertwined with the topic of femininity, hence becoming a trope. Words such as "*volando*" (flying in Italian) or "*ailé*" (winged in French) point to the topic of flight, implemented by rapid series of five or more notes, sometimes double notes for the piano or similar orchestral runs in the composer's symphonic works. References to Walzes and Mazurkas point to the topic of dance and testify to Chopin's influence. Very close to this topic are Scriabin's allusions to marches, sometimes with medieval and demonic overtones.

Darren Leaper and Cecilia Xi also point to the autobiographical origin of the composer's Sonata No. 1 in F Minor Op. 6, connected to Scriabin's hand disease and related anxiety. The first movement references the topic labelled as "Mannheim Rocket", mixed with the military topic. The second movement delves into singing style and the third movement develops the topic of gloomy dance, battlefield and death, through the use of low pitched chromatic lines, slow movement and dotted rhythms, minor mode and excruciating melodic leaps of ascending major sevenths.

The authors of this chapter then conclude with a discussion on the necessity for interpreters to recognize the topics in Scriabin's music in order to build their own interpretation. They also suggest that these topics constitute a continuum in the composer's output, thus requiring a similar sound world through all the composer's creative periods. This sound world becomes a token of the composer's exceptional skills as a pianist. The piano rolls recorded by Scriabin reveal the composer's taste for tempo fluctuations, his refined nuances, his sharp treatment of dotted rhythms, the careful structuring of his interpretation that go beyond the mere interpretive indications found in the score, and his sophisticated use of the pedal, all of which he encouraged his students to explore also.

## AROUND CHAPTER 8. THE TOPIC OF THE GATO IN THE EARLY WORKS OF ALBERTO GINASTERA AND THE DISAMBIGUATION OF 'PEQUEÑA DANZA' BY MELANIE PLESCH

How can we trace the topic of Gato, an Argentinian folk dance, in Alberto Ginastera's 'Pequeña danza' (third musical number of Scene 1 of Ginastera's ballet *Estancia* Op. 8), given the composer's sometimes abstract and idiosyncratic compositional style? Melanie Plesch answers the question after walking us through a convincing review of topic theories, an interesting investigation of selected scores by Ginastera and a careful study of several Argentinian dances.

In its standalone piano version, 'Pequeña danza' features upward glissandi on an interval of a fifth (possibly imitating guitar technique) which occur every sixteen bars, long descending glissandi of three octaves or more between introductions and stanzas, hemiolas in a 6/8 metre, and specific phrasing, all of which indicates possible references to Argentinian folk music and dance.

The author then reviews the evolution of musical topic theory, initiated by Leonard Ratner around 1980 in classical music and later applied to folk music, with some national identity overtones, notably in Latin America. The concept of musical topic has expanded, through musicological discussions and occasional disagreements, from a reference to other musics to a reference to the external world, and from the acknowledgement of signifiers (e.g. rhythms, melodies and structure) to the acknowledgement of the signified (e.g. moods and atmospheres). Topical references to folk music (e.g. imitations of folk instruments or the use of specific modes) may also partake in defining musical styles. Furthermore, topics may refer to literature and visual arts, or point to national moods such as the Argentinian extreme sorrow. Topics may also refer to specific times, places, composers or works. Pointing to the etymological roots of the word "topic" (*topos* in Greek means "place") the author proposes that musical topics only function if they are recognized by the listener, in the same way that rhetoric elements were recognized by listeners in the eighteenth century.

In order to trace the influence of vernacular music in art-music, the analyst must identify metre, characteristic rhythmic patterns, melodic profiles, phrasing, harmonic sequences, texture, dynamics, and patterns of accompaniment (some parameters being central in some cases and peripheral in others). The analyst may also consider other works by the composer and the cultural context of the creative process, as sometimes folk art is only accessible through notations or written accounts of an otherwise spontaneous art. The author then reviews Ginastera's artistic evolution: he studied in Buenos Aires, was exposed to the French aesthetics and embraced Argentinian national music. His music mixed vernacular (Argentinian folk music), French (Impressionism) and modernistic (Bartók, Stravinsky, Xenakis) elements and enjoyed a rapid success. Often referring in his music to folk dances such as Gato and Malambo, Ginastera appears as a rhythm-oriented composer.

The Gato (cat in Spanish), sometimes called Perdriz (partridge in Spanish) is an old courtship dance from the eighteenth century that refers to a poem featuring these two animals. The poem, a *seguidilla*, alternates verses of five and seven syllables. This elegant dance, in which partners do not touch one another, is still danced today and is considered to be among the happy Argentinian dances. Two melodic archetypes of the accompanying music to the Gato were written down, respectively by Ventura Lynch in 1883 and Antonio Podestá in 1900, and the first art-music reference to this dance is a later piece by Julian Aguirre, the virtuosic *Gato* for piano solo. Ginastera drew on this musical context to compose his first Gato when he was nineteen (1935) as part of his piano concerto, of which he then destroyed the score. Fortunately, the piece was recorded beforehand and the score was preserved. In *Danza del Gaucho Matrero*, Ginastera alludes to another dance, alongside the Gato: the more turbulent Malambo, a solo dance, extinct but resuscitated by the urban revival movement. The piece refers to the highly popular character of the Matrero, a fugitive from justice, and lends itself to a plausible narrative that justifies both dances. The author then comments on the presence of the Gato in other pieces by Ginastera, notably *Cinco canciones populares argentinas*.

The above mentioned discussions allow Melanie Plesch to conclude that the 'Pequeña danza' is, indeed,

a Gato, if highly abstracted, and proceed with a summary of her methodology: (1) an archeological work that investigates the topic within the vernacular production, (2) a genealogical study of the topic in recorded material and then (3) a cross-exploration of the topic in the composer's and other composers' productions. These methods will reward the performer with a full comprehension of Ginastera's subtle use of vernacular elements in his music, and with a convincing performance of the composer's works.

### **AROUND CHAPTER 9. TOPICS AND PERFORMANCE IN PÉTER EÖTVÖS'S VIOLIN CONCERTO SEVEN (2007) BY MÁRTA GRABÓCZ**

Péter Eötvös composed *Seven*, a concerto for violin and orchestra, as a tribute to the seven astronauts who perished in the explosion of the air shuttle Columbia as it re-entered the atmosphere after its orbital mission. Márta Grabócz takes on the challenging task of identifying topics and tropes in this contemporary work inspired by this tragic event. Eötvös has had a keen interest in space research since his early years. He read articles and books, and attended lectures about this subject. Several of his compositions are inspired by space. He also informed himself about the mission, the crew and the personalities of the astronauts. He dedicated the concerto to the seven astronauts in these terms: "the violin concerto *Seven* is a very personal monologue and the musical expression of my sympathy towards the seven astronauts who lost their lives while exploring space in fulfillment of a fundamental dream of mankind." The orchestra is organized around the number seven: forty-nine musicians are divided in seven groups. One solo violinist is on stage while six others are in the concert hall. All seven astronauts are depicted by seven cadenzas in the solo part. The concerto describes both events and emotions.

The piece, akin to a modern symphonic poem, is divided into two parts. Márta Grabócz only analyzes the first part, which displays all the musical/motivic material of the piece, as well as its topics, tropes and elements of rhetoric. She draws parallels with compositions by Béla Bartók, which are likely to have

influenced Eötvös. The author identifies five common topics between *Seven* and works by Bartók: *Lamento*, *Perpetuum Mobile*, walking in a static space, possibly combined with *parlando*, questions/answers, and threat. Márta Grabócz draws some of her analytical tools from the French composer François-Bernard Mâche, notably his five archetypes (birth, growth, extinction, association and dissociation), two categories (formal categories and musical imaginary associations), and seven dynamic patterns. She further elaborates four typologies: birth/extinction, growth, different forms of stasis, and positive/negative climaxes. The author also clarifies the meaning of musical tropes as proposed by Robert Hatten (a combination of musical topics that create new meaning) and suggests, as a prerequisite for the reader, a familiarity with the concept of topic as discussed by Leonard Ratner, Raymond Monelle, Robert Hatten and Eero Tarasti.

In the first cadenza, Márta Grabócz identifies the topic of lament in the first part, expressed by descending glissandi and chromaticism, as well as the 7/4 metre. In the second part, the author identifies the topic of consolation with the typology of anabase, an ascension, expressed by ascending lines and glissandi. The section ends with an expression of fright. The author then compares several interpretations in their ability to prepare the listener for the drama that is unfolding. In the third cadenza, the author identifies the topics of pursuit, as instruments and orchestral sections seem to chase one another, and of spatial articulation, as four gongs equipped with heavy metal sticks aim to represent Columbia's four rockets that ensured her lift off. The author also identifies the topic of pursuit in Bartók's violin concerto. She further points to the combination of the pursuit topic with hovering and hesitation, which then constitutes a new trope. The seven, and then fourteen, metallic orchestral blows aim to depict the disintegration of the shuttle and the falling of the debris on earth as the violin score spins downward aleatorically. The disaster is reported in seven phases: launch, acceleration, ascension, pursuit within the orchestra (several instrumental groups interact with one another), pursuit with violin (elaboration of complex tropes), escape and disintegration.

Each of the three performances that Márta Grabócz analyses have their own distinctive qualities, but none

constitutes the ideal version. In the fourth cadenza, the composer aimed, among others, to depict the characters of Kalpana Chawla, the Indian-born American female astronaut, and of Ilan Ramon, the Israeli astronaut participating in the mission. Grabócz identifies in the score hints to talas and to Middle East lamentations to represent these two astronauts.

I would like to quote the author's conclusion to this very dense and innovative topical analysis: "I underline the new situation identified in this piece of contemporary music: it highlights the combining, the overlaying of two or more traditional topics. It depends on the knowledge of the historical topics of each performer to guide the listener in an appropriate direction towards the recognition of traces from the past in the music of our own day."<sup>5</sup>

#### AROUND CHAPTER 10. ROMANTIC PERFORMANCE AND GESTURAL TOPIC BY LINA NAVICKAITĖ-MARTINELLI

How could we apply topic theory to a gestural discourse of musical performance and, through this new type of topical analysis, enhance our understanding of a musical work? This analysis would identify movements and assign meanings to these movements. Can we also view bodily behaviour as a vector of communication with the audience? Are there gestural topics stemming from cultural codes encapsulated in a musical performance? In order to answer these questions Lina Navickaitė-Martinelli first points to the persona of the Romantic musician, which, she argues, remains our primary cultural reference when considering the modern virtuoso. Musicians such as Paganini and Liszt have been credited with supra-natural gifts and divine assistance. Showmanship, charisma and sex appeal have become side products of the Romantic virtuoso. On the other hand, a canonic repertoire, and a canonic interpretation of this repertoire, were established and inform musical contests around the

<sup>5</sup> M. Grabócz, *Topics and Performance in Péter Eötvös's Violin Concerto Seven* (2007), [in:] *Musical Topics and Musical Performance*, ed. J. Hellaby, London–New York 2023, p. 219.

world where young musicians try and emulate their glorious role-models from the past.

Considering the musical performance as a semiotic field, the author sees musicians as senders of signs, which are being received and decoded by the audience. The musicians are actors of their own characters and use their voice, instrumental sounds and gestures to communicate with their audience. Both the visual and aural aspects are involved in this idealization and dramatization of the Romantic performer. While performing, musicians display facial expressions and muscular tone, which constitute a parallel discourse and partakes in the communication of emotions. Whether sound producing or not, intended or not, the performers' gestures are meaningful, and may fall within the following categories: sound producing (pitch, rhythm, texture, timbres, dynamics), ancillary and accompanying.

Can we identify universally recognized topics in musical gestures? The fact that children may spontaneously imitate musicians' gestures and develop a gestural discourse that fits the music tends to indicate a degree of universality in the musical gesture. The human being's aptitude to tell the difference of meaning between a gesture displayed in one context and the same gesture displayed in another context is a testimony to the human ability to fine-read gestures. Finally, the fact that some gestures are rooted in cultural codes is yet another testimony to the wide semiotic field carried by gestural discourses.

Lina Navickaité-Martinelli then reviews the six functions of Roman Jakobson's model of communication and applies them to the musical performance.

- the sender's expressive gesture communicates emotional state and contributes to define the sender.
- the conative gesture solicits the audience's reaction. It depends on the behaviour etiquette of the event and the sender's expressive gesture, some of which may be codified gestures (e.g. the performer's immobility inducing silence before the performance or the pianist's suspended hands inducing silence after the performance).
- the phatic gesture points to a contact between sender and receiver: greeting (bowing) eye contact, smiles. Phatic gestures need not be intentional and may differ according to context: formal performances, educational concerts and experimental music elicit

different types of phatic gestures. Phatic gestures may also occur between musicians onstage.

- the referential gesture points to the context of the message and may allude to other musics, literature or paintings.

- the metalinguistic gestures refer to another sign system, and require interpretive efforts, for example Gould "conducting" his own piano playing, or Pogorelich challenging musical traditions by his informal dressing and casual gestural discourse during a piano contest.

- the poetic gestures embellish the functional gestural discourse with extra, unnecessary, gestures.

The gestural topic may constitute a vocabulary through which the performer shows his or her own reaction to the music and therefore impacts the audience's reaction to the event. The public tends to expect a Romantic stage etiquette such as intimacy, dynamism, serenity, virtuosity, eccentricity. Pop culture is also rooted in Romanticism, in its constant reference to masculinity, its expectation for the audience's response, its eccentric display of clothing, or its theatrical use of the microphone.

Drawing on a series of concert photos, the author identifies a number of recurring gestures that may constitute musical topics:

- the upward look alludes to transcendence and may be seen as an expressive and ancillary gesture.
- the hitting of a final chord followed by a theatrical lift of both arms may be considered conative and phatic, and may be seen as a climatic topic.
- the lifting of one arm while playing on the piano with the other may assume a poetic function and connote a particularly engaged performance.

The great number of press photos featuring similar situations may be seen as a testimony to their meaningfulness for the spectators. Furthermore, photos of Paganini and Liszt, widely spread among the public despite their lack of proven authenticity, show our continued interest in the display of Romantic gestural behaviour.

The author expects new topics to appear as years go by. She hopes to see further research investigate this field, for example examining the gestural discourse of several musicians performing the same work. Finally, Lina Navickaité-Martinelli evokes the possibility for gestural discourse to constitute a new analytical

tool, revealing the meaning of a piece by exploring the gestures that the music necessitates.

\* \* \*

Musicology and music-making have very different ways to explore music. Sometimes their paths happily cross in constructive conversations, such as the ones proposed in this book. Musical works are being discussed and analyzed in view of their most meaningful performance possible. Sometimes musicology and music-making exchange opinions in more passionate and stormy ways. Each side seems to claim, or at least imply, that their approach is the most truthful—if not the only valid—way to enter the fascinating world of sounds. I would like to close my review with this short story. I recently read a letter by Gustav Mahler<sup>6</sup> in which he substantially went out of his way to explain his artistic vision to “his tormenting little spirit” who had passionately inquired about his art. Little did I know that this “tormenting little spirit” was a girl of eight, Gisela Tolney-Witt, who later became a celebrated musicologist. This was in 1893. In 1964, seventy-one years later, when Mrs Tolney-Witt was still alive, the world discovered Mahler’s ultimate masterwork. His extraordinary Tenth Symphony, for which we have to thank the distinguished musicologist, Deryck Cooke, for establishing the most convincing performing version, was premiered in London. What goes around comes around, sometimes in the most unexpected ways. I see this episode as the most enchanting example of constructive collaboration between music makers and musicologists. May it inspire many more such collaborations.

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## SUMMARY

**David Baltuch**

From the Page to the Stage.  
*Musical Topics and Musical Performance*  
 Edited by Julian Hellaby

The present review summarizes and discusses *Musical Topics and Musical Performance* published by Routledge and edited by Julian Hellaby. Ten chapters by ten different authors revolve around the concept of musical topic, which may be loosely defined as an 'object' of which the music is the 'sign'. Music may refer to dances (e.g. waltz), moods (e.g. agitato), types of music (e.g. fanfares), periods/styles of music (e.g. archaic) and other referents. The term 'topic' has substantially evolved since its creation by Leonard Ratner in 1980, notably through the writings of Raymond Monelle (2000), Robert Hatten (2004) and Eero Tarasti (2012). The authors of this book connect, in their studies, topical analyses of given works to their musical performances, or discuss more broadly a composer's output or the possible implementations of topical analysis. Connecting music analysis to performance is not an easy task and the journey from theory to practice requires favourable conditions to be successful. Furthermore, musicological texts that would happily reach an audience of practising performers are difficult to produce, not only because the mindsets and aims

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of musicologists and performers are different but also because each domain works with a specialized vocabulary that is not always shared by the other domain. Nonetheless, collaborations between musicology and performance are more and more frequent, to the full benefit of both domains. There are historical example of such collaborations that are inspirational. They remind us that both, performance and musicology, live under the same umbrella: it is called music.

**Keywords**

music, topic, musicology, performance, analysis, meaning, semiotics