

# **An approach to narratology in music analysis**

# Narratology

- Narratology: the “science of narrative” and its techniques. This has underlain many modern approaches to music analysis, in different ways.
- In the 1970s, when it began most intensively to be applied to music, it meant structural analysis of narrative, aiming at scientific objectivity. It was hoped that structuralism could provide wholly objective accounts of musical works and musical “languages”.

# Narrative

- Definition of narrative: “the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way” (Susana Onega and José Angel García Landa, *Narratology*, London: Longman, 1996).
- Such “events” can be defined quite broadly – those together constituting a plot in a novel or movie, or for that matter the facts in a history book, the slides in a PowerPoint presentation, or the formal sections in a Beethoven sonata.
- But narrative is not just the sequence of such events, but their *semiotic representation*: their representation as a system of interrelated signs, in ways studied in structuralism and semiotics.

# Structuralism and Semiotics

- Structuralism starts with the notion of a “language”, with its own grammatical rules. Schenkerian theory, or any other theory used to understand the musical “language” of tonality and its application in particular pieces, could be seen in these terms.
- Semiotics treats any class of behaviour as communication, dependent on a system of “signs” (the word comes from Greek *semeion*, a sign).

# The Historical Background to Structuralism and Semiotics

- Structuralism generally looks back to Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) as its founding father, but began to make an impact in the humanities from the 1960s, first in linguistics, and then by analogy in other fields, including music theory.
- We need not distinguish for our purposes between “structuralism” and “semiotics”.
- Semiotics in music has been largely pioneered by the French-Canadian music theorist and ethnomusicologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez, who is still active; his method is epitomized by a famous analysis of Edgard Varese’s *Density 21.5*.

## Principles of structuralism: internal and external reference

- A basic principle of one variant of structuralism is to regard any “text” (in the widest sense of that word) as embodying a system of interrelated signs each of which derives its “meaning” through *internal* reference to the other signs in the system. This is Nattiez’s emphasis.
- Alternatively, the meaning of signs in such a system may be thought of as being derived also from *external* reference to the world outside itself. This is more usually the emphasis in analysis drawing on the so-called New Musicology.

- Roman Jakobson refers to what we might call the “Nattiez” approach as *introversive semiosis* – where each element of the discourse derives its “meaning” only through *internal* reference to the other signs in the system.
- Jakobson refers to the approach including reference to the outside world as *extroversive semiosis*.
- There is no reason, I think, why some elements of the second emphasis should not find a place within a system drawing mainly on the first.
- In any event, the aim of such an approach is to understand the “rules” of the system.

# Analysing Narrative Structure

- If narrative is the representation of a series of events, then any narrative text is a composite entity, capable of being segmented into its constituent events, and these events can be analysed in terms of the relationship of these events to one another.
- Most simply such events can be categorized at least as belonging to “beginnings”, “middles” and “ends”.
- Thinking about a narrative in these terms implies a progress through time, which is more fixed in music (which is bound, at least in the Classical repertory, to unfolding continuously through real time), than in other arts.



- This “horizontal” aspect of the unfolding of a “narrative” in a musical composition is analogous to syntactic analysis in language and linguistic studies, and is called the *syntactic axis* in semiotic and narratological analysis, which defines the way in which the music unfolds through time.
- It is contrasted with the *paradigmatic axis* – vertical, if you like – which defines the work in terms of its vocabulary of elements and their meaning in relation to one another outside their chronological order.

- Today I will be drawing on Kofi Agawu's *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).
- Agawu's categorization of beginnings, middles and ends can be taken as a rudimentary example of the paradigmatic axis.
- He discusses beginnings in his Chapter 3 in terms of *introversive semiosis* – in other words, regarding the signs within the system of signs of which a piece can be thought to be constructed as self-referential, rather than as referring to the outside world.

Here is his mapping of the paradigmatic axis on to a Schenkerian *Ursatz*:

The image displays a musical score for a Schenkerian *Ursatz* on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The melody consists of three notes: a quarter note on G4 (labeled with a circumflex and the number 3), a quarter note on E4 (labeled with a circumflex and the number 2), and a quarter note on C4 (labeled with a circumflex and the number 1). The bass line consists of three notes: a quarter note on C3, a quarter note on G2, and a quarter note on C3. A thick horizontal line spans the duration of the first two notes in both staves. Below the staff, three brackets indicate structural divisions: 'Beginning' spans from the start to the first note; 'Middle' spans from the first note to the second note; and 'Ending' spans from the start to the final note. Roman numerals are placed below the staff: 'I' at the beginning, 'V' under the second note, and 'I' at the end.

But the same principle can be applied to any of the paradigms themselves, since tonal music is basically hierarchical in structure.

# Topics in Analysis

- Agawu's approach gives a central place to so-called "topics".
- To see how this works, it will be enough to look at the example he draws on in his introduction, the first 16 bars of Mozart's "Prague" Symphony in D KV504, which draws on an analysis by Leonard Ratner.
- Here Ratner uses concepts drawn from Baroque rhetoric in music to identify *topics*: "meanings" of various different kinds of musical gesture in Baroque and Classical music, derived from styles and conventions outside any particular piece and *external* to it.

# Rhetoric and Music

- From about 1600 terms drawn from the *rhetoric* of Greek and Latin antiquity came to be used in music analysis, though never forming a comprehensive or complete system. Treatises were written to introduce aspiring composers to the potential of using them.
- Some relate to formal analysis – introductions, beginnings, middles, endings and codas; some to expressive devices (“hypotyposis”, meaning word painting, for example); some to technical devices (fugal imitation, chromaticism, fauxbourdon effects, etc.)
- Ratner draws on the terminology of the 17th and 18th centuries for names for his “topics” – allusive clichés, if you like. For analysis these may be useful though there is no theoretical reason to draw literally on them.

# Mozart, "Prague" Symphony in D KV504, 1st movement

Topical analysis by Ratner, with two-part contrapuntal framework added for orientation by Kofi Agawu

French overture, coups d'archet  
*exordium* (introduction)

① Adagio

The image displays a musical score for the introduction of the first movement of Mozart's "Prague" Symphony. The score is divided into two main sections: "Ratner's Analysis" and "Two-Voice Contrapuntal Framework".

**Ratner's Analysis:** This section shows a single melodic line in treble clef, D major, 3/4 time. It begins with a circled "1" and the tempo marking "Adagio". The melody starts with a half note G4 (f), followed by a quarter note A4 (p), then a quarter note B4 (f). This is followed by four triplet groups, each consisting of a quarter note G4 (f), an eighth note A4, and an eighth note B4. The melody concludes with a quarter note G4 (p).

**Two-Voice Contrapuntal Framework:** This section shows two staves in treble clef, D major, 3/4 time. The first staff contains a half note G4, and the second staff contains a half note D4.

Ratner's  
Analysis

Two-Voice  
Contrapuntal  
Framework

sensibility  
*antithesis*

transposition

singing style  
*antithesis*

A musical score consisting of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a circled '4' at the beginning. It contains four measures of music, each with a dynamic marking: *f*, *p*, *p*, and *p*. The middle staff is in bass clef and contains four measures of music corresponding to the top staff. The bottom staff is in treble clef and contains three whole notes, each with a fermata. The annotations 'sensibility antithesis', 'transposition', and 'singing style antithesis' are placed above the first, second, and fourth measures of the top staff, respectively.

*circumlocutio*  
(turning figure)

*gradatio*  
(sequence)

hint of learned style  
*anadiplosis* (repetition of  
figure after punctuation)

A musical score consisting of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef and contains a melodic line with various rhythmic values and ornaments. A circled number '7' is at the beginning. The middle staff is in bass clef and contains a bass line. The bottom staff is in treble clef and contains a single note '8' at the first measure, followed by two measures with notes '9' and '10'. Annotations in Italian are placed above the top staff: 'circumlocutio (turning figure)' above the first two measures, 'gradatio (sequence)' above the next two measures, and 'hint of learned style anadiplosis (repetition of figure after punctuation)' above the final two measures. Brackets and lines connect these annotations to the corresponding musical figures in the top staff.



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*antithesis*

*fanfare peroratio (conclusion)*

*cadence*

*distributio (beaking up of figure)*

The image shows a musical score with three staves. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle in bass clef, and the bottom in treble clef. The score is divided into four sections: 'antithesis', 'fanfare peroratio (conclusion)', 'cadence', and 'distributio (beaking up of figure)'. The 'antithesis' section features a melodic line with a slur and a box. The 'fanfare peroratio' section has a melodic line with a slur and a box, and a bass line. The 'cadence' section has a melodic line with a slur and a box, and a bass line. The 'distributio' section has a melodic line with a slur and a box, and a bass line. The bottom staff shows three chords: a triad, a dyad, and a triad.

sensibility

*dubitatio* (uncertainty  
unexpected turn)

fanfare *peroratio*  
(conclusion)

*ombra* (supernatural)  
*apostrophe* (digression  
to another topic)

Musical score consisting of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a circled measure number '13' at the beginning. It contains melodic lines with various ornaments and dynamics. The middle staff is in bass clef and contains a lower melodic line. The bottom staff is in treble clef and contains a series of chords. Annotations above the top staff identify sections: 'sensibility' (first measure), '*dubitatio* (uncertainty unexpected turn)' (measures 2-4), 'fanfare *peroratio* (conclusion)' (measures 5-7), and '*ombra* (supernatural) *apostrophe* (digression to another topic)' (measures 8-9). Dynamics include *f* (forte) and *p* (piano). A circled '13' is at the start. A circled '3' is above a triplet in measure 6. A circled '7' is above a note in measure 8. A circled '7' is above a note in measure 9.

Agawu goes on to suggest that these topics still require a *grammar*, to show their coherence as part of a system of signs.

And he suggests that the best way of doing so is to regard them as elements of *extroversive semiosis* (in other words, deriving meaning from being referential), requiring supplementation with a system of *introversive semiosis* (deriving meaning not referentially but via a network of internal logic).

For him, an ideal way of expressing introversive semiosis is through Schenkerian theory. So he suggests supplementing Ratner's representation with voice-leading graphs, beginning thus:

**Foreground**

The foreground section consists of two staves. The treble staff features a complex melodic line with many slurs and ties, ending in a triplet of eighth notes. The bass staff has a simpler line with a few notes and a fermata. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 6, 10, 6, 10, 6 in the treble staff and 'I' in the bass staff. A circled '4' is positioned above the final triplet, with a dashed line extending to the right.

**Midground**

The midground section consists of two staves. The treble staff has a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes at the end. The bass staff has a few notes and a fermata. Fingerings are indicated by 'I' in both staves and '10 10' in the treble staff. A circled '3' is positioned above the final triplet.

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The first system of the musical score consists of two staves. The upper staff is for the violin, and the lower staff is for the piano. The piano part includes fingerings 10, 7, 45, 6, and ii<sup>6</sup>. The violin part includes fingerings 10, 10, 10, 6, and N. There are also markings 'ii' and 'V' below the piano staff. A circled number '9' is located above the right side of the system. A horizontal dotted line is drawn above the violin staff.

The second system of the musical score consists of two staves. The upper staff is for the violin, and the lower staff is for the piano. The piano part includes fingerings 10 and ii. The violin part includes a fingering V. A horizontal solid line is drawn below the piano staff.

Again, the principle is capable of being applied very generally:

- the system of topics used in this way does not necessarily have to draw on Ratner's terminology;
- the system of "abstract" musical analysis used does not necessarily have to be Schenkerian.