Meaning

Agawu’s article provides a nice summary of topic theory up until 2007. Though I wish to focus on the other articles, I would like to suggest one solution to a criticism of topic theory that Agawu repeatedly brings up: there is a “supposed poverty of mere identification.”\(^1\) Personally, I do think that this is a poverty of many topical analyses, though I understand Agawu’s claim that a listener or analyst has much to gain in labeling topics so that the identification is “never ‘mere.’”\(^2\) The other two articles suggest narrative ways of understanding topics in context, but I wish to bring one additional idea to bear. Stephen Rumph has suggested that there are often relationships in the signifying features of topics. For instance, the Mozart example presented by Agawu, K. 331, begins with the singing topic of an Alberti bass. This sets up the arpeggio as a possibly important feature. Many of the future topics are reliant on (the minuet and the Sturm und Drang) or even defined by (especially the important horn calls and fanfares) their use of arpeggiation. Rumph suggests that these underlying “figurae” link the various topics together. A figurae (as he defines it) is not a signifying feature, but an abstract structural feature that articulates multiple topical signs.\(^3\) I bring this up to suggest that merely identifying topics in an analysis isn’t enough, but there are likely many ways to bring structural relevancy to relationships between the extramusical labels.

\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) See Rumph, Enlightenment Semiotics, Berkeley: University of California Press, (2011): 94-96. He borrows the term, figura, from Hjelmslev. A figura is, in other words, a topical phoneme, a musical element or feature that constitutes part of a topic.
Robinson and Hatten investigate the role of emotion in music, which turns out to be a rather complicated and nuanced affair. They suggest that emotion is a process, not just a static feeling, consisting of an interaction between a person’s appraisal, judgments, and physiological changes in a given situation. To understand music’s relationship with emotion, the authors first review two main psychological viewpoints on the subject. The “appearance emotionalism” (or “doggy”) theory, championed by Davies and Kivy, suggests that emotion is expressed in music through its similarity to features of emotion in humans. As Hatten and Robinson explain, “the so-called ‘doggy theory’ seems to assume that there is a significant degree of natural resemblance between musical expressive gestures and human gestures that are expressive in real life.”

A basset hound may be very happy, but since its face droops into a frown, it expresses sadness or tiredness. In music, a sighing gesture may point to relief or sadness; an up-tempo, major-key melody might suggest merriment or excitement. Hatten’s concept of “markedness,” adapted from linguistics, is important to his understanding of this theory. Essentially, anything in music that is normative or expected is unmarked. Anything that differs is marked in relation to the norm. This suggests that the marked thing has more semiotic possibility than the unmarked one. For appearance emotionalism, whatever is marked is essentially imbued with more emotional meaning; it lends itself to importance.

Hatten and Robinson see a few problems with this theory that all revolve around the relative restriction of emotions it allows. To compensate for this, they suggest a theory based on personae as motivated by the work of Cone and Levinson. Essentially, music represents an agent with which the listener can empathize or sympathize. Summarizing the similarities, Hatten and Robinson write:

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5 Robinson and Hatten, “Emotions,” 75.
Both Davies’s and Levinson’s theories of musical expression rely on the close connection between how music moves and sounds and what emotions it expresses, but they make different assumptions about what that connection is. Whereas Davies thinks that expression in music rests upon resemblances perceived by listeners between musical gestures and human gestures that are (in ordinary life) expressive of some emotion, Levinson thinks that we postulate a persona in the music who is perceived by listeners as actually having the emotions that he or she (apparently) expresses. In other words, expressiveness in music should be analyzed as the genuine expression of genuine emotion in an imagined persona. After explaining the superiority of this view in explaining complex and evolving emotions in music, the authors suggest that this embodying perspective should be used on a case-by-case basis.

I think an important point to stress (which the authors do make) is that emotion evoked by an outside agent, whether in sympathy or in empathy, necessitates understanding. If I don’t understand a person(a), or its context, I will be unable to empathize or sympathize. The same holds true, to some extent, in topic theory. If I don’t understand the semiotic meanings of a topic, I won’t be able to make any of the meaningful connections that a different listener or analyst might.

In any case, I found Hatten’s and Robinson’s account to be rather convincing and quite informative. One of my problems with many accounts of emotion in music (and this also holds for some simplistic applications of semiotics in search of meaning) is that emotion is treated as a mere Pavlovian reaction to either a culturally- or contextually-conditioned stimulus. (“Minor is sad because I’ve been bombarded by explicitly sad music in minor in my culture” or “this song makes me sad because I associate it with the funeral of a family member.”) I think the imaginative conception of a persona engaged in an expressive trajectory in music is a stimulating way to negotiate emotion in music without resorting to superficially reactionary methods.

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6 Robinson and Hatten, “Emotions,” 78.
Additionally, I think this view skirts any Platonic issues by stressing contextual connections to the imagined persona rather than relying on inherent emotions expressed by any kinds of signifying features.

In Klein’s article, the role of narrative is considered in light of Hatten’s contributions to semiotics. First, though, Klein needs to explain how we are to understand narrative and its role in music more generally. He challenges a frequent criticism that musical narrative merely places extramusical meaning onto a piece: “From this perspective, we see how rightly Gregory Karl argues that limiting narrative to extra-musical reference seems a naïve understanding both of what a narrative is and of what claims people make when they hear music as narrative. The impulse to narrativize music is a motivation to find the expressive logic within both the individual composition and the repertoire that supports it.”⁷ The difference in these two views points to a deficiency in many topical analyses, wherein meaning is merely mapped onto a piece rather than derived from or revealed in it. I’m thinking here of Agawu’s earlier semiotic treatise, Playing with Signs, in which he attempts to reconcile “extroversive” and “introversive” signs within a music.⁸ This essentially results in labeling topics for extroversive meaning and providing Schenker graphs for introversive meaning. Though this is an admittedly simplistic summary on my part, Agawu makes little recourse to connections between them, except to suggest where changes of topics might perhaps focus analytical attention onto some portion of the voice leading structure.

Klein suggests that his “view of how narrative interacts with the levels of structural analysis follows Agawu’s description of the interplay between musical topics and harmony.”⁹ I

⁹ Klein, “Chopin’s Fourth Ballade,” 51.
believe Klein is more convincing at comparing and combining narrative and structure in his intertextual readings than Agawu is. But I find myself wondering how these narratives—which essentially equate to the search for expressive logic—how they build upon Hatten’s categories of expressive genre. I guess my biggest issue with this article and the Chopin analyses was that I was unsure as to how Klein’s narrative differed from an investigation of the pieces’ expressive genres.