LYING ABOUT TONALITY:
A New World of Topic in Twentieth-Century Modernist Music

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“Extending Topic Theory” Session.
Annual Meeting of the Society for Music Theory.

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Schoenberg Op. 14, no. 1 (1907-08)

Final Cadence

Ich darf nicht dankend an dir niedersinken.
Du bist vom geist der flur, aus der wir stiegen:
Will sich mein trost an deine wehmut schmiegen,
So wird sie zucken, um ihm abzuwinken.
Verharrst du bei dem quälenden beschlusse,
Nie deines leides nähe zugestehen,
Und nur mit ihm und mir dich zu ergeben.
Am eisigklaren tiefentschlafnen flusse.\textsuperscript{10}

I must not kneel in thanks before you.
You came from the spirit of the fields, from which we rose:
If I try to ease your melancholy,
You turn away in rejection.
Must you remain with your agonizing decision,
Never to acknowledge the nearness of your sorrow.
And only to walk with it and me
Along the river trapped in icy sleep?

By Stefan George
Schoenberg Op. 14, no. 1 (1907-08)

mm. 5-10

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Topic Theory in Early 20th Century

- Bradbury and McFarlane (1979): “apocalypse of cultural community."
- Single composers:
  - Burkholder (2012): Stylistic Heterogeneity and Topics in the Music of Charles Ives
  - Narum (2013): Sound and Semantics: Topics in the Music of Arnold Schoenberg
- My goal: Open a World of Topic
  1. Schoenberg Op. 19/4
  2. Signifier: Compare to 18th cent. Topics
Disclaimer

What about composer X?
What about 20th. c. tonal music?
Schoenberg Op. 19/4 (1911) - Sets

mm. 1–5: A section

- Forte (2003): “a meld of tonal materials drawn from ... octatonic, diatonic, heptatonic, and whole-tone sources” that provides “a remarkable structuring” beneath the “bagatelle-like, ‘playful,’ and ‘leicht’ surface.”
Schoenberg Op. 19/4 (1911) - Topics

- Almén (2008):
  - A: dance topic
  - B: recitative
  - A': parodies

- “The various *topoi* function like evanescent masks, tried on for effect, but discarded in self-loathing and disgust.”

- “…the atonal language merely serves to increase the sense of dislocation.”
Schoenberg Op. 19/4 (1911) - Hybrid?

• Set-class (associational) + topics?
• Both do similar thing!
  • collections of pitches that manifest common relationships
  • regular rhythmic patterns
  • textural changes
  • Segment- or chunk-ability
• Forte: melded tonal materials ↔ Almén: topic-defining features
Figurae

• Stephen Rumph (2011; 2014): “shared structural features of topics” that do not signify *topically*.  
  • /arpeggiation/ ➔ fanfare, Mannheim rocket, hunt (parsimonious part writing)  
  • /displacement/ ➔ sarabande, gavotte, *alla zoppa*, learned-style (metrical consonance)

• Incorporate:
  • phonemes: “tuh” or “ah” ➔ “minimal nonsignifying units of difference”
  • distinctive features: voiced ("duh" or "buh") vs. unvoiced ("t" or "p") ➔ “combination”

• Tonal figurae?
  • /triads/, /metric consonance/, /pitch centricity/ ➔ marked in modernism
Schoenberg Op. 19/4 (1911)

- Tonality as topic: signify
  - /triadic/, /diatonic/
  - /tritone/
  - overlapping (013)
  - /pentatonic 5-cycle/
  - /whole-tone/
  - aggregate complete
Tonality as topic?

• Tonality as *fuzzy set* of practices (not a system)

• For modernists:
  • tonal *figurae* combine in “a prior universe made up of commonplaces of style known to the [contemporary] composers and their audiences.” (Agawu 2009)
  • “musical style or genre”—not a musical system—“taken out of its *proper* context and used in another one.” (Mirka 2014)
  • “the signified of a musical topic is a textual feature or cultural unit, not a *feature in the real world* (or even of the world physically contemporary with the signifier, since topics often refer to older cultural theories.)” (Monelle 2000)
Tonality as topic?

• Tonality as *fuzzy set* of practices (not a system)

• Eco (1976): signification occurs when there is “the *possibility of lying*.”
  • “…every *time there is possibility of lying, there is a sign-function*: which is to signify (and then to communicate) something to which no real state of things corresponds.”
  • Tonality creates conditions of possibility for topicality.
Signified of tonality-as-topic

- /C Major triad/ ➔ simplicity, clarity
- As part of topic ➔ topical world
**Signified of tonality-as-topic**


Other *figurae*: /homophony/, /drone/, /dynamic extreme/
Signified of tonality-as-topic


Other *figurae*: /homophony/, /triads/, /chorale/
Signified of tonality-as-topic

Bartók. *Bluebeard’s Castle* (1930) “Fifth Door” Scene 1, RN 73.

Other *figurae*: /pentatonicism/, /parallel motion/, /triads/, /homophony/, /dynamic extreme/
Signified of tonality-as-topic

Bartók. String Quartet V (1934), II, mm. 45–46.

Other *figurae*: /triads/, /homophony/, /dynamic extreme/

Aaron Harcus: “Estrangement”
Signified of tonality-as-topic

Tonality as topic

- Broad and unsystematic
- Just like “modernism”
- Not “just” early-20\textsuperscript{th} c. atonal composers
- Berman (1980): “broad and open way”
- Harper-Scott (2012): “all music of the twentieth century”
- Reactions to modernization
Towards some Conclusions

- How is tonality topical in modernism?
  - Markedness reversal of phonemes ➔ figural in early 20th century
- Bring topic in from periphery
- Monelle (2006): “the nightmare of modernism made some of us think that musical meaning, in any ordinary sense, was finished.”
- Usual modes of meaning via tonal-topic
- Modernism: historicity and difference
- Tonality signifies reactions to modernization
Thank you!

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Selected Bibliography

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