

Musical Topics and Performance Practice

A Symposium



1–2 June 2023

Melbourne Conservatorium of Music | Ian Potter Southbank Centre
Faculty of Fine Arts and Music | The University of Melbourne

ABSTRACTS

KEYNOTE

PERFORMING TOPICS AT THE PIANO

Julian Hellaby (Macgeorge Visiting Speaker)

Thursday 1 June, 6:30 PM

Ian Potter Southbank Centre, Prudence Myer Studio (Level 5)

Leonard Ratner's book *Classic Music: Expression, Form and Style* pioneered the notion of topics as "subject for musical discourse" (Ratner 1980: 9) and, with their appearance, a particular theory of musical meaning was able to gain traction. Thus, later writers such as Raymond Monelle (2000, 2006) and Robert Hatten (1994, 2004) took this theory down a semiotic path, the former expanding Ratner's Classical focus to include the Romantic period. In this he has been accompanied by Kofi Agawu (2009) and Janice Dickensheets (2012). There is also a growing body of writing on the subject of 20th- and 21st-century composers' topical use by, amongst others, Márta Grabócz (2002, 2023), Walter Frisch (2008), Johanna Frymoyer (2017) and Melanie Plesch (2017, 2018, 2023).

Nevertheless, the focal period for most publications on the subject has tended to remain the 18th century – as for example in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* (2014) – and, with a few notable exceptions, the relationship of topic theory to performance practice has not received very much attention. In line with the recent publication (edited by the presenter), *Musical Topics and Musical Performance* (2023), this lecture-recital explores how performance can interact with the perceived presence of topics in a range of compositions.

For the pianist, an appreciation of topicality has the capacity to affect interpretative decisions, especially if the topic is not named in a work's title but is discovered within the setting of a parent work such as a ballade or a fantasy. For example, the identification of a nocturne topic in a Chopin ballade or a march topic in a Schumann fantasy piece provides interpretative insights which can be projected in performance.

Performing Topics at the Piano, therefore, explores the interface between topicality and interpretation as it applies to (mostly) 19th-century piano music and concludes by proposing a model to illustrate how topics as interpretative informants might operate alongside others such as musical structure or scored directives. The presentation also features illustrative performances by the presenter of music by several composers including Beethoven, the first movement of whose *Appassionata* Sonata Op. 57 will be played in its entirety.

PLENARY SESSION 1

TOPICAL ABSTRACTION, DISAMBIGUATION AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICE, OR HOW FAST SHOULD WE PLAY ALBERTO GINASTERA'S *PEQUEÑA DANZA*'

Melanie Plesch (University of Melbourne).

Thursday 1 June, 5:00-6:00 PM

Ian Potter Southbank Centre, Prudence Myer Studio (Level 5)

Alberto Ginastera's rousing 'Pequeña danza' is the third number in Scene I of his ballet *Estancia* op.8 (1941); it is heard again in Scene V, now called 'Danza final', and preceding the dazzling 'Malambo' that closes the work. 'Pequeña danza' is also well known as part of the orchestral suite extracted from the ballet (op 8a) and through the composer's arrangement for solo piano.

But what dance is this 'little dance'? Dance topics are identified by characteristic musical features such as rhythmic patterns, melodic gestures, and harmonic sequences, among others. An extreme case of topical abstraction, 'Pequeña danza' confronts us with the limits of interpretation in topical analysis. Written in 6/8 metre and featuring a hemiolic pattern throughout, this work could point to any one of many Argentine vernacular dances.

In this presentation I advance a potential disambiguation of the topic underlying 'Pequeña danza' through a study of the composer's handling of vernacular references in his early works. Combining historical musicology, ethnohistory and topic theory, my analysis identifies an idiosyncratic *dispositio* of topics used by Ginastera that connects references to the dances *gato* and *malambo* with an 'ominous' figure specific to the composer. It also considers the history of the topicalization of vernacular dances in Argentine art music before Ginastera and his engagement with the topical universe he inherited.

The disambiguation process followed contemplates the empirical evidence as well as the cultural references and expressive connotations of the potential topics. This methodology, it is hoped, could be extrapolated to comparable cases.

PLENARY SESSION 2

OSSIANISM, NARRATIVE, AND DVOŘÁK'S NEW WORLD SYMPHONY

Janice Dickensheets (University of Northern Colorado, MacGeorge Visiting Speaker), Friday 2 June, 12:00-1:00 PM

Level 7, Room 721

Fueled by Enlightenment fascination with knowledge derived from ancient cultures, James Macpherson's Ossianic poetry exploded upon the western world. Though plagued by continual controversy surrounding their authenticity, these poems inspired Romantic-period works of literature, theatre, and music throughout Europe and America, and helped give birth to the bardic style in music—a style that conjures the ancient realms of epic poetry through narrative techniques that mirror those of Macpherson.

A central Ossianic image is the evocation of the "cultured primitive," Macpherson's view of Celtic society, which aligned well with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "noble savage," thus creating a fascination with exiled heroes and loss of paradise. In America, a growing movement toward "primitivism" emphasized the organic unity between man and nature, an idea that aligned with

Transcendentalist values, suggesting that Ossian's appearance in the New World may very well have impacted nineteenth-century American artistic aesthetics.

Dvořák's ninth symphony epitomizes the bardic style. Topical and narrative analyses uncover a buried formal structure within the standard sonata cycle that mirrors that of northern-European Medieval epic poetry, which, in turn can inform and shape performances. Framed by mournful other-worldly gestures signifying the voice of the bard, the work features common Ossianic imagery: the cultured primitive set amid the tempest of battle and storm, lost love, and tales of heroic bravery, all surrounded by melancholy, and death. Ossianic imagery that is rendered in an American voice—a voice that embodies nineteenth-century American aesthetics.

Paper presentations

'RHETORICAL' VERSUS 'ORGANICIST' PERFORMANCES: AN UPDATE.

Joan Grimalt (Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya)

Thursday 1 June, 4:30 PM

Ian Potter Southbank Centre, Prudence Myer Studio (Level 5)

Traditional definitions of the musical *topos* tend to be static. This is the same criticism that Schenkerian analysis has received, when used exclusively and not as an auxiliary tool. A musical *topos* can be seen as a reference, but within a time-governed discourse. Thus, its analytical description, especially if it intends to be related to performance, needs to include the expressive relationships this *topos* has with its neighbouring references, in its actual context. In other words, it needs to be aware of the rhetorical, narrative elements in which it appears.

How does topical-rhetorical awareness modify a performance? Is this influence verifiable in some way? My chapter in the book aims to provide useful answers to these questions, based on a pragmatic approach, both as a performer and as a teacher of analysis.

It is commonly accepted that Rhetoric has shaped music as a special sort of discourse throughout the so-called *common-practice* period. However, in most current performances of Classic and Romantic music the prevailing criterium still seems to be the 'organic' qualities of the music, i.e. its syntactic connections, rather than its discursiveness. This vision of the 'Classical' repertoire reflects the formalist approach that has prevailed in Analysis courses until recently. Instead of showing the music's proximity to dancing, singing and oral expression, our Conservatoires have focussed on how it can all be derived from one motivic cell. This 'organicist' focus results in performances with some characteristic features.

On the other hand, a performance that pays heed to the rhetorical and topical aspects of the work can also be described in comparison with its opposite tendency. The main parameter where such differences can manifest and be analysed is arguably pulse. In organicist performances of Classic repertoire, the pulse is steady and tends to move forward as if striving to reach some abstract goal. In performer jargon, this is often called *Give it more direction* (HEPOKOSKI & DARCY 2006, 25).

On the contrary, being aware of the sheer topical and rhetorical diversity of a Classical musical work tends to manifest in a freer use of its basic pulse. Beethoven is credited for having displayed a fluctuating pulse as a performer of his own works (LEIKIN 2011, Ch. 5). Seeing music as a referential discourse requires more time to imitate speech and singing of a usually distressed singer or speaker, one who will not and cannot care for a steady beat.

As for the Romantic repertoire, sometimes the lack of awareness of a represented *topos* involving movement, such as a ‘march’ or a ‘social dance’, results in a free pulse that can put in jeopardy the represented *topos*. In this case, the peril comes from excessive subjectivation, i.e., the representation of an inner process –a memory, typically– rather than a ‘dance’ or a ‘march’.

But just how much *rubato* is appropriate for every specific musical style? Or, without the prescriptive tone so common in conservatoires, what happens if you apply a lot of *rubato* to the early nineteenth-century repertoire? A viable answer might be to reflect on what is being represented in both cases. In other words, to reflect on the representation of a virtual ‘subject’ manipulating on real time the musical material.

WHEN IS THE BRILLIANT STYLE NOT THE BRILLIANT STYLE? TOPICAL NEGATION AND PERFORMANCE IN BEETHOVEN’S OP. 12 VIOLIN SONATAS’

Dorian Bandy and Elizaveta Miller (McGill University)
Friday 2 June, 9:30-10:00 AM
Room 721 (Level 7)

In the recent scholarship examining the relationship between topic theory and performance, it is generally assumed that the identification and labeling of topics serves as a first step towards the realization of those gestures in performance. Yet this framing rests on the unstated premise that pieces of music sustain an unambivalent relationship with the topics referenced within them—that is, that topics constitute, rather than problematize, the expressive vocabulary of a given piece. This paper calls such a relationship into question, using as a case-study the topical vocabulary at play in Beethoven’s Op. 12 Violin Sonatas, completed in the final year of the 18th century. These pieces, particularly the third sonata of the set, sustain an uneasy relationship with their own topical universes, both presenting hints of topical references and repeatedly negating them. At times, Beethoven accomplishes such negated references through textural manipulations that point towards non-chamber genres such as the symphony and concerto—cases in which the ultimate denial of the topical reference is inevitable, given the two-instrument scoring of the sonatas. Elsewhere, however, Beethoven’s topical negations are more provocative, especially where they involve lapsed references to the “brilliant style” and “singing style,” tropes more readily compatible with chamber genres yet which receive a surprisingly ambivalent treatment at his hands. The paper argues that such cases, by presenting challenges for both analytic and performed interpretation, necessitate the development of a more nuanced model for the interplay of topics and the pieces of music in which they operate.

TOPIC THEORY, POLISH CULTURAL NARRATIVES, AND THE MUSIC OF FRYDERYK CHOPIN

Cheng Wei Lim (Columbia University)
Friday 2 June, 10:30-11:00 AM
Room 721 (Level 7)

Scholars have explored topic theory’s pertinence to Western art music performance vis-à-vis nineteenth-century music (e.g., Dickensheets 2023, Dougherty 2023, Hatten 2010, Kennaway 2023, Lidov 2012, Navickaitė-Martinelli 2023, Tsekova-Zapponi 2023). I build on their approaches by demonstrating how hermeneutic interpretation and greater sensitivity to historical contexts could enrich topical analysis. Using Fryderyk Chopin’s music, I discuss how Polish cultural narratives color our understanding of his topical allusions. Narratives of loss and attempted redemption became especially poignant after the November Uprising (1830), expressed as melancholic nostalgia for sovereign Poland’s past, its chivalric heroism idealized. Though several musicologists have applied topic theory to narrative-influenced readings of Chopin’s music (e.g.,

Bellman 2010, Goldberg 2004, Klein 2017), my reading of the Polonaise Op. 53 develops this interpretative move in several ways. I rely on fine-grained topical analysis, specifically in distinguishing the piece's many polonaise *types* (McKee 2017; cf. Goldberg 2016, Parakilas 2017 for other genres). I also show that, depending on how the piece's tonal-formal logic interacts with this cultural narrative, these topical allusions are imbued with *temporal perspective* (Hatten 1997, 2006). My reading suggests performative choices that go against the grain of current performance practice. Even then, some allusions remain ambiguous. Through examining nineteenth-century commentary on interpreting the Polonaise (by Franz Liszt, Jan Kleczyński, and others), I argue that performers have agency in choosing which topical reading shades their performance. Ultimately, music history and theory go hand-in-glove as creative resources for the performer.

'THE *PIANTO* TOPIC AND A TOPICALLY INFORMED PERFORMANCE OF SCHOENBERG'S PIANO MUSIC

David Tieri (University of Melbourne)
Friday 2 June, 11:00-11:30 AM
Room 721 (Level 7)

The topical analysis of the influential and yet controversial twentieth-century composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) is a recent development in the scholarly literature. Several scholars have begun applying topic theory to Schoenberg's music, and a wide range of musical topics have already been found. However, topics in Schoenberg's works for solo piano, as well as the expressive potential of topics for the performance practice of Schoenberg's music, are issues that have not yet been fully explored.

In this paper, I examine Schoenberg's use of the topic of the *pianto*—a descending semitone that is a signifier of grief—in a sample of his piano pieces. Using a combination of topical analysis and performance-led research, I identify traditional and extended references to this figure, singly and combined with other conventions, such as the lament. I also consider the implications for artistic interpretation and performance decisions, which I demonstrate through a live playing of selected excerpts from these pieces. I, thus, explore the relationship between topical analysis and topically informed performance thereby to answer the question of how pianists can use topical awareness to present an eloquent performance of Schoenberg's piano music.

IS THE AUDIENCE LISTENING? NOTATION, COMPREHENSION AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICE IN LATE-MEDIEVAL POLYPHONY

Tim Daly (University of Melbourne)
Friday 2 June, 2:00-2:30 PM
Room 721 (Level 7)

Late-medieval music seems to offer little of interest to topic theory. Other forms of citation and allusion, often based on the wholesale reuse of existing melodies, seem to predominate. Further, topical analysis of late fifteenth-century polyphony has an audience problem. How is widespread musical semiosis possible when musical understanding was the preserve of a small community of trained musicians who jealously guarded the transmission of practical musical knowledge?

This paper reverses the relationship between semiosis and performance practice to explore how the practice of fifteenth-century musicians and composers made musical organisation audible. This process starts with an examination of a form of notational performance practice that made musical structure perceptible to performers reading from individual parts: certain patterns in mensural notation came to signify important structural phenomena. Performance traditions, particularly those around the singing of unwritten chromatic inflections, could in turn make the

structure expected by practitioners available as musical punctuation to an audience learning for the first time to treat music as a rational process to be understood and not merely as a source of wonder. The links in this semiotic chain can be taken as proto topics within the paradigm of beginnings, middles and endings of Agawu's concept of introversive semiosis. The result is a listening framework in which a musical rhetoric that speaks to more than the performers becomes possible.

PURCELL'S MAD BESS OF BEDLAM, MULTI-ROLLING, AND THE BEGINNINGS OF THE "MAD SONG" STYLE

Amelia Le Plastrier,
Friday 2 June, 2:30–3:00 PM
Room 721 (Level 7)

This paper is part of a larger project on the musical representation of madness in English songs. It argues that most of the musical figures associated with "mad songs" can be traced back to Henry Purcell's *Bess of Bedlam*. One of the song's key features is multi-rolling: the subject appears to change from the supposedly deranged Bess to another person, raising important performance challenges. By considering the mad song as *style*, in Ratner's terms, we can gain insight into the perplexing performance aspects of *Bess of Bedlam* and the 17th English mad song genre.

After Purcell's death, five of his vocal works were singled out as proof of England's ability to produce music as complex and compelling as that of continental Europe. Three of those works belong to the mad song genre: *Let the Dreadful Engines*, *From Rosy Bowers*, and *From Silent Shades* (subtitled *Bess of Bedlam*). *Bess of Bedlam* was Purcell's first "mad song" and sparked a new style of the genre that dominated the English stage during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. *Bess of Bedlam* was also a significant influence on Handel when he composed his first mad scene for his opera *Orlando*.

Despite its significance, *Bess of Bedlam* is rarely performed, as the singer needs to decide when and where to voice Bess, and when to sing as the Narrator, giving the listener insight into the bleak reality of Bess' unfortunate situation. Awareness of the topic's multi-rolling feature can help clarify the ambiguity that significantly impacts the performer's interpretation of Bess' madness.