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Exploring Linear-Analytical Elements in the Writings of Leo Mazel

ABSTRACT

Background

Schenkerian theory has not had a particularly strong influence on Russian theorists of music. This is understandable, since Schenker's ideas had long remained practically unknown in the lands of the Soviet cultural influence. In Russia, the predominant harmonic theory was—and remains—that of Hugo Riemann. Among Russian theorists who have both relied on and substantially developed Riemann's ideas, the most well-known is Yuri Kholopov. All this, however, does not mean that ideas akin to Schenker's are completely foreign to Russian-language scholars. In this paper, I show that elements of linear-analytical thinking can be implicit in analysis seemingly unrelated to Schenker's work or to graphic techniques.

The case in question is a monograph on Chopin's Fantasy, op. 49 by the Soviet musicologist Leo Mazel, from 1937. My goal is to explore Mazel's views of linear motion and compare them to Schenker's concepts by "translating"—and sometimes developing—Mazel's prose into fully fledged graphs.

Leo Mazel (1907–2000) was an influential Soviet musicologist, who originated the so-called "holistic analysis" method (*tselostnyi analiz*); Mazel developed it concurrently with another musicologist, Viktor Zuckerman. This method includes both broad aesthetic considerations and detailed scrutiny of music. See Daniil Zavlunov (2014) for an examination of the history and philosophy of holistic analysis. Mazel's 1937 monograph on Chopin's Fantasy is an extremely detailed analysis of the piece. Mazel explores the work's form, tonal and harmonic plan, motivic structure, and expressive content. With respect to form, he interprets Chopin's fantasy as a fusion of sonata and rondo-sonata formal types (types 3 and 4 sonata, to use Hepokoski and Darcy's terms).

Aims and repertoire studied

My main goals are (1) to explore parallels between Mazel's and Schenker's work, where possible, and (2) to present a partial translation of Mazel's treatise, and thus increase the general familiarity with his work. I also offer my own Schenkerian reading of the fantasy, a reading partly based on Mazel's analysis. Specifically, I take up his observation that a neighbor figure, a descending second, is omnipresent in the Fantasy. I develop this idea by suggesting that the neighbor motive is composed-out at multiple structural levels, including the high middleground.

Part of my goal is to compare of this reading with a well-known published analysis of the Fantasy, that by Carl Schachter (1988). Schachter's analysis is a fully-fledged Schenkerian reading of the piece. A comparison of Schachter's

and Mazel's analyses (if one incorporates Mazel's observations into a real Schenkerian graph) yields two different middleground structures.

The repertoire under consideration is Chopin's fantasy op. 49, but the main idea—that linear analysis can be present even in writings outwardly unrelated to Schenker's work—is relevant to all tonal music, and possible non-tonal as well.

Methods

My comparison of Schenker's and Mazel's analytical techniques involves a close reading of Mazel's prose (and his sparse musical examples), uncovering in it traces of linear thinking, and "translating" these elements into established Schenkerian terms and graphic symbols.

The method in my own reading of Chopin's Fantasy is strictly Schenkerian.

Implications

I focus on three elements in Mazel's treatise on Chopin's Fantasy, elements that have direct relevance to linear analysis. The first is the opening phrase of the piece. Mazel presents a scheme of the first two-measure idea, showing three motivic elements. The first two are (a) the leap of a descending fourth and (b) a descending second, with the first note metrically stronger than the second. He then explains the larger melodic level (element C) as "summarizing the descending motion of the entire idea: the initial descending fourth (element A) is filled in with descending seconds (element B)". This statement about a filled-in interval resembles the idea of linear progression. Of course, the concept of linear progression is not completely there. And yet, his recognition of the filled-in horizontal interval is remarkably reminiscent of linear-analytical thinking. The motivic analysis of the opening phrase bears significance for Mazel's subsequent analysis, for he traces the transformations of the two basic motives throughout the entire work.

The second linear element in Mazel's monograph is more substantial: it is a harmonic reduction of two passages in the development. These reductions consist of chord progressions written on two staves, with the bass line in the left hand and the remaining chord tones in the right hand. Reductions of this kind essentially represent what William Rothstein has termed *imaginary continuo*. In Mazel's treatise, they appear when the music is difficult to explain in harmonic-functional terms, because it is driven by linear, rather than functional, relationships.

Finally, the most remarkable section, in terms of linear thinking, is Mazel's discussion of the Lento passage, which he calls the "central episode", mm. 199–222. The essence of this discussion consists of viewing the episode as an insertion

(*vstavka*); I argue that this view represents a prolongational idea that can be expressed in Schenkerian terms. Mazel explains this passage as a sort of extension (or prolongation, which is not his expression) of the G-flat major harmony, subsequently moving to F. Harmonically, this is discussed mainly in functional terms: the Lento is “a very long digression (*otklonenie*) into the subdominant key in the context of G flat major” (p. 125). And yet, melodically, his reference to a structurally retained tone G flat makes his observation kindred to a prolongational idea. Thanks to an emphasis on the tone F sharp throughout the Lento (in the bass and soprano), as well as a G flat (F sharp) in the bass that frames the passage, Mazel recognizes this tone as “an abstractly understood and vaguely perceived organ point” (126). This statement is remarkably close to the Schenkerian concept of structural retention, although Mazel does not explain it in terms of harmonic prolongation, as Schenker would do. For comparison, see, for instance, Schenker’s discussion of the primary tone, in *The Masterwork* (1926; 2014, 3–4), which also comes close to the idea of a pedal point.

Finally, I integrate Mazel’s idea of semitonal motion into a complete Schenkerian reading of the Fantasy. This reading is informed by Schachter’s analysis (1988), particularly at the background level, but the middleground is different: it shows motivic parallelism based on the neighbor motion, complete or incomplete, at different levels of structure. This neighbor motion is borrowed from the opening phrase. The most significant consequence of this motivic parallelism involves a deep-middleground event, the semitonal motion F–Gb–F encompassing mm. 1–235. This is the highest level within the first (and longest) portion of the Fantasy, the portion that forms a huge auxiliary cadence, ultimately moving to the Ab-major tonic in m. 276. In this reading, therefore, the neighbor motion originating from the opening 2-measure idea, to which Mazel pays such close attention, grows to epic dimensions, forming motivic parallelism at levels including the highest middleground.

My analysis, therefore, synthesizes ideas from Russian- and English-language analytical traditions, ideas that otherwise remain isolated with respect to each other. I hope also that it brings out motivic connections in Chopin’s piece that otherwise remain unnoticed or underplayed.

Keywords

Harmony, tonality, Schenker, Mazel, Chopin

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Example 1. Chopin, Fantasy op. 49: a Schenkerian reading (middleground level). Brackets denote parallelisms among neighbour motives. The box shows the Lento passage, where the middleground descending-second motive in the bass is based on Mazel’s analysis of the passage.

