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Pure Theory / Impure Analysis

ABSTRACT

Background

Between the 1950s and 70s, American music theory achieved the status of an authoritative scholarly discipline, distinct from both musicology and music theory itself as hitherto understood (i.e., as the pedagogy of music fundamentals and harmony). The ‘new’ music theory gained power in the academy and produced knowledge, in turn creating more power (McCreless 1996). To maintain this legitimization, theory aspires to quasi-scientific status by pursuing rigorous systematic organization. For example, complex systems such as Schenkerian theory (Schenker 1979) and the Sonata Theory of Hepokoski and Darcy (2006) institute foundational principles — ‘*Ursatz*’ and ‘rotation’ respectively — and build large theoretical edifices whose components are strictly interconnected to those principles and to one another in a series of precise relationships, tending to exclude unrelated elements. Such high degree of internal coherence, which we may define as *purity*, is a necessary condition for theory to be theory and to claim scientific prestige.

Theory’s purity, however, is at odds with music’s density. A single theoretical system can only illuminate one of the multiple layers and processes at work in any composition. A recognition of music’s semiotic thickness invokes a pluralistic analytical approach; and although there is no final interpretive account of a given composition, this does not exempt the analyst to pursue comprehensiveness. This paper offers an argument for the collapse of analytical purity. For example, to only employ Sonata Theory in analyses of 18th-century sonata movements means ignoring the stylistic allusions engendered by musical topics (Ratner 1980, Ratner 1991, Mirka 2014) and the pervasive galant schemata unearthed by Gjerdingen (2007), with the attendant issues of listeners’ cognition. Sonata Theory needs to exclude topics and schemata, but a composed sonata does not, nor should its study.

Aims and repertoire studied

This paper highlights the unavoidable tension between music theory and analysis. The two fields depend on each other, yet are epistemologically opposite: music theory aspires to the condition of purity whereas music analysis, at its best, is an *impure* empirical process. While the former is intrinsically bound to construct self-contained worlds, the latter should break the confines of those worlds, cross-contaminate them, and respond sensitively to whichever parameters of a composition appear to be salient at any given turn by applying the theoretical concepts most suitable at those junctures. I present a series of case studies from the 18th-century chamber repertoire, especially works by W. A. Mozart, to show how purist analytical results are variously deepened, complicated, or questioned when impurities from related and divergent theories are introduced.

Methods

I employ an analytical method developed in my dissertation (Magarotto 2016), which integrates Sonata Theory and the analysis of schemata usage according to Gjerdingen, and I also add topical analysis and other factors to exemplify analytical impurity and demonstrate its value. Here I summarize two case studies, on Mozart’s Keyboard Sonatas K. 545 (1788) and 576 (1789) (to follow the discussion below, readers will need the scores, available at <dme.mozarteum.at/DME/nma>). The first movement of Mozart’s well-known Keyboard Sonata in C major, K. 545 (‘for beginners’) has been subjected to frequent analysis, especially regarding the restatement of the primary theme (P) in the subdominant at mm. 42–5. The debate concerns whether this thematic return marks the beginning of the recapitulation, albeit an unusual one, or belongs to the development. Hepokoski and Darcy read the phenomenon as an ambiguity between the Type 3 and Type 2 sonata (2006, 262–7), whereas John Snyder’s Schenkerian interpretation assigns the F-major thematic statement of P to the development (Snyder 1991). However, the matter can be elucidated with an impure analytical approach that does not ignore relevant contextual aspects, including galant-style conventions, listeners’ perspectives, and the pedagogical purposes of this sonata.

Snyder reads the unorthodox structure of K. 545/i as an *uninterrupted* fundamental line in which the *Kopftón*, degree 5 (G5 in m. 1), is prolonged without interruption until its recovery at the onset of the recapitulatory secondary theme in m. 59; from here the structural descent continues until completion in m. 71 (Snyder 1991, 67–73). Thus, for Snyder the section including the F-major P theme (mm. 42–57) cannot be part of the recapitulation because it lacks a convincing *Kopftón* (Snyder 1991, 64, 67). However, this reading is challenged when one throws historically grounded considerations in the mixture. For 18th-century listeners, expectations of conventional thematic layouts intrinsic to the genre sonata (described in Sonata Theory) and expectations of familiar schemata successions (described in Gjerdingen 2007 and Magarotto 2016) would have complemented the perception of structural tones and tonal areas as such. It is in fact highly debatable whether informed listeners without absolute pitch might be able to distinguish different key areas as easily as they can distinguish different textures, motives, and phrases. Although the key of P in this recapitulation breaks the default, the thematic layout of both P and the following transition (TR, mm. 46–57) is consistent with the expositional model, except for the interpolation of a new module in mm. 50–3 (at any rate, TR alterations in a recapitulation are normative). As it happens, Mozart extends TR by using two Primmers in succession instead of the single Primmer of the exposition. Such two-Primmer schema appears elsewhere in his keyboard sonata output (K. 279/i, mm. 48–51) and it allows for maximum voice-leading smoothness by creating a long stepwise descent through both schemata. This smoothness matches Leopold Mozart’s principle that masterful composition must follow the

‘thread’ (*il filo*; letter of 13 August 1778; Gjerdingen 2007, 376). It is also reasonable to assume that the composer of a sonata ‘for beginners’ might carefully calculate technical difficulties and provide opportunities for practicing basic skills: here the two Priners offer balanced agility practice to both hands, assigning fast 16th-note scales to each hand in turn. In conclusion, for the recapitulation to reach the normative tonal resolution in the tonic key at the secondary theme (from m. 59), while also allowing for the stepwise connection of two successive Priners in TR (motivated aesthetically and pedagogically), P needs to begin in F major.

This explanation remains hypothetical, but it incorporates far more contextual information than analyses based on a single theoretical system. It indicates how a pluralistic or ‘impure’ analysis that attempts to be comprehensive can put into question purist interpretations, offering stronger results by triangulating evidence from several historical, aesthetic, stylistic, and formal aspects at once. In this case, the impurities added to the clean Schenkerian reading include the dialogic conventions of the sonata game, aesthetic principles (Leopold’s ‘thread’ and voice-leading smoothness), stylistic conventions of the galant idiom (Priners), comparative analysis (K. 545/i and K. 279/i), listener-oriented considerations, and the context of the sonata’s explicit pedagogical purpose.

A second case study involves the first movement of the Keyboard Sonata in D major, K. 576. In this case, topical analysis and knowledge of Mozart’s individual treatment of the sonata form — what I call his sonata ‘script’ (Magarotto 2016) — complicate Hepokoski and Darcy’s interpretation of the movement. For these authors, m. 41 in the exposition marks the Essential Expository Closure (EEC), which by definition ends the secondary-theme zone (S, mm. 28–41) and is followed by the closing zone (C, from m. 42). This alleged ‘S’, however, is unconvincing as a secondary theme because it is harmonically unstable and asymmetrical; comparative analysis shows that the first movements of all other Mozart’s keyboard sonatas feature a perfectly stable and symmetrical S (Magarotto 2016, 202–5), indicating that this symmetry is a central property of his sonata ‘script’. By contrast, the theme Hepokoski and Darcy deem as ‘C’ does exhibit the normative symmetry of Mozart’s secondary themes. Moreover, the two themes in question (alleged ‘S’ and alleged ‘C’) are swapped in the recapitulation, so that the alleged ‘C’ appears first (mm. 122–37) and is followed by the alleged ‘S’ (from m. 138); the former is also extended, becoming a balanced double period and thus acquiring even more symmetry. This strongly suggests that the alleged ‘C’ was in fact the ‘real’ S and that the alleged ‘S’ was in fact a deformational second transition (or part of what Hepokoski and Darcy define as ‘trimodular block’). The hermeneutic conclusion is that, in this movement, Mozart plays with the norms of the sonata form as well as his own script, creating an imbalanced exposition and then fixing the imbalance in the recapitulation by assigning all the materials to their ‘correct’ formal locations. The game is surely engaging.

Topical analysis adds further support to this reading. The ‘real’ S, especially in its recapitulatory version, displays a cantabile quality and the typical ‘comprehensibility’ of the singing style (Day-O’Connell 2014) — frequent traits in Mozart’s other S themes. Conversely, the alleged ‘S’ elaborates the primary theme’s hunt/fanfare topic in a driving and modulatory fashion better suited to transitional and closing zones. Research in this area is still underdeveloped, but the first movement of K. 576 might indicate the existence of a

topical syntax in 18th-century music: a set of preferred associations of certain topics with specific formal functions (for one study, see Caplin 2014).

Overall, both comparative analysis and topical analysis support the interpretation of the movement as a trimodular structure in the exposition that is normalized in the recapitulation, demonstrating that the addition of analytical impurities can question or complement the conclusions obtained through Sonata Theory alone.

Implications

This study has important implications for analysis and interpretation, showing that a competent melding of diverse analytical systems and approaches bears high hermeneutic potential. Although the impure approach here centers on 18th-century music and Mozart, it can of course be applied to other repertoires; each period or genre will require a different array of theories and methods. This paper takes up the conference theme of music analysis’ future and status, responding that its status is one of empirical inquiry, and proposing pluralism and theoretical impurity as avenues for 21st-century music analysis.

Keywords

Analytical practice, Schenkerian analysis, Sonata Theory, topic theory, galant schemata, comparative analysis, Mozart.

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