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## Interactions between Topics and Schemata: The Case of the Sacred Romanesca

### ABSTRACT

#### Background

Eighteenth-century composers coined a highly specific musical idiom to depict processions and choruses of priests and priestesses on the operatic stage (McKee 2007). These passages share slow tempo, soft dynamics, major mode, chorale texture, duple meter, rhythmic and melodic simplicity, and a I–V–vi opening paired with 1–7–1, 3–2–1 and 3–5–1 soprano lines. The stable coupling between *signifier* (musical attributes) and *signified* (expressive attributes such as serenity, spirituality, or transcendence) constitutes what McKee calls the ‘sacred hymn topic’. Arguably, once the link between sound and meaning had been forged in opera, the topic achieved the potential to invoke meanings associated with religious ritual when used in other contexts.

McKee’s inclusion of a chord progression in the definition of a topic is unusual. When harmony and melody figure among the signifiers of musical topics, they are hardly ever defined in such a specific way. Furthermore, McKee considers that ‘more than anything else, it is the opening harmonic gesture’ that ‘imbues the music with a sense of “walking in the spirit”’ (2007, 25). This opening harmonic gesture, paired with specific soprano lines, coincides with the first stages of the Romanesca, one of the voice leading patterns from Gjerdingen’s lexicon of galant schemata (2007).

Topic theory and schema theory deal with musical patterns established by repeated usage, both achieve special importance in the highly conventionalized style of eighteenth-century music, and both aim for the recuperation of historical modes of listening. Despite these shared concerns, topic theory and schema theory have remained independent until fairly recently, the former focused on issues of meaning, and the latter concerned with musical syntax. Overall, Gjerdingen presents galant schemata as semantically neutral (2007, 120). They are not correlated with particular textures, meters or tempos, nor do they exhibit any affiliation with affects or genres. This lack of generic affiliation makes schemata poor candidates to function as musical topics: as Mirka insists, topical signification relies on the use of styles ‘*taken out of their proper context and used in another one*’ (2014, 2, italics in original). Without an association with specific contexts, schemata cannot participate in this process of displacement across contexts that characterizes musical topics. Yet, despite their supposedly abstract nature, some schemata tend to blend with the world of the so-called ‘extra-musical’. Recent scholarship has begun to investigate the interactions between topics and schemata, exposing the expressive meanings that certain voice-leading patterns invoked in specific historical contexts (Bourne 2014, Byros 2014, Rice 2014).

#### Aims and repertoire studied

This paper investigates the relationship between the hymn topic and the Romanesca schema in the music of the late eighteenth-century, contributing to emerging body of music-theoretical inquiry concerned with the interactions between topics and schemata. My goal is to determine whether the Romanesca functioned as a neutral syntactic pattern or was endowed with specific expressive properties, and how composers might have relied on these properties for communicative purposes.

The repertoire studied includes opera, sacred music, and instrumental music from the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with an emphasis on Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.

#### Methods

The first part of this paper presents a corpus study that investigated the relationship between the sacred hymn topic and two basslines associated with the Romanesca schema (1–5–6 and 1–7–6). The corpus study began with a search for instances of the Romanesca basslines in a corpus of 296 works by 13 composers, assembled so as to be representative of the music heard in Vienna from 1775 to 1800. Next, I analyzed the co-occurrence of these basslines with some of the musical attributes of the sacred hymn topic (slow tempo, soft dynamics, chorale texture, and duple meter), as well as the contexts in which the schema typically appears. The interpretation of the results includes a discussion of the semiotic, metaphoric, and linguistic underpinnings of the overlap between the Romanesca and the hymn topic. I also draw on the historical distribution of schemata and the life-cycle of the Romanesca to speculate that for late-eighteenth-century composers and listeners the schema might have functioned as a signifier of the musical past.

The second part of the paper consist of a series of analytical vignettes that illustrate how the Romanesca interacts with other parameters of the musical structure (including sonata form and tonal structure) to create meaning in works by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.

#### Implications

My corpus study reveals that a high proportion of late-eighteenth-century Romanescas share attributes with the sacred hymn topic. I extend McKee’s arguments to demonstrate that not only do operatic hymns tend to begin as Romanescas, but also that Romanescas tend to be written as hymns. Additionally, the schema appears with higher frequency in sacred works than in instrumental music and more often in opera seria than in opera buffa. Gjerdingen does not observe affiliations of the Romanesca with tempo, texture,

affect, or genre, but by the end of the century these associations seem strong. Although the schema might have originally lacked a semantic dimension, it acquired spiritual and ceremonial meanings over time, even when dissociated from choral texture—an obvious signifier of the sacred sphere. I also argue that these religious associations do not only apply to the 1–5–6 bassline of McKee’s sacred hymn, but also to the stepwise descent that characterizes the ‘galant’ version of the Romanesca (Gjerdingen 2007, 32).

This study illustrates how corpus analysis can contribute to the study of the expressive properties of schemata, and how these properties may inform music analysis and contribute to recuperate historical modes of listening.

### Keywords

Topic, schema, musical signification, eighteenth century, Viennese classicism, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven.

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