



EDITORIAL

Topics and Schemata

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In my Introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* I asked, ‘What are musical topics?’. In answer, I posited that topics are conventions, yet they do not subsume all kinds of conventions: ‘Other conventions, subsumed under this concept by other authors, are not topics’. Among them are contrapuntal-harmonic schemata. If schemata are not topics, they can, nevertheless, combine with topics ‘into more or less stable amalgam[s] that are conventional in their own rights’ (‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2). This idea was developed by Vasili Byros in the same volume with reference to the schema–topic amalgam made up of the *le-sol-fi-sol* and the *ombra* (‘Topics and Harmonic Schemata: A Case from Beethoven’, in *The Oxford Handbook*, 381–414) and by William Caplin in the following chapter, dedicated to the lament topic (‘Topics and Formal Functions: The Case of the Lament’, in *The Oxford Handbook*, 415–452).

In the wake of the volume’s publication, the expressive qualities of schemata and their interaction with topics have been explored by other authors. In two articles, one of them published in this journal, John A. Rice presented two schemata that he called the Heartz and the Morte, and proposed that the Heartz is ‘not only . . . a schema but also . . . a topic’, in that it conveys ‘a sweetness and tenderness characteristic of a certain strain of the galant style’ (‘The Heartz: A Galant Schema from Corelli to Mozart’, *Music Theory Spectrum* 36/2 (2014), 318, 315). By contrast, the Morte is an emblem of lament and thus akin to *ombra* (‘The Morte: A Galant Voice-Leading Schema as Emblem of Lament and Compositional Building-Block’, *Eighteenth-Century Music* 12/2 (2015), 164). Olga Sánchez-Kisielewska established a link between the ‘sacred hymn’ topic and the Romanesca schema, yielding what she calls a sacred Romanesca (‘Interactions between Topics and Schemata: The Case of the Sacred Romanesca’, *Theory and Practice* 41/1 (2016), 47–80, and ‘The Romanesca as a Spiritual Sign in the Operas of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven’, in *Singing in Signs: New Semiotic Explorations of Opera*, ed. Gregory J. Decker and Matthew R. Shaftel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 163–191). Nathaniel Mitchell came up with the Volta, a schema which has no strong topical implications, yet frequently performs a dramatic function as a gesture of culmination (‘The Volta: A Galant Gesture of Culmination’, *Music Theory Spectrum* 42/2 (2020), 280–304). And, again in this journal, Ewald Demeyere touched upon the affective implementations of a schema consisting of a dominant pedal accompanied by a chromatic descent (DPCD) (‘Yet Another Galant Schema: The Dominant Pedal Accompanied by a Chromatic Descent’, *Eighteenth-Century Music* 19/2 (2022), 173–199).

Two of these authors framed the relation between schemata and topics in terms of that between syntax and semantics. Although independent in principle, ‘syntax and semantics interface in what cognitive linguists call a *syntax–lexicon continuum*’ and lead to the emergence of form–meaning pairs: ‘The musical equivalents of form–meaning pairs are *schema–topic amalgams*’ (Byros, ‘Topics and Harmonic Schemata’, 382, 383). Accordingly, the sacred Romanesca is a ‘fluid amalgam between musical syntax and semantics’ (Sánchez-Kisielewska, ‘Interactions between Topics and Schemata’, 65). This raises the question of the conditions under which such amalgams are possible.

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With regard to the sacred Romanesca, it was the ancient quality of the Romanesca schema. Given that the schema achieved its greatest currency in the early eighteenth century, ‘the Romanesca, semantically empty in its origins, acquired in the late eighteenth century connotations of ceremony, solemnity, alterity, and even transcendence’ (Sánchez-Kisielewska, ‘The Romanesca as a Spiritual Sign’, 166). But the other schemata were never ‘semantically empty’. Rather, they were filled with meaning from their origins. What made this meaning possible?

In order to answer this question, we need to reconsider the relation of schemata to topics. This relation is *not* the same as the relation of form to meaning in form–meaning pairs in that topics are not equivalent to meaning: they *have* meaning. And they have meaning because they are signs, each of them made up of the signifier and the signified. If the meaning of topics is the signified, the signifier is the set of their musical characteristics. It follows that amalgams of topics and schemata can emerge when structural features of schemata match musical characteristics of topics. Still, not all characteristics of topics are equally important. This was observed by Johanna Frymoyer, who distinguished between ‘essential’, ‘frequent’ and ‘idiomatic’ characteristics. Essential characteristics are necessary to identify a topic. As such, they ‘remain sufficiently narrow so as to distinguish’ it from other topics. Frequent characteristics are ‘not essential to a topical identification’, while idiomatic characteristics are tangential to this task (Johanna Frymoyer, ‘The Musical Topic in the Twentieth Century: A Case Study of Schoenberg’s Ironic Waltzes’, *Music Theory Spectrum* 39/1 (2017), 85). Drawing upon this weighted hierarchy of musical characteristics, one can submit that amalgams of topics and schemata can emerge when structural features of schemata match ‘essential’ characteristics of topics.

The conditions under which this situation comes about could be further clarified in terms of Robert S. Hatten’s theory of markedness. According to this theory, markedness consists in an asymmetrical relation between terms of an opposition such that the marked term is used less frequently than the unmarked term and has a ‘narrower range of meaning’ (*Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 35). As an example of such a relation, Hatten invokes the opposition of minor and major modes, which motivates their correlation with the expressive realms of the ‘tragic’ and the ‘nontragic’. Drawing upon Hatten’s characterization of the minor mode, W. Dean Sutcliffe points out that, ‘because it was “marked” in opposition to the dominant major mode, the ways in which the minor mode was typically employed in fact involved a narrowing of options’ in terms of both ‘the sorts of figures and devices that were employed’ and ‘the sorts of affects that were projected’. Among the figures and devices employed by the minor mode are chromatic chords and lines, the former including ‘diminished-seventh, augmented-sixth and Neapolitan’ (W. Dean Sutcliffe, *Instrumental Music in an Age of Sociability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 504, 507).

Since the minor mode affords greater opportunities for chromatic chords and lines, chromaticism and the minor mode are interrelated and both of them are marked. By contrast, diatonicism and the major mode are unmarked. It follows that diatonicism and the major mode cannot form ‘essential’ features of topics. This is why the Romanesca was ‘semantically empty in its origin’. Given that the schema occurs in the major mode, it belongs to the ‘nontragic’, a vast expressive realm which encompasses several topics. Its correlation with the sacred hymn is made possible by other characteristics of this topic, such as slow tempo, soft dynamics, chorale texture or simple rhythm. When these characteristics are present, as in the ‘March of the Priests’ from *Die Zauberflöte*, the Romanesca invokes ‘a sense of spirituality or religious feeling’ (Sánchez-Kisielewska, ‘Interactions between Topics and Schemata’, 62), but it does not invoke such a feeling when these characteristics are absent or replaced by their opposites, as in the Queen of the Night’s aria ‘Der Hölle Rache’ (bars 24–28, 35–39), where the Romanesca is paired with frantic figuration. The same is true of the Hertz, a schema featuring the subdominant chord over a tonic pedal, typically presented in the major mode. As a result, the Hertz achieves its quality of tenderness and

sweetness only ‘in combination with other musical parameters’. If paired with exciting accompaniments and rising arpeggios, as is often the case in instrumental music, it betrays ‘hardly a trace of the tenderness and sweetness’ ascribed by Rice to its occurrences in vocal music (‘The Hertz’, 312, 321). Yet another schema described by Rice is the Lully. This schema, like most others, can occur in major or minor modes, which is why it forms no stable amalgam with any specific topic. When deployed in Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito*, it owes its splendour to the rhythm and texture of the French overture and the sumptuous orchestration with trumpets and drums, yet ‘stripped of its dotted rhythms’, as it is in the Prelude in C major from book 1 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, the Lully ‘is expressively neutral’ (John A. Rice, ‘Adding to the Galant Schematicon: The Lully’, *Mozart-Jahrbuch* (2014), 211).

Since the Romanesca, the Hertz and the Lully are diatonic, they can only form pairs with topics that have no ‘essential’ characteristics related to pitch. When they do form such pairs, their structural features combine with ‘essential’ features of topics characterized by marked terms of oppositions within other parameters. To be sure, markedness involving other parameters is yet to be investigated, but it stands to reason that some states of those parameters are used less frequently than others, and are therefore ‘sufficiently narrow’ to allow for successful topical identification. For instance, chorale texture is marked against the default texture of the galant style, while slow tempo is marked against the default *tempo giusto*. The question remains why the schemata discussed by Sánchez-Kisielewska and Rice combine with such states of those parameters more frequently than with others – but it is yet to be demonstrated if this is indeed the case. The issue requires a far more rigorous examination, via the use of corpus methods, than it has so far received. In fact, Rice conducts no corpus studies, and he makes no claims about the Lully. His remarks about the Hertz are supported by a handful of examples and the authority of Daniel Hertz. Sánchez-Kisielewska does conduct a corpus study, yet ‘this study focuses only on the beginnings of independent movements and all sections marked by a change of meter or key signature’. As a result, ‘Romanescas that do not unfold from the very beginning of a movement or section have not been considered’ (‘Interactions between Topics and Schemata’, 58). This is why the Queen of the Night falls through the cracks.

All of the other schemata whose expressive qualities were explored by the authors previously mentioned feature chromaticism and thus imply the minor mode. When they occur in the major, they result in modal mixture, which ‘always indicates a tragic or poignant perspective’ (Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*, 36). This pertains to Byros’s *le-sol-fi-sol*, Caplin’s lament, Rice’s Morte, Mitchell’s Volta and Demeyere’s DPCD. Since chromaticism and the minor mode are marked, these schemata match ‘essential’ features of topics which fit the ‘tragic’ character, which explains why they pair with *ombra* or related topics such as *tempesta*, lament, fantasia or *Empfindsamkeit*. (For the relation of *tempesta*, lament, fantasia and *Empfindsamkeit* to *ombra* see Clive McClelland, ‘*Ombra* and *Tempesta*’, in *The Oxford Handbook*, 283.) Still, ‘essential’ characteristics of these topics related to pitch are not their only characteristics. Rather, each of them displays further ‘essential’ characteristics related to other parameters. If such characteristics are combined with a given schema, they consolidate the topic–schema amalgam. If they are absent, they render the schema expressively neutral. If the schema combines with ‘essential’ characteristics of a different topic, this results in topical tropes (Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*, 29–66). From my discussion it follows that Frymoyer’s weighed hierarchy of ‘essential’, ‘frequent’ and ‘idiomatic’ characteristics of topics is of critical importance for Hatten’s concept of troping, and it is indispensable to distinguish between topical tropes and topically neutral passages characterized by a concatenation of unmarked features.

The relation of schemata to topics and topical tropes is further complicated by the fact that ‘essential’ characteristics of topics related to pitch do not have to be embedded in schemata. This is so since schemata are ‘skeletons’ (*Gerippe*) in the sense of the term used by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (*Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, second edition, two volumes,

volume 2 (Berlin: Winter, 1762), 340). In other words, they are voice-leading patterns which admit of decorations. While schemata such as the *le-sol-fi-sol* safeguard the chromatic character of a given passage, chromaticism can just as well be elicited by chromatic decoration of a diatonic schema. This opens up interesting possibilities of interaction between topics and schemata. I will illustrate them with an analysis of what Leonard G. Ratner calls the *stile legato* in the first movement of Haydn's Sonata in E flat major H52 (*Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer, 1980), 412–421).

With the term *stile legato*, or 'bound style', Ratner refers to the material first presented in bars 6–8 and 10–13 of the exposition. The term stems not from *legato* articulation but from *ligaturae*, or suspensions, through which a note is bound over into the next bar. (For a discussion of the 'bound style' see Keith Chapin, 'Learned Style and Learned Styles', in *The Oxford Handbook*, 305.) According to Ratner, the *stile legato* phrase in bars 6–8 'consist[s] of an elaborated fourth-species counterpoint in descending sixth chords with suspensions' (*Classic Music*, 412). More specifically, it is based on what Giorgio Sanguinetti identifies as the descending 7–6 sequence (*The Art of Partimento: History, Theory, and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 141). Although sequences do not feature in the galant schematicon compiled by Robert Gjerdingen (*Music in the Galant Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)), they form an important group of schemata, treated as such by Sanguinetti. In [Example 1](#) the 7–6 suspensions are between the lower voices while the top voice moves in parallel thirds with the bass. In Haydn's sonata, the sequence appears in E flat major, starting from the second bar of the model ([Example 2](#)). It is hard to recognize in bars 6–8 ([Example 3](#)) because its structural skeleton is masked by several layers of ornamentation. The lower voices, forming the chain of suspensions, appear in the disguise of an accompaniment reminiscent of the Alberti bass, whereas the top voice, placed in the right-hand part, acts as a melody in longer rhythmical values and legato articulation. Together, these topical markers suggest the singing style. Indeed, the *stile legato* passage was taken by Donald Francis Tovey for 'a broad cantabile phrase on an easily swinging . . . accompaniment' (*Essays in Musical Analysis: Chamber Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), 94). Moreover, the melody is decorated by dotted-rhythmic figures referring back to the French-overture topic of the main theme, and it includes a chromatic note, D \flat , which gives it a touch of fantasia. All in all, the passage represents a topical trope, its different topics carried by different structural layers.



Example 1. Descending 7–6 sequence, from Giorgio Sanguinetti, *The Art of Partimento: History, Theory, and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), Example 9.37b, 142. Used by permission



Example 2. Descending 7–6 sequence in Joseph Haydn, Piano Sonata in E flat major H52/i, bars 6–8

After two presentations in the exposition, *stile legato* comes back into play in the development section. This time, Haydn uses the first five steps of the descending 7–6 sequence in F minor (Example 7), combining the original position used in Example 2 with the disposition of hands from Example 6. As a result, the upper voices form the swinging accompaniment in the right-hand part (Example 8). The melodic line is retained in the bass, but it loses its cantabile character, chopped up as it is into dotted-rhythmic motives shifting between different octaves. By dropping the singing style, the *stile legato* passage further intensifies the fantasia topic, whose seed was planted by the D \flat in its first occurrence, and it contains even more chromaticism than bars 10–13. In fact, the shifting bass line charts the chromatic tetrachord in F minor (F–E \flat –E \flat –D \flat –D \flat –C), but, by the time it reaches its end, the sequence has modulated to A flat major.



Example 7. Descending 7–6 sequence in Haydn, Sonata H52/i, bars 58–60

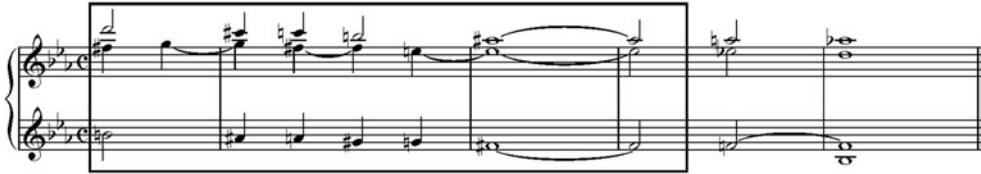


Example 8. Haydn, Sonata H52/i, bars 58–60

The next occurrence of *stile legato* in bars 73–78 (Example 11) is singled out by Ratner as the one in which this material ‘performs its most vital structural function’: it follows the E major episode in bars 68–73 and ‘leads the harmony chromatically downward to come to rest on the dominant of the home key’ (*Classic Music*, 415). The passage brings with it the set of topical markers familiar from its earlier occurrences – swinging accompaniment, dotted-rhythmic motives, chromaticism – but now chromaticism penetrates to the bones of the structural skeleton. Indeed, this skeleton is not the descending 7–6 sequence but a descending chromatic motion (Example 9). While it does feature 7–6 suspensions and the upper voice moves in parallel thirds with the bass, the bass is not a diatonic descent traversing the full octave but a chromatic descent from the first to the fifth scale degrees. In other words, it is the lament bass. After this bass has reached the last station (Example 10), the dominant seventh in B minor is shifted down by a semitone, which causes a chromatic step in all three voices. Its transformation into the dominant seventh in E flat major is completed by a further chromatic step in the upper voices and by adding the fourth voice underneath. This is what Tovey calls ‘a magical enharmonic modulation’ (*Essays in Musical Analysis*, 100). More than that, it is a marvellous piece of mystification, during which the fantasia topic migrates from the surface into the structure of the contrapuntal-harmonic model and the *stile legato* evaporates from the topical trope.



Example 9. Descending chromatic motion, from Sanguinetti, *The Art of Partimento*, Example 9.42a, 146



Example 10. Descending chromatic motion in Haydn, *Sonata H52/I*, bars 73–78



Example 11. Haydn, *Sonata H52/I*, bars 73–78

What this analysis reveals is a fascinating case of interaction between topics and schemata, yet the most intriguing aspect of this interaction is how it unfolds throughout the sonata form, only to salvage its tonal trajectory at the last moment. The relation of topics and schemata to musical form has been discussed by others, but the subject has not been exhausted. I will return to it in due course.

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