

BOOK REVIEW

What We Talk about When We Talk about Narrativity in Music

Márta GRABÓCZ (éd.), (2021). *Narratologie musicale – Topiques, théories et stratégies analytiques*. Paris: Hermann. ISBN 979 1 0370 0637 0.

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The philosophical-academic discourse on music in the West has come a long way since its beginnings in Greek antiquity; still the editor of the recently published book, *Narratologie musicale – Topiques, théories et stratégies analytiques*, Márta Grabócz suggests in her Introduction that one of its basic controversies has virtually remained the same ever since. The two approaches attributed to the Pythagorean and the Platonic/Aristotelian traditions respectively concern music as either an autonomous, quasi-natural phenomenon based on its own specific scientific-mathematical rules stemming from the laws of nature, or as a cultural practice featuring an expressive value and a social function within the communities in which it is performed and listened to (p. 6). From this, with a giant leap, Grabócz's Introduction takes us millennia later in time, right to the 1980s and '90s, when the conflict (labelled as a "war" in the Introduction) re-emerged between the defenders of music theory and historical musicology on the one side and the proponents of a new approach on the other, championing the study of musical meaning, the development of topic theory, and the application of narratological analysis to musical processes. As Joseph Kerman proposed in his highly influential and ever since much-cited 1985 book on musicology,¹ around the time many have felt that the scope of the academic discourse on music had to be broadened, to include, among other things, the study of the "content," or of the "signified" in music, along with the cultural context of music-making, as opposed to earlier musicology's traditional fascination with musical "structure," or the "signifier" as the only aspect of music relevant enough to be discussed in analytic texts. This 2021 book edited by Márta Grabócz aspires to provide a panoramic picture of how this project of broadening musicology's scope to the semiotic and narrative aspects has been going since its inception in modern academic discourse, by presenting theories from the beginnings of the disciplines of musical narratology and semiotics up to the most recent approaches on the matter,

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¹Joseph KERMAN, *Musicology* (London: Fontana Press, 1985).

and thereby establishing “virtual dialogues” (p. 8) between scholars from different periods and different disciplinary backgrounds as well as between approaches rooted in different theoretical and methodological foundations.

Despite this plethora of different approaches and analytical methodologies, the compilation manages to maintain a clearly defined focus on the key problems concerning musical narrativity, since both the selection and the arrangement of texts are instrumental in keeping the reader’s attention on the main issues identified by Grabócz in the book’s Introduction. These “key themes” include debates on musical signification (pp. 9–10), and the application of the concept of “narration” (and, consequently, of narratological analysis) to musical processes (pp. 10–11) both in theoretical and practical terms. From this, the ultimate problem seems to emerge as the question of whether “narrative analysis” of music would inevitably result in some kind of an *exegesis*, the identification of a “story” told in the musical process (and its quasi-translation to verbal language) as Jean-Jacques Nattiez supposed (and rejected, because he thought the “sense of narrativity” in music stemmed from its “imitative capacity”),² or on the contrary, whether the approach of music through narratological models only leads to the identification of the “strategies of the organization of signifieds” (the “form of the content”) as Grabócz herself suggested earlier.³ At any rate, the ultimate problem seems to be that of *what exactly we talk about when we talk about narrativity in music* in the first place. What constitutes narrativity, or at least the sense thereof in music? Most articles in the book make some sort of proposition to resolve this debate, either from a primarily theoretical (Part I), or from an analytic point of view (Part II), and the ultimate aspiration of the book (as well as its most important contribution to the study of music and narrativity) seems to be the juxtaposition of these two approaches and the initiation of a discourse between them.

Part I (entitled *Topic Theory, Theories of Narrativity*) starts with the basics of representation in classical music, i.e. topic theory, the first three chapters revolving around topics and the expressive capacity of classical music. The first chapter by Kofi Agawu (pp. 43–72) presents a general overview (with an extended bibliography at the end of the chapter) of topic theory from Leonard Ratner to the early 2000s, also touching on key points of criticism pertaining to the theory (historic assessment, identification, origins of certain topics etc.). Similarly, Nicholas McKay’s article (pp. 73–105) reviews the succeeding generations of topic theorists from Ratner to Monelle, and poses the question of how text and context relate to each other in analyses based on topics, ultimately concluding that topic theory can “come of age” only if it manages to develop a sensibility to the interpretation of topics in various historical and cultural contexts (p. 101). The third chapter, a 1986 study of Vladimir Karbusicky (pp. 107–120), considers that musical signification may rely on metaphoric relations in and between music, language, and the “spheres of reality.” In other words, connections between musical expressions and the phenomena of the world are established through a series of symbolic (conventional or artificial) relations attached together by the principle of metaphoric analogy, thereby eventually forming the semantic content of music (pp. 118–119). The actual debate on musical narrativity takes place in the next four chapters, where at first Austrian literary scholar Werner Wolf

²See Jean-Jacques NATTIEZ, “Peut-on parler de la narrativité en musique?,” *Revue de musiques des universités canadiennes* 2 (1990), 68–91.

³Márta GRABÓCZ, *Musique, narrativité, signification* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2009), 27.



(pp. 121–142) discusses narration in instrumental music from an inter- and transmedial perspective, concluding that instrumental music can be “narrative-inducing” thanks to the cognitive framework of the listener who attributes narrative qualities to certain peculiarities (conflict, teleology etc.) of the musical process (p. 138). It is followed by Raymond Monelle’s take on the debate on musical narratology (pp. 143–152), in which the English scholar inquires whether the concept of narratology can be applied to music, finding (after Paul Ricoeur) that since it is the experience of time that make actions “readable” as a narrative, therefore the temporality of music may also give a similar sort of (narrative) cohesion to a series of events in the interpretation of a listener (pp. 150–151). In the next chapter (pp. 153–164), Danièle Pistone also concludes that musical narration is basically nothing else but the effect “provoked” by the temporality of music in the listener, in which the musical process gains some kind of trajectory (pp. 159–160). Finally, Byron Almén’s article (pp. 165–175) discusses musical narration to the analogy of J. J. Liszka’s concept of the “semiotic of myth,” finding that the concept of “transvaluation” (the revaluation of the perceived rank and markedness relations within a sign-process) also applies to music since it occurs in the interaction of musical events and the cultural function of the resulting temporal pattern, which then describes a narrative trajectory (p. 174).

The following two studies concentrate on another crucial feature of narrativity, i.e., the sense of *agency* in music, closely connected to the semiotic problem of *markedness*. Fred Everett Maus (pp. 177–203) proposes an “anthropomorphic analysis” of music around the “concept of action” by interpreting Beethoven’s String Quartet in F Minor (op. 95) following Tzvetan Todorov’s theory of narrative structure to reveal the “aesthetic aim” of the piece inaccessible to conventional analyses of the musical structure (p. 202). Then, Robert Hatten (pp. 205–219) theorizes “narrative hierarchy” in music from a non-marked – “degree zero” – sequence of musical events through three further degrees leading to the interruption and rearrangement of the non-marked sequence, and the emergence of a narrative strategy (pp. 216–217). The last three chapters of Part I discuss other important aspects of the problem of musical narrativity. Lawrence Kramer (pp. 221–234) observes the “hermeneutic complexity” of musical narrativity by drawing a parallel between metanarrativity and the tendencies toward the deconstruction of narrativity in twentieth-century literary modernism and the deconstruction of narrativity in twentieth-century music on the example of Debussy’s *Jeux* (interpreted by Kramer as an intentionally aimless, purposeless musical process; see p. 230). John Rink (pp. 235–250) approaches musical narration from performance studies through a comparison of Alfred Brendel’s and Murray Perahia’s views on performance, concluding that interpreting music as a process inevitably involves a *narrative programme* from the performer’s side, which then translates to a *narrative programme* for the listener: therefore, it is impossible to define musical narrativity without paying attention to the role of performance and of the performer. Accordingly, László Stachó (pp. 251–273) also studies strategies of the expression of temporality in musical performance by applying P. N. Juslin’s cognitive psychological model of musical performance (the so-called *GERMS model*) and Sperber and Wilson’s *relevance theory*, concluding that the variations in performance can contribute to the formation of musical (narrative) meaning through guiding the listener’s attention to the relevant moments of musical composition (for instance, irony can be signified by exaggeration or the violation of certain rules; see p. 263).

After a mostly theoretical Part I, the analyses in Part II follow one another by and large in the chronological order of the analysed composers. The first two concentrate on Mozart: József Ujfalussy’s contribution (originally written in 1957, revised in 1980, pp. 277–330) on the



formation of “intonations” in Mozart’s instrumental music (identified through parallels with his operas and Church music) can indeed be regarded as an early forerunner of topic theory, while Eero Tarasti’s article (pp. 331–353) identifies the three types of narrativity (those of *conventional*, *organic*, and *existential*) in the Fantasia in D Minor (K 397) through a synthesis of the methodologies of Schenkerian analysis and his own theory of existential semiotics. These are followed by two articles on Schubert: Angela Carone (pp. 355–376) examines the literary topos of “peregrination” (travelling toward a goal as a transformation of personality) in *Drei Klavierstücke* D 946 applying Greimas’ actantial model, while Xavier Hascher (pp. 377–389) interprets moments of crisis in the first movement of the “Unfinished” Symphony as a model of *anti-progress* and therefore *anti-narration*. The three following analyses concentrate on Chopin: Luis Ángel de Benito (pp. 391–404) studies the function of the literary and musical topos of *ombra* (*Doppelgänger*, i.e., the juxtaposition of a theme and its disfigured, contorted version) in the formal processes of Sonata, op. 35. Douglass Seaton (pp. 405–419) also examines issues of musical form and its relation to narrative content through an identification of masculine and feminine “personae,” as well as a narratorial *persona* in the first movement of Sonata no. 3, op. 58 – interpreting the movement as a quasi-feminist rejection of the conventional dramatic (masculine) model of sonata form (p. 417). Similarly, Michael Klein (pp. 421–433) also supposes the presence of an implied narrator in the fourth Ballade, directing musical storytelling toward an idealized, pastoral theme (p. 432). Then, Hermann Danuser (pp. 435–466) takes on Mahler’s Third Symphony as a “musical novel” by discovering the interactions between traditional musical form and narrative program in terms of the work’s cohesion.

So far, virtually all contributions in the book have focused conspicuously on a quite limited repertoire, i.e., European art music from between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. The last three chapters somewhat broaden this scope since they aspire to discover musical narrativity in post-World War II avant-garde and contemporary music. First, Siglind Bruhn (pp. 467–492) analyses Elliott Carter’s Concerto for Orchestra after Saint-John Perse’s poem, “Vents,” as a case of musical *ekphrasis* as the music represents the “narrative strata” of the poem (p. 492). Then, Ivanka Stoianova (pp. 493–517) studies narrativization and the creation of a new, partially musical narrative genre in Hans-Werner Henze’s scenic-vocal composition, *El Cimarrón*, relying on Greimas’ theory of the *canonical probes* within a narrative; and finally, Philippe Lalitte (pp. 519–540) takes on the narrative aspects of *mixed music* (compositions featuring real-time interaction of instruments and recorded or computer-generated sound) from a narrative-semiotic perspective, applying Greimas’ concept of the *semiotic square* (*carré semiotique*) to define relations between different layers of musical material and their narrative and semantic capacities.

Overall, the volume features many different approaches and points of view on musical narrativity (from intonation/topic theory through formal approaches, hermeneutics, structuralist semantics and narratology to gender studies, intermediality, and even existential semiotics), while the book itself has a clear and easy-to-follow “narrative line” from the application of stylistic, and extra-musical references in historical context (i.e., topics) to the study of narrative capacity in contemporary compositions. Of course, it may be argued that this scope is somewhat limited since only the last little more than two hundred years of Western art music are explored in the book, from Mozart to Jonathan Harvey (other musical traditions including early music, popular music, or music of non-European cultures are basically excluded). However, this restriction seems justifiable, on the one hand because a broader scope could easily blur the focus of



the selection as a result of a much vaguer definition of “music” both in terms of aesthetic and socio-cultural functions, which would have made finding any kind of common ground for the debate over musical narrativity almost certainly impossible. On the other hand, from a practical perspective, theories of musical narrativity have mostly been developed so far to describe Western music from the eighteenth century onwards; therefore, a collection of essays aiming to sum up existing theories and establish dialogues between already developed approaches had no other option but relying on these texts, authors, and theories. At the same time, it can hardly be denied that these academic discourses have been brought together successfully to give a comprehensive panoramic picture of the state of the art regarding musical narrativity, and the “virtual dialogues” announced by Grabócz in the Introduction open fascinating new ways indeed for discussion about the topic.

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