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FROM MUSIC SIGNIFICATION TO MUSICAL NARRATIVITY

Concepts and analyses

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Signification in music

The history of aesthetics and of philosophical thought related to music demonstrates a dichotomy, a dual approach, one aspect of which emphasizes the purely theoretical, scientific, or physical features of music, while the other considers it as a type of human communication endowed with expression. This ambiguous, equivocal character of musical analysis and criticism was already present in Antiquity: the Pythagoreans focused on the laws of intervals and harmonic proportions—i.e., the numerical relations between sounds considered as models of universal harmony—whereas Plato and Aristotle were mainly interested in the ethical and pedagogical qualities, cathartic effects, and the social role of music. These dichotomous approaches, which lacked mediation and a dialectical exchange, reappeared several times through the history of the aesthetics of music from the eighteenth to the twentieth century (for example, the theories of Rousseau versus Rameau, Liszt versus Hanslick, and Kretzschmar versus Schenker).

Beginning in the mid-1970s, numerous currents of the humanities, such as structuralism, post-structuralism, cognitive sciences, literary semiotics, narratology, and gender studies, have powerfully influenced musicology. The integration of new disciplines into the framework of traditional musicology reinforced the weight and value of these approaches as they engage in an "aesthetics of content," by which I mean the analysis of expression in music: thus, music signification—that is, musical semiotics—was established.

In various geographical regions, depending on epistemological allegiances, and even throughout the decades, the terminology employed to define signifying units in music has varied, sometimes greatly. The following are summaries of some of the major trends in approaches to music signification.

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Intonation

In the 1960s and 1970s, Eastern and Central European musicologists (such as Asafiev, Jiránek, Ujfalussy, Karbusický, and to some extent Szabolcsi) employed the term "intonation" to refer to expressive types within a musical style that were primarily based on older musical genres. These types functioned within a particular society, or social stratum, including, for example, lullaby, lament, *caccia*, *alla turca*, French overture, military march, funeral march, religious or ceremonial music, festive dances, popular dances, nocturne, serenade, and so on.

The term "intonation" originates in Rousseau's *Musical Dictionary* in which the Enlightenment philosopher related voice inflections to human expression and emotions. Asafiev considered "intonation" to be the foundation of the musical sign. He associated intonations with *musical memoranda*, a virtual thesaurus of musical types or formulae, and espoused the view that the technical and expressive characteristics of each type persist in the collective memory of listeners—a reservoir, as it were, that allows connections between historical periods. In 1968, the Hungarian musicologist Ujfalussy offered the following definition of intonation:

> In the current practice of musical aesthetics, the category of intonation represents much more than the simple melodic and rhythmic inflections of spoken language. In other terms, intonation signifies formulae, types of specific musical sonorities which transmit social and human meanings and which represent certain defined characters developing throughout a musical composition.
>
> *(Ujfalussy 1968, 136)*

Topics

In the early 1970s, Anglo-American scholars began developing an approach to musical signs as basic units of music signification. In his path-breaking study of the Classical style, Rosen (1971) analyzed the expressive and stylistic types found in the thematic material of Classical genres (see, for example, his chapters on Haydn symphonies that examine formal models based on stylistic references).

In 1980 Ratner introduced the notion of the "topic"—from *topos*, i.e. "commonplace" of classical rhetoric. It was not a new notion, but a redefined and re-applied concept borrowed from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century treatises by Marpurg, Mattheson, and Koch. Ratner identified 27 types of conventional musical expression, each of which refers to some kind of human reality: the affects, the extra-musical world or "cultural units" of the Baroque and Classical periods. Among the types that Ratner identifies are the following:

1. Dance types: minuet, passepied, sarabande, allemand, polonaise, bourrée, country dance, gavotte, siciliano, gigue.
2. Marches: military; funeral; ceremonial.
3. Styles: *alla breve, alla zoppa*, amoroso, aria, brilliant (virtuoso) style, cadenza, *Empfindsamkeit*, fanfare, French overture, the hunt, learned, *ombra,* Mannheim rocket, musette, opera buffa, pastoral, recitativo, sigh motif, *cantabile*, *Sturm und Drang*, *alla turca* (see Ratner 1980, 9–30).

American and British musicologists continued to develop analyses of musical forms based on topics (among others, Allanbrook 1983; Agawu 1991; Hatten 1994; Monelle 2007). Monelle, for example, defines musical topics as follows:

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> We now understand that topics may be fragments of melody or rhythm, styles, conventional forms, aspects of timbre or harmony, which signify aspects of social or cultural life, and through them expressive themes like manliness, the outdoors, innocence, the lament. The nexus between musical element and signification is by means of correlation, Hatten's word for the direct one-to-one signaling of ordinary language and expression.
>
> *(2007, 177)*

At present, the most complete list of topics appears in Kofi Agawu's *Music as Discourse* (2009, 41–50). By grouping Classic, Romantic, and twentieth-century topics, he identifies some 160 items, including some types that are duplicated on different lists. The theory and analysis of topics is greatly expanded and explored in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* (Mirka 2014a). The contributions to this study highlight the renewed the interest in topical studies.

Seme, classeme, isotopy

Since the mid-1980s, West-European musicological writings have used the terms "semes," "classemes," or "semantic isotopies" to describe musical signifieds. Greimas's writings on literary narrative semiotics inspired his students and followers (Tarasti, Stoianova, Miereanu, Grabócz and others). His influential *Structural Semantics* ([1966] 1984) was partly grounded on Russian formalism, particularly on the *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) by Vladimir Propp, who was a contemporary and colleague of Asafiev in the 1920s and 1930s. The first publication that combines the Greimassian narratological approach with a topical analysis is Tarasti's *Myth and Music* (1978).

To sum up, music signification—in works written between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries—can be defined as the verbal reconstruction of a lost musical competence, a kind of musical knowledge almost forgotten, yet perpetuated in musical practice by performers, and handed down from generation to generation. The notion of signification covers the various expressive types (or "commonplaces") within each musical style; that is, types of expression linked to particular musical formulae that refer to identifiable "cultural units" recognized by members of a given culture or society. The gradual rediscovery of the implicit exploration of music signification has given rise to a permanent research program that can at present be considered as a work in progress. Topic theory has emerged as a vital linchpin in the contemporary research paradigm.

An introduction to musical narratology

Classical narratology

Narratology is the science of narrative (see Todorov 1971). Narrativity is a component of certain narrative genres: the narrative mode of textualization ("*mise en texte*") or enunciation (see Adam 1984). Narratology involves key functions such as action and event, transformation, and multi-part sequences. Generalized narrativity is the organizing principle of all discourse (Greimas [1966] 1984); similarly, narrative logic is the organizing principle of narrative and discourse (Fontanille 2006). According to Prince, "an object is a narrative if it is taken to be the logically consistent representation of at least two asynchronous events that do not presuppose or imply

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each other" (2008, 19). Other theorists underline the role of the transforming act, based, for example, on the notion of narrative mediation (Todorov; Greimas) or a three-, four-, or—sometimes—five-fold chain of events, not to mention the two-fold "sequential and configurational" dimension of narrative (Ricœur 1980).

The "narrative" analysis of storytelling and discourse should take into account all of these dimensions. It is important to note that these definitions are derived from the branch of narratological research known as "classical narratology," since musicological approaches are mostly rooted in the methodological and analytical framework that emerged in the 1960s to 1980s (see Hermann, Jahn, and Ryan 2008.)

Adam states that "narratology can be defined as a branch of the general science of signs—semiology—which seeks to analyze the *internal organizational mode of certain types of text*" (Adam 1984, 4). Ryan characterizes the narrative text as follows:

1. A narrative text must create a world and populate it with characters and objects. Logically speaking, this condition means that the narrative text is based on propositions asserting the existence of individuals and on propositions ascribing properties to these existents.
2. The world referred to by the text must undergo changes of state that are caused by nonhabitual physical events: either accidents ("happenings") or deliberate human actions. These changes create a temporal dimension and place the narrative world in the flux of history.
3. The text must allow the reconstitution of an interpretive network of goals, plans, causal relations, and psychological motivations around the narrated events. This implicit network gives coherence and intelligibility to the physical events and turns them into a plot.

(2004, 8–9)

Narratology, narrativity in music

Since the 1980s, in Europe, various linguistic and semiotic models have been applied to describe the organization of signifying units within a musical form. For example, Tarasti and Grabócz follow the model of Greimas; Meeùs follows Hjelmslev; Karbusicky follows Peirce; Vecchione follows traditional rhetoric; Monelle based his writings on a group of scholars: Peirce, Greimas, Riffaterre, and Daldry. In the United States different narratological systems or linguistic models have been referred to and used by scholars in the field of musicological research. For example, Agawu relies on traditional rhetoric; Almèn relies on Liszka; Ellis on Greimas; Hatten on Shapiro; Newcomb on emplotment theory; and Seaton on Scholes and Kellogg.

A feature common to all these different models is the quest for the rules that organize the signifieds. These rules vary from one historical epoch to another, from one style to another, from one composer's complete *oeuvre* to another's. Almost all the analyses of the above theorists and musicologists predominantly share a common position vis-à-vis the musical reality under study: they view the organization of the signifieds as consisting of binary oppositions. Such oppositions, based on asymmetrical markings in Hatten, and on rhetorical rules in Agawu, are located within a diagram of "archetypal" musical forms corresponding to different periods of music history in Karbusicky.[1]

Kramer (1991), Tarasti (1994) and Monelle (2008) have underlined the "problem" of, or the "debate" on musical narratology. Tarasti states his own position as follows:

> Finally, narrativity can be understood in the very common sense as a general cat-
> egory of the human mind, a competency that involves putting temporal events
> into a certain order, a syntagmatic continuum. This continuum has a beginning,
> development, and end; and the order created in this way is called, under given cir-
> cumstances, a narration … It turns out to be a certain tension between the begin-
> ning and the end, a sort of arch of progression.
>
> *(1994, 24)*

Agawu also addresses the nature of (and controversy over) musical narratives:

> The idea that music has the capacity to narrate or to embody a narrative, or that
> we can impose a narrative account on the collective events of a musical compos-
> ition, speaks not only to an intrinsic aspect of temporal structuring but to basic
> human need to understand succession coherently. Verbal and musical compositions
> invite interpretation of any demarcated temporal succession as automatically
> endowed with narrative potential.
>
> *(2009, 102)*

Beyond this basic level, Agawu also mentions the active desire "to refuse narration."

> The most fruitful discussions of musical narrative are ones that accept the impera-
> tives of an aporia, of a foundational impossibility that allows us to seek to under-
> stand narrative in terms of nonnarration.
>
> *(2009, 102)*[2]

Monelle summarizes his own approach as follows:

> Music does not manipulate the realism of a seriality within continuous time; it
> manipulates time itself. It has no "story," no *fabula*, because it is already indexically
> in contact with the flow of life. This is especially revealed by the function of
> *memory*; and in this field, musical narrative can illuminate a study of literary narra-
> tive, in which the *syuzhet* encases a realism lacking from its apparently implied
> seriality.
>
> *(2008, 1)*

Despite such debates, most books and papers on music signification, published after 2000, include at least one chapter describing ways in which signifieds are organized, raising the level of theoretical inquiries into the connection and ordering of musical topics, which I regard as an essential part of "musical narrativity," and which go beyond traditional formal investigations.

On the basis of the definitions of classical narratology presented above, and of my own topical investigations in my analyses of movements in Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt, Bartók, and Kurtág (Grabócz 2009, 2013), and also based on an exploration of Greimassian theories of narrative to musical structure, I introduce here my own definition: "musical narrativity" or "musical narratology" refers to the mode of expressive organization in instrumental compositions. In other words, musical narrativity is the mode of organization of signifying units within a musical form. Applications of narrative strategies in music seek to understand how musical discourse is articulated in terms of the sequences of topics or intonations. This

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approach will be combined in every case with a traditional musical analysis drawing on theories of musical structure (form), on thematic and motivic analyses, harmony, and orchestration.

Topical and narrative analysis of compositions related to music signification

In his articles and chapters on Beethoven, Hatten (1991, 1994) goes beyond the analysis of topics to that of expressive genres, which I regard as markers of narrativity. He considers an "expressive genre" to be present in Beethoven's complex musical forms that require expressive as well as structural competencies during the operation of musicological and hermeneutic interpretation: the approach both explains and reconstructs music signification. For Hatten, an expressive genre is a "category of musical works based on their implementation of a change-of-state schema (tragic-to-triumphant, tragic-to-transcendent) or their organization of expressive states in terms of an overarching topical field (pastoral, tragic)" (1994, 290). Hatten categorizes these fields into three classes on the basis of the rules of rhetoric (high, middle, and low styles) and segments them into two columns according to their markedness values as either marked or non-marked entities within the Classical style. The scheme below (Figure 17.1) describes the changes of state in the first movement (but also in the overall cycle) of Beethoven's Piano Sonata, op. 101, in which, as Hatten puts it,

> the topical contrast of the pastoral with the tragic, creates a typical dramatic struc-
> ture. In the first movement of op. 101, tragic irruptions create dramatic moments
> of crisis. The pastoral exerts its control over these outbursts, and the movement
> ends with a serenity that invokes transcendence or spiritual grace.
>
> *(1994, 92)*

As he points out elsewhere,

> the progress from pastoral through the threat of tragedy and back to pastoral affirm-
> ation is replicated at the level of the four-movement sonata as a whole … What is
> important here is that the pastoral can organize the expressive structure of
> a complete cycle, placing its stamp on the ultimate outcome.
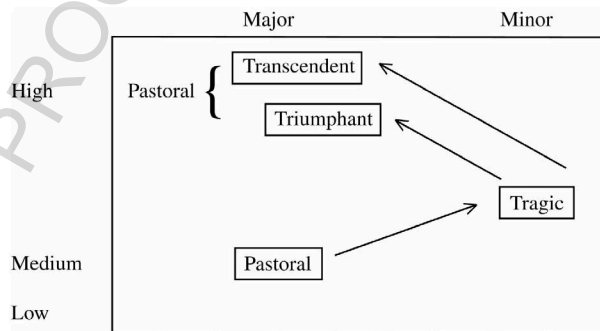>
> *(1991, 86–87)*

Figure 17.1 Expressive genre in Beethoven's Piano Sonata, op. 101 (based on Hatten 1991, 86)

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Tarasti's study on Chopin's *Polonaise-Fantasy* op. 61 (1984, translated in Tarasti 1994) furthered our understanding of exceptional musical forms in the Romantic era. It also demonstrates one of the first analyses carried out that used signifieds and "expressive narrative strategies" (see Table 17.1). In this analysis, Tarasti presents the musical form as a succession of ten narrative programs (NP).

Throughout this progression occurs an alternating evolution of emotional or affective values, either euphoric or dysphoric (marked in the table as "+" or "−", respectively). After the dysphoric values of the nocturne (NP7), as well as those of the nocturne and the mazurka in NP9, three actors—the polonaise, the nocturne, and the mazurka—are superimposed as a group in NP10, which Tarasti describes as "accomplishment" or "fulfillment." This final section (NP10) corresponds to a "macro-metaphor" of the "elevation" that is heard in NP1, finally offering a victorious, heroic variation of the three themes, an event expected since the beginning of the composition. The *Polonaise-Fantasy* was composed in 1846, after the Polish insurrections of 1830–31 and before the 1848 uprising, thus it was written at a time of growing national identity. In this analysis Tarasti resolves the historic enigma created by the fact that, in the case of this composition, neither the sonata form, as Hugo Leichtentritt believed, nor a quasi-rondo form as Gerald Abraham insinuated (Tarasti 1994, 138–40). Indeed, the variation form, with narrative programs that encompass teleology and highlight the triumph of the closing heroic variants, allows a fuller semiotic description and analysis of the *Polonaise-Fantasy*.

Table 17.1 Chopin's *Polonaise-Fantasy*, op. 61, form described in 10 narrative programs

Narrative Program (NP)	Description	Affects: Dysphoric (−) Euphoric (+)
NP 1	Descent and then rising, elevation (mm. 1–8)	− +
NP 2	Birth of the main theme ([polonaise]: mm. 9–21)	−
NP 3	Polonaise, version 1 (mm. 22–66)	+
NP 4	Modulations or topological interruptions, stoppages (mm. 67–91)	−
NP 5	Polonaise, version 2: extreme affective states (mm. 92–115)	+ −
NP 6	Mazurka, version 1 (mm. 116–47)	+
NP 7	Nocturne, version 1 (mm. 153–80)	−
NP 8	Mazurka, version 2 (mm. 181–98)	+
NP 9	Journeying (departure) and return (mm. 199–240)	− −
	• Nocturne, version 2 (m. 201) B major	
	• Introduction + variations (mm. 205–14) D major, C major	
	• Mazurka, version 3 (m. 215) F minor	
	Transition: (m. 225) 'a tempo primo' F minor	
NP 10	Fulfillment (mm. 241–88)	+ +
	• Polonaise, version 3: (m. 242) A flat major	
	• Transition (variation of Mazurka) (m. 248) B major	
	• Nocturne, version 3 (m. 253)	
	• *Superposition* of Polonaise + Mazurka + Nocturne (mm. 267 ff.): accelerando, sempre $\boldsymbol{ff}$, A♭ major	

Grabócz, based on Tarasti (1994, 138–54)

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After analyzing numerous complete piano works by Liszt, applying structural and "expressive" or topical segmentation in an intertextual perspective, I have focused on the "conceptual" or formal ideal type (or expressive archetype) of Liszt's piano works. My methodology depends on Greimassian models of "narrative strategies," "narrative programs," "semes" and "isotopies" (Grabócz 1986; 1996). I discovered that numerous instrumental works by Liszt involve identical successions of topics, whence a canonical narrative structure, a fixed concatenation of topics or isotopies are present (see Table 17.2).

Table 17.3 gives a detailed presentation of *Vallée d'Obermann*, an emblematic composition dating from 1848–55, which—because of its source of inspiration in Senancour's novel, *Obermann* (1804), depicting the atmosphere of the "negative sublime," of spleen, and the "mal du siècle"—was one of the first pure realizations of the above narrative strategy in Liszt's works.

This compositional strategy, based on a single theme and its variations in form or in character—over a composition lasting, depending on the performance, around 13 to 14 minutes—outlines a journey, a wandering or initiation leading from an anxious interrogation to a certain serenity found in religious and pastoral feelings, bringing consolation through a pantheistic transcendence. The two intermediate stages of the journey correspond to the encounter with Nature and/or Love on the one hand (section 2, m. 75), and to a battle with Nature or Society on the other (section 3, m. 119).

Table 17.2 Canonical narrative strategy in Liszt's works: succession of narrative programs

Topic or Isotopy Composition	Macabre quest	Heroic	Pastoral [amoroso]	Macabre fight	Mourning	Religious	Pantheist (or glorified religious, triumphant)
Vallée d'Obermann	PN/1		PN/2	PN/3			PN/4
Pensée des morts (final version 1853)	PN/1 (and coda: PN/5)				PN/2	PN/3	PN/4
St François de Paule marchant sur les flots	PN/4		PN/1	PN/2		PN/3	PN/5
Sunt lacrimae rerum		PN/3	PN/2		PN/1		
Dante sonata	PN/1/a	PN/1/b PN/4/b	PN/2	PN/3		PN/4/a	
Tombez, larmes silencieuses	T/1		T/2			T/3	
Piano Sonata in B minor	PN/1/a PN/5/a PN/7	PN/1/b PN/5/b PN/6	PN/2	PN/3/a	PN/3/b	PN/4/a	PN/4/b
Tasso (symphonic poem)	PN/1	PN/3	PN/2	PN/4			PN/5

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Table 17.3 Liszt: *Vallée d'Obermann*, narrative strategy of the monothematic variation

STRUCTURE OR NARRATIVE STRATEGY	1st narrative program	2nd narrative program	3rd narrative program	4th narrative program
Structural function	Theme and its rhetorical development	Theme and its formal variations	Motto and its "development"	Theme and its formal variations
measures	1–74	75–118	119–169	170–216
Key	E minor – opposition between the tonic axis (E–G–B♭–D♭) and the subdominant axis (A–C–E♭–F♯)	C major and modulation	C♯, D, E and modulation	E major
Tempo and expression indication	Lento assai, espressivo; then: più lento, dolcissimo	Un poco più di moto ma sempre lento, *pp*, dolcissimo	Recitativo, *pp*, trem. appassio–nato *ff*; agitato molto; Presto *ff*, energico, tempestuoso	Lento, dolce, ==unacorda==, dolce armonioso; sempre animando sin al fine *fff*
Topics or classemes	Lamenting rhet–orical questions	Pastoral–amoroso, bel canto	Storm figures, macabre semes, fanfare semes	Pathetic bel canto, and campanella semes of church
ISOTOPY	MACABRE QUEST	PASTORALA-MOROSO	MACABRE FIGHT	RELIGIOUS-PANTHEIST

Liszt's narrative program comprises four stages in the concatenation of topics:

1. *Topic of lament*: score markings in the compositions cited in Table 17.2 suggest a possible hermeneutic interpretation of a profound mournful Faustian quest about the meaning of existence ("avec un profond sentiment de l'ennui"; "Andante lagrimoso"; "con duolo, languendo"; "lamentoso"; "lagrimoso"; "lento e espressivo"; "sotto voce").
2. *Pastoral-amoroso topic*: a response found in love and intimacy ("con intimo sentimento"; "dolcissimo, una corda"; "con amore").
3. *Storm or struggle topic*: a fight against an imaginary external or internal world, including the musical images of storms or battle fanfares ("tempestoso"; "recitativo"; "espressivo"; "molto energico e marcato"). This answer or response is in turn superseded at the end of the section.
4. *The "religioso" topic* as manifested in transcendental pantheism: it is realized by score markings such as: "dolcissimo e armonioso"; "cantabile assai"; "dolce armonioso"; "tre corde"; "tremolando"; "campanella," and ornamenting specific choral textures, modal or pentatonic melodic/harmonic structure, arpeggiated accompaniment imitating church bells, and *campanella* figures.

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What is very interesting in Liszt's musical compositions from his Weimar period, whether a piano work, symphonic poem, or operatic paraphrase, is that, independently of any literary or pictorial model (*Tasso*; *Orpheus*; *Prometheus*; *Die Ideale*; *Saint François de Paule marchant sur les flots; Vallée d'Obermann*; *Dante Sonata*, etc.), Liszt uses and maintains the same chain of topics, the same "inner line," i.e. his hidden or secret narrative program, which was probably also significant for him as a kind of vital, spiritual and personal project (cf. Grabócz 2014).

I have presented here examples of narrative analyses that interpret the expressive strategy deployed in certain exceptional musical compositions through the use of topics and their binary oppositions. Currently, the list of analyses of this type is much more substantial, extending to the twentieth- and twenty-first-century works (for example Klein 2005; Grabócz 2009; Tarasti 2012a; Klein and Reyland 2012; and Mirka 2014a).

These semiotic and narrative models can expand our ways of understanding—and describing—new musical forms that do not readily conform to traditional or historical musical structures (ABA, sonata form, sonata rondo, and so on) or even with those that have emerged since the nineteenth century, and in which composers articulate new expressive devices or designs, aiming to develop a particular form of expressive thought and dramaturgy. In conclusion, the narrative approach creates an analytical framework for the comparative study of music, literature, and the arts as a means of exploring commonalities of signification as articulated through time.

Notes

1 Maus (2001) offers an overview of, and historical introduction to the main narrative genres and models explored by American musicologists before 1995. He begins by examining the concept of narratology as "story-telling," a mental activity that creates its own norms and patterns ("patterned activity"). He then briefly examines the narrative models used to describe the dramatic patterns or types of plot in music and the identification of agents and "actants" in music. Maus also makes a distinction based on whether the narrative frames are applied to scenic music (opera) or instrumental music (music without lyrics or singing).
2 In his analyses of compositions by Liszt, Brahms, and Mahler, Agawu describes first the units ("Building blocks"), and thereafter he outlines the form and the "meaning" of each piece (2009).