



A Theoretical Framework for Evaluation of Musical Topics: The Case of Chopin

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Abstract

Peircean' semiotics provides a cognitive framework for investigating the general process of thinking, expressed as a semiosis with multiple vectors. With their diverse expressions and connotations, musical topics inherently embody semiotic principles in musicological discourse, though debates persist regarding their semiotic references. This study presents a complementary model founded on Peirce's tripartite semiotic framework in an attempt to account for the representation of musical topics and facilitate an approach to topical evaluation. Among other things, Peirce's concept of correlates motivates the contemplation of topics with similar expressive qualities. In the process of unpacking, the paper considers the complex challenges and potential solutions to evaluating musical topics posed by their multiple referential layers. The analytical framework synthesizes Ratner's rhetorical reduction approach to analyzing Romantic music with Grimalt's topic categorization system. This approach is then applied to evaluate the nocturne topic in the secondary theme of the first movement of Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor, with Chopin's Barcarolle serving as a correlate to examine the effect of the nocturne topic. The semiotic-based topical evaluation demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach while raising critical awareness in topic theory discourse.

Keywords: musical semiotics; musical topic; musical signification; Chopin; Peirce

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INTRODUCTION

Musical topics offer a potent lens for examining the expressive mechanisms of music, as underscored in recent scholarship on musical semiotics (Dougherty and Sheinberg 2022). Since Ratner's (1980) seminal work, discourse surrounding musical topics has predominantly focused on the eighteenth century. In demonstrating how dramatic action in comic opera requires the representation of affect while meter shapes the "characteristic rhythm" (p. 8) that supports the successful projection

of dramatic gestures, Allanbrook (1983) employs the embodied aspects of dance meter in conjunction with stylistic cues to decode Mozart's operatic character and narrative within this buffa genre. Her post-humous work (2014) further championed the significance of musical topics, addressing concerns regarding the analytical relevance of disjunctive, short, non-linear features in contemporary music analysis. Moreover, she provided nuanced insights into the concept of topics, tracing its etymology and related notions while proposing an embodied understanding of "the

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clichés of the late eighteenth-century musical cosmos” (2014, p. 108–109). Agawu (1991, 2009) significantly contributed to this discourse, initially identifying 27 topics and subsequently expanding his inventory to encompass 61 classical music topics. Mirka’s (2014) monograph not only synthesized the historical foundations of eighteenth-century musical topics but also presented a semiotic model predicated on iconicity to explicate the issue of topical identity. This model differentiates topics, characterized by “cross-references between musical styles or genres” (2014, p. 35), from mere pictorialism, which simply imitates extra-musical sounds. Her model emphasizes the relative stability of musical signification, as the meaning of a topic signifies beyond actual music proper.

In nineteenth-century music, Agawu (1991) posits the existence of a vast array of musical topics, attributing this proliferation to the era’s universal expressive language and consistent tonal system. This expansion reflects the increased complexity and diversity of musical expression in the Romantic period. Dickensheets (2003) further developed this idea, investigating both the persistence of Ratnerian topics in nineteenth-century compositions and the emergence of new topical material specific to the era. Her later work (Dickensheets 2012) expands upon a general directory of prevalent nineteenth-century musical topics. Grimalt (2020) offers a comprehensive handbook that integrates eighteenth- and nineteenth-century musical topics within a refined topical categorization system.

Despite these advancements in topic theory research, the recognition of topics has remained somewhat intuitive, lacking a critical approach. This intuitive nature stems partly from the original definitions provided by Ratner (1980), which relied more on examples than explicit criteria. Ratner categorized topics as either types or styles but did not offer clear distinctions between these categories. Types contained dance-based topics such as minuet, sarabande, and marches, while styles en-

compassed a broader range of expressive modes, including military and hunt music, singing style, and brilliant style. The vagueness in definition has led to the ongoing challenge in conceptualizing musical topics.

We draw on definitions from multiple sources to elucidate the concepts of genre and style as they relate to musical topics (Samson 2001a; Fabbri 1999; Pascall 2001; Brossard as discussed in Palisca [1983]). In this context, genres refer to historically formed and community-sanctioned types of music that serve as repositories for musical topics. The communal nature of genres renders them an ideal medium for expressing musical ideas and personal expression, leading to their recurrence among diverse practitioners, each imbuing the genre with unique interpretations and variations. Style, on the other hand, denotes an individual’s characteristic manner of expression that is immediately perceptible, revealing the extent of personal agency in music and often manifesting through the manipulation of genre conventions.

Revisiting Ratner’s original definition (1966, 1980), musical topics comprise two categories: type and style. While type essentially corresponds to genre, style encompasses musical features that diverge from the definition of style previously discussed. To strengthen this interpretation, I draw upon conceptualizations by Mirka (2014) and Grimalt (2020), both of whom expand upon Ratner’s original framework. Grimalt (2020, p. 110) frames topics as “topical references,” emphasizing their recurrent nature as cultural units integral to genre and embodying characteristic musical events. Mirka (2014, p. 21) identifies large-scale compositions, such as sonatas and concertos, as topics of “undetermined character” (larger genres), within which topics of varying emotional content are numbered among style topics, and character-determined small genres like dance and march. The interplay between these topics gives rise to comic styles that encapsulate the essence of topic theory. The fundamental nature of musical topics is

confirmed: they primarily reference genres and their embedded cultural connotations, while style functions as characteristic parts of genre composition.

Musical Topics as Genres

The fluid nature of genres and their relationship to topics is exemplified in Kallberg's (1988) examination of Chopin's nocturnes. Kallberg views genre as a shared code or contract between composer and listener – a set of expectations both met and transgressed, thus enabling the emergence of new topical associations. For instance, Debussy's Minuet in Suite bergamasque diverges significantly from its Baroque namesake. Furthermore, a composer's personal style shifts often manifest through reinterpretations of familiar genres and their associated topics. Chopin's hesitation in naming late compositions, such as the Polonaise in F sharp minor, Op. 44 (originally conceived as a Fantasy), the Berceuse, Op. 57 (initially titled Variants), and the Polonaise-Fantasy, Op. 61 (which remained unnamed until publication), illustrates this reflective phase. In this respect, these works blur the boundaries between established genres, creating new topical landscapes.

Mirka's (2014) semiotic model of topical signification suggests that the identity of a topic is reflected in its representation of its genre object through similarity. This model posits that topics function as signs that point to broader genre categories, with the relationship between topic and genre being one of iconic resemblance. However, if genres evolve through repeated musical practices that include both historical precedents and future possibilities, how do we determine when a topic is invoked in each reference?

Tomaszewski offers insight on musical communication and interpretation that can shed light on this question:

From a semiotic perspective, the musical work is perceived as a message sent by the composer in the direction of potential receivers the objects of [musical] reception are not individual

psychophysical impressions, emotional and aesthetic feelings or experiences of particular listeners ... but generalised symbolic representations, verbalised as the 'speech of reception' and accepted by a given culture on the basis of consensus. (Tomaszewski 2015 [1998], p. 802–803).

The concept of “generalised symbolic representations” refers to constants that persist across varied interpretations. These shared understandings are present both synchronically within individual interpretations and diachronically across broader conceptual frameworks representative of specific historical periods, known as *Begriffsfelder* or conceptual fields in semantics (Dahlhaus and Eggebrecht 1979, p. 390). Identifying these constants allows interpreters to reach consistent conclusions free from “subjectivity and randomness” (Tomaszewski 2015 [1998], p. 803). This suggests that invariant elements also exist in the diachronically communal activity of genre composition. By examining the components and character of a specific genre instance and comparing them to these established elements, the genre-token – as indicated by the hyphen – gains semiotic meaning. The successful conveyance of this significance marks the completion of semiosis. Over time, particular musical practices are repeated and reinforced, crystallizing into conventional codes – genres or styles – that serve as frameworks for topical expression. Each successful reference to these codes can be considered an invocation of a musical topic. This approach aligns with Agawu's (1991, p. 19) view on examining topics critically: “a dialectical interplay between the conceptual or archetypal and its idiosyncratic realization.” Allanbrook (2014, p. 107), in a compilation of her lectures from the 1990s, further explains that in textless music, the effectiveness of the musical topic derives from a particular context or gesture, while the socio-cultural associations it carries “will complement the indeterminate feelings aroused naturally by the textless music alone, supplying a context out of context.”

Agency in Doubt

Dahlhaus (1983 [1977], p. 24) observes that genre functionality has consistently mirrored the aesthetic tendencies of different musical eras, arguing that genre norms constitute the “real substance of music.” He further suggests that a genre’s initial purposive characterization evolves into a stylized musical feature, imbuing the work with “emotional coloring and images in memory or fantasy of long-ago festivities” (1982 [1967], p. 15). As a result, a topic signifies genre or style by referencing these dual connotations of social function and emotional resonance. This becomes particularly pertinent in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, marked by the emergence of hybrid genre styles and composers’ increasing utilization of genre for self-expression, even as its functional aspects diminished.

However, the evaluation of musical topics poses a practical challenge because of their abundance and inherent ambiguity, especially when dealing with topics sharing similar characteristics. Dibble (2016 [2012]) argues, for instance, that the nocturne and barcarolle genres exhibit such close entanglement that distinguishing between them becomes problematic. Moreover, as Rosen (2010) observes, although we recognize the emotions evoked through music, articulating them precisely becomes troublesome. The fluid nature of musical topics further complicates their definition, a feature acknowledged in the pioneering project for establishing fundamental concepts in the field of musical semiotics: “Topics are notoriously difficult to define systematically or in terms of their distinguishing features; furthermore, they must not be taken as bald correlations, but rather interpreted in the frame or context of the musical discourse they help to shape” (Tarasti et al. 1987, p. 419).

Frymoyer (2017) advances a bottom-up model for identifying musical topics in the modernist repertory encompassing multiple levels of musical features, where idiomatic features are crucial to elucidating the ambiguity of topical expression.

This ambiguity often occurs when genre norms (which the author calls the topical type) are violated. Frymoyer explains this by considering such violations as tokens of the topical type and reinterpreting them as new topics, where all idiomatic features are elevated to essential features in novel contexts, complete with distinguishing generic features, thereby establishing their own topical hierarchies. In this analytical framework, Frymoyer seems to adopt a hermeneutic approach, following Hatten’s (1994) strategic interpretation, by associating topical reference with personal experience rather than identifying marked topical particulars. Thus, a tangential topical reference can set off a potent expression. This analytical procedure continues in subsequent studies, where Donaldson (2024) treats ambiguous topic as isotopies with temporarily stable identities and characters in synchronic contexts, positioned at the Actant level where “a topic is unquestionably realized” (para. 3.3). Topic ambiguity is resolved only after progression through preliminary foundational levels to reach the Actant stage. Likewise, the concept of isotopies, closely related to musical topics, has been a central focus in Tarasti’s work. In his early studies, Tarasti (1994, 2002) emphasized isotopies for their generic semantic connotations and their nature as floating entities, considering them key concepts in musical signification. More recently, Tarasti (2023, p. 25) has moved towards a more inclusive understanding of isotopy, simplifying it to “topical field.”

While above approach, reminiscent of infinite semiosis, effectively circumvents certain challenges in topical identification, it does not fully address the critical aspects of the identification process. Such ambiguity is common in textless instrumental music, perhaps reflecting an inherent characteristic of musical signification, where topical recognition “only increases the precision of the discovery; and precision only increases the pleasure that it causes” (Allanbrook 2014, p. 111).

The relationship between musical topics and formal functions is complex and

lacks clear criteria for their ordering within a composition. As Caplin (2005) observes, the impact of musical topics makes it difficult to definitively establish their range of application. Of the topics Caplin lists as having a formal relation, from the brilliant style and sensibility to the *coup d'archet* and *Sturm und Drang*, there is the interplay and potential subversion of formal functions. For example, the appearance of *Sturm und Drang* in the first movement of Mozart's Sonata K. 332 defies traditional formal expectations by presenting a formal beginning in a medial transition, mirroring the opening phrase of the piece. This unexpected placement challenges the conventional understanding of the topic's formal function. Caplin's study highlights the enduring questions surrounding the syntactic boundaries of musical topics. In addition to the literature cited in Caplin's article, further discussions of topical syntax and explanation can be found in Klein (2005, p. 56–76).

When it comes to the way musical elements are organized to create meaningful expressions within a composition, Allanbrook (1983) highlights the challenges posed by the kinesthetic properties of topics, drawing attention to the role of proprioceptive sensitivity in music appreciation. This perspective is corroborated by recent research on kinesthetic imagery in music perception, where Kim (2023, p. 55) distinguishes it from other senses by its reliance on "internally mediated neuromuscular systems." The term "kinaesthesia" was coined by Bastian (1880, p. 543) to refer to the concept of perceptual movement. Unlike other senses that depend on external sensory receptors, kinaesthesia is not directly linked to the sound-generating action. Instead, it induces a covert sense of self-movement, experienced mentally without visual cues. The experiential process of kinesthetic imagery is characterized by non-goal-oriented automatism. This internal dynamic responds to the dynamic qualities of the perceived object and forms the basis for the dynamic qualities of the self as the experiencing subject. Thus, the

kinesthetic qualities intrinsic to musical topics endow them with a tangible ambiguity, positioning them as an uncertain agency of musical expression.

The challenges in evaluating musical topics reflect broader methodological limitations in the humanities stemming from abstract and intangible conceptual frameworks. Topical analysis demands attentive listening and personal engagement with the feelings emanating from the characteristics of a musical topic. Rumph (2014) discusses the concept of double articulation of topics, drawing on Hjelmslev's idea of *figurae* – articulations that possess both a direct signifying function and a non-signifying articulation aimed at serving structural rather than semiotic purposes. In the first movement of Mozart's Sonata in F major, K. 332, a melodic arpeggio functioning as a *figura* articulates a variety of topics, including ländler, singing style, learned style, fanfare, Mannheim rocket, and *Sturm und Drang*. However, while topical *figurae* contribute to unveiling musical coherence, identifying specific units of topics and evaluating certain topics remains uncertain.

In constructing musical topics, prioritizing expressive qualities over formulaic development may be more productive. As Saussure (1959 [1916]) noted regarding linguistic units, identifying concrete units may be less crucial than perceiving their intricate interplay. This observation applies equally to musical topics, suggesting that understanding their expressive function within a composition may be more valuable than attempting to isolate and categorize them definitively.

Music and Signification: Interplay of Topic, Icon, and Index

The close connection between music and language has long been recognized. Rousseau (1990 [1986], p. 276) asserts that "verse, song, speech have a common origin," indicating the intertwined nature of these forms of expression. Monelle (2000, 2014 [1992]) delves deeper into this relationship by complementing semiotic analysis of musical topics with an intertextual

examination of linguistic concepts. In particular, the rhetorical devices of metaphor and metonymy, which both involve the notion of X “stand[ing] for” Y (Lakoff and Turner 1989, p. 108), serve as potential contexts for our discussion. While metaphor entails a substitution of ideas based on resemblance and a cross-domain mapping relation, metonymy is characterized by a more intimate connection between two objects within the same domain (Fontanier 1968).

Monelle (2014) argues that tonal music, by virtue of its non-referential nature, primarily operates through indexical and metonymic mechanisms while questioning simplistic iconic readings. This perspective emphasizes the contiguous associations in music, where “thematic, rhythmic, harmonic details” function as metonymic features (Monelle 2014 [2012], p. 322). This view aligns with Peirce’s (CP 2.306; DPP 1, p. 532, 1901) concept of indexicality, where signs denote objects through “association by contiguity.” Monelle seems to invoke the monolithic cognitive domain of metonymy to suggest that musical signification remains confined within the realm of musical content, with both existing on the same plane. Referencing Lacan’s portrayal of metonymy’s signifier domain matrix (Monelle 2014 [1992], p. 321), it is apparent that in metonymy, the affinity between two elements resides at the level of the titular status without reaching the actual referent. This may resonate with the affective signification in the lower horizontal axis of the “semiotic model of affective and topical signification” proposed by Mirka (201, p. 31), which is directly referenced to by the musical parameter iconically. However, Mirka (2014, p. 43) refrains from categorizing this as musical topic imitation due to its imitative nature being contingent upon the similarity between “musical motion and emotion.” In other words, musical expression is dictated by its intrinsic content rather than “broad stylistic features replicable from one composition to another” (2014, p. 52). This implies a convergence of musical form and content, where musi-

cal parameters interweave with affects, a phenomenon absent in the semiotic understanding.

Metaphors in natural language operate through substitutions of two distinct concepts based on “mappings across conceptual domains” (Lakoff and Turner 1989, p. 138). The metaphor “Marriage is a siege” exemplifies this concept, where siege illustrates the concept of marriage while implying connotations of bondage and dilemma. Here, siege serves as an icon, with marriage and siege related by analogous similarity. Despite their disparate cognitive domains, the siege represents certain qualities of marriage. However, unlike natural language, music lacks “double articulation” (Martinet 1960, p. 22). A musical element, such as a major third, does not inherently specify a particular object when presented in a score or performance. Monelle (2014 [1992], p. 4), referencing Rousseau, explains that music mirrors “the sound of passionate speech” rather than imitating reality; it serves as a representation of feelings rather than expressing them directly. The efficacy of musical meaning, lacking “denotative meaning in the ordinary sense” (2014 [1992], p. 16), hinges upon its contextual interpretation. Even when ascribing built-in emotional qualities to sounds, like a major third expressing a “pleasurable, amoral state of nature” (Cooke 1959, p. 57), employing musical elements to represent extra-musical concepts may correspond to “musical imitation of extra-musical sounds” (Mirka 2014, p. 36). However, this fact stands apart from musical topics, belonging instead to a separate category of imitation-based musical signs that juxtapose with topics. Nonetheless, the close relationship between these signs and topics frequently leads to the “slippage from *ratio difficilis* to *ratio facilis*” (Mirka 2014, p. 54), resulting in the emergence of musical topics derived from imitation.

The identification of a musical topic, where a musical expression signifies a specific genre, raises the question of whether such representation operates through iconic or indexical means. Monelle (2000, p.

18) argues that the sarabande in the second movement of Mozart's Jupiter Symphony indexically stands for the genre's expressive qualities of "seriousness and decorum" through its characteristic dance measures. In contrast, Mirka (2014) contends that a topic token iconically represents select qualities of the genre rather than replicating it entirely. Tarasti (2016) contributes to this discourse by proposing that both metaphor and metonymy should be categorized as indexes, as they resist literal interpretation. Tarasti suggests understanding these elements from a genre perspective, interpreting them through established codes, including the metalanguage inherent to the genre itself. This debate hinges on the nuanced understanding of icons and indexes within Peirce's framework.

According to Peirce (CP 2.306; DPP 1: 532, 1901), icons and symbols involve mental associations of similarity to their objects and necessitate "intellectual operations," while indexes relate to associations of contiguity. An icon functions as a sign that denotes its object based on its own inherent characteristics, irrespective of the actual existence of the object. It can be any "quality, existent individual, or law" (CP 2.247; EP 2, p. 291, 1903) that bears a resemblance to and signifies the intended object. Peirce (CP 8.343; MS L463, 1908-1912) further refines this definition by describing an icon as a sign determined by its dynamic object through its internal nature, with the dynamic object representing the "efficient but not immediately present object" and the immediate object referring to the object as represented by the sign.

On the other hand, an index denotes its object "by virtue of being really affected by that object" (CP 2.248; EP 2: 291, 1903). While an index shares qualities with its object and utilizes these to establish reference, it does not rely on similarity or analogy as an icon does. Instead, it establishes a dynamic connection with both the "senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign" and the "individual object" (CP 2.305; DPP 1: 251, 1901).

Zhao (2017: 107) argues that the defi-

ning characteristic distinguishing indexes from icons and symbols lies in their association with sense or intuition. He posits that recognizing icons necessitates "memory and experience formation," while indexes do not involve the representation of the representative and the represented. Instead, indexes rely on a "directly connected contiguity" that leans on intuition to occur with the object. This implies that indexes demand the least intellectual effort and convey the most readily accessible meaning compared to the other two sign types. Zhao further contends that indexes are *a priori* in nature, suggesting an innate sense of indexical relationships. This claim is supported by an experiment conducted by Zlatev (2013) and colleagues at the Institute of Cognitive Semiotics, Lund University, Sweden. The study investigated the ability of children and chimpanzees to recognize iconic and indexical signs. The results revealed that both children and chimpanzees readily recognized indexical signs, such as pointing gestures and Post-it notes, to a certain degree. In contrast, only children demonstrated a grip on iconic signs.

Peirce notes that a sign possesses two distinct objects: the immediate object and the dynamic object, underscoring the importance of distinguishing between them. The immediate object is what the sign represents, while the dynamic object refers to the actual object itself (CP 8.343; MS 1334, 1905). The immediate object conveys a specific notion designed to elicit a particular response from a manifold of impressions (EP 2: 407, 1907). Effective communication hinges on both speaker and listener sharing identity of this idea (CP 8.314; MS L224, 1909). Conversely, the dynamic object imposes constraints on the sign's representation (CP 4.536, 1906), which Hausman (1987, p. 404) considers "the only test we can expect of art," illustrated in evaluating the legitimacy of referencing to creative metaphors' referents. Atkin (2023) aptly characterizes them as interim replicas and final answers in a chain of signs, respectively. In summary, while the imme-

mediate object denotes what is referred to by a sign at present, Peirce views it as merely indicative of something more complex – the dynamic object – which delineates our investigation's limit. According to Peirce, since signs cannot directly express their inherent nature – the dynamic objects – they instead hint at it through their immediate objects. Interpreters must discern this underlying reality via collateral experience – a necessary backdrop for grasping why a sign takes its particular form – often shaping how one comprehends its final interpretant.

How do they connect to representations of musical topics? Perhaps they can be related to the dual perspectives on genre interpretation mentioned by Samson (2001a). Considering Peirce's definition of sign-object relations, on the one hand, the immediate object might be conceptualized either as Weber's (1949) ideal type – a hypothetical abstract construct – or as an artifact, depending on its character. It is created by drawing upon the diverse facts of musical reality to form a composite representation. When confronted with musical facts exhibiting varying characteristics, such as acts of rebellion against aesthetic premises, dramaturgical trends, compositional practices, and stylization prevalent at the close of the nineteenth century, the analyst can utilize the ideal type to correlate and compare these elements. This process, as Dahlhaus (1985 [1982], p. 123) suggests, aims to facilitate "their interpretation as components of significative or functional nexuses." Thus, when a musical topic is perceived within a musical flow, the role of music is examined as an icon communicating the composer's musical ideas. This musical icon can be realized as a series of feelings elicited by a sequence of notes or, as Peirce (CP 8.335; MS L463, 1904) puts it, "the sentiment excited by a piece of music considered as representing what the composer intended." In this sense, musical topics function as iconic representations of specific qualities of genre or style.

On the other hand, a dynamic object

can be thought of as Platonic ideal form (1997), wherein a topic functions as an index. The ideal form posits it as a pre-existing entity, from which all else emanates or is considered its reflection, channeling indexicality. Therefore, any manifestation of the ideal form intrinsically necessarily points back to the universal entity through indexical reference. According to Zhao's (2017) interpretation of the index, numerous topics originating from imitative practices mature into stylistic tropes with an expressive habitus, thereby becoming indexically linked to their associated emotions. The *pianto* topic exemplifies this evolution (Everett 2020). Initially, an iconic imitation of human weeping through a descending minor second, it develops into a stylistic marker with broader connotations through repeated use. The minor second, originally a contextless sound, acquires a specific expressive meaning. When it signifies that particular topic, it functions indexically; it becomes instilled with meaning as a sign, wherein the expressed emotion (indexical) effortlessly connects with the felt experience (intuitive), triggering its indexical instincts without relying on past experiential recognition.

The blended motivations presented by musical topics may embody an ideal relationship between sign and object, as noted by Peirce (CP 4.448; MS 492, c.1903): "The most perfect of signs are those in which the iconic, indicative, and symbolic characters are blended as equally as possible." In addition, it is crucial to acknowledge that while linguistic and musical concepts share a homologous origin, their application across domains can only be considered analogous at other levels. The cross-domain mapping of metaphor is adapted to a single musical domain when approaching musical topics, while the competence and context required for metonymy and the intuitive associations involved in metaphor appear to be transposed within the musical context.

This study employs Peirce's semiosis as a cognitive framework, in tandem with Ratner's rhetorical reduction and

Grimalt's categorization of topics, to investigate the complexities of evaluating musical topics. Agawu (2009) and Hatten (1998, 2005, 2023) have articulated that semiotic approaches offer a valuable framework for grasping the multifaceted nature of musical signification.

METHOD

Topical Evaluation in The Semiotic Context: Correlates and Categorization

Based on his triadic model, this study will adopt Peirce's concept of correlates. The Peircean triadic sign model consists of three elements: the representamen (sign), the object, and the interpretant. Although Pierce considers the concept of the semiotic trichotomy to be fundamental to logic, he views semiotics as a science that aims to find out possible interpretations of things rather than requiring the identification of a must-event, as in positive science. While interpretations may vary among individuals, the idea (specialized meaning) perceived by the mind remains constant throughout semiosis (Peirce, 1932). Peircean semiotics thus provides a cognitive pathway for thinking about signs in general. A complementary element is necessary to apply this semiotic framework to topical evaluation effectively. Accordingly, I have slightly modified Peirce's tripartite framework to offer a complementary model that reflects the formal process of thought in topical evaluation:

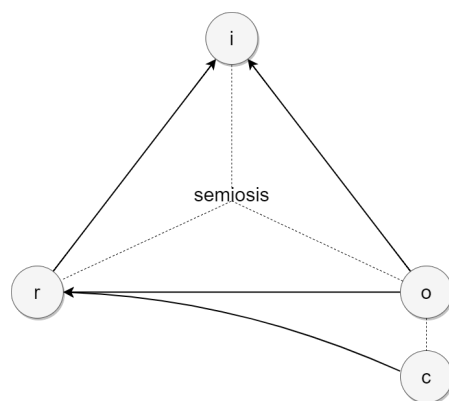


Figure 1. Triadic model of Peircean semiotics (i: interpretant; r: representamen; o: object; c: correlate)

As illustrated in Figure 1, adapted from Chandler (2022 [2002]), this model can be visualized by an irregular tetrahedron-like figure comprising four elements: the representamen (r), the object (o), the interpretant (i), and the correlate (c). The inclusion of correlates stems from Peirce's (EP 1: 5, 1867) observation that "empirical psychology has established the fact that we can know a quality only by means of its contrast with or similarity to another." The semiosis involves dynamic mediation influenced by these three signs, as indicated by the dotted-line tripod, which represents the interplay of representamen, object, and interpretant. The correlate in the lower right contributes to shaping sign qualities and facilitating successful semiosis. The solid-arrow triangle depicts the vector in which perception unfolds in semiosis, illustrating the sequence through which meaning emerges from the interaction of these elements.

Peirce (CP 1.428; MS 900, c.1896) argued that acquiring knowledge necessitates engaging with opposition, a concept he termed "brute force," representing the resistance encountered in the pursuit of knowledge. Comprehension, therefore, involves recognizing and grappling with opposing elements or ideas related to the subject at hand. Peirce further proposed two types of relations between a fact (relate) and its opposition (correlate):

The [first] relation is a mere concurrence of the correlates in one character, and the relate and correlate are not distinguished [In the second relation] the correlate is set over against the relate, and there is in some sense an opposition. Relates of the first kind are brought into relation simply by their agreement. However, mere disagreement (unrecognized) does not constitute a relation, and therefore, relates of the second kind are only brought into a relationship by correspondence. (CP 1.558; EP 1: 7, 1867)

This framework necessitates a categorization system for effective correlative analysis. Grimalt (2020) offers a valuable categorization of musical topics using the semiotic square, a tool that enhances

topical evaluation by mapping relationships between concepts. The present study applies this approach to examine the unlabeled nocturne topic in Chopin's Sonata Op. 58 (specifically, the secondary theme commencing at measure 41) as a case study. This topic is situated within a semiotic square encompassing three relations: contrary, contradictory, and complementary.

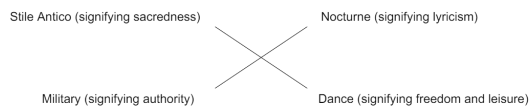


Figure 2. Four topical categories in a semiotic square

As depicted in Figure 2, the square reveals complex oppositions and complementarities: *stile antico* and nocturne exhibit contrary opposition, nocturne and military stand in contradictory opposition, while nocturne and dance share a complementary relation. While initially structured around binary linguistic oppositions, it is important to note that the semiotic square operates differently when applied to genre categories. In these instances, the interconnections emerge primarily through affective or gestural sense, though the semantic fields they signify present oppositional relationships. Thus, the square is used heuristically to map expressive contrasts. These relationships become particularly pertinent when examining the organization and communication of musical topics post-evaluation.

According to Grimalt's categorization, the secondary theme of Chopin Sonata Op. 58 could be analyzed through four semantic groups: religion (encompassing *stile antico*), the secular world (including nocturne), the military, and dance. Peirce's concept of first relation suggests that a topic is known through correlation with another sharing its character. In this vein, the lyrical quality of the nocturne associates it with open-air serenades, lute serenades, and barcarolles. Notably, Chopin's well-known Barcarolle in F# major relates to the nocturne in Sonata Op. 58 through its lyrical melody and undulating accom-

paniment, both evoking a sense of nocturnal tranquility.

Peirce's second relation, connecting opposing meanings through factual correspondence, sheds light on the circumstance of genre crossover – the blending or juxtaposition of seemingly disparate musical styles or topics within a single work. Here, comparing and analyzing the signification and connotation of musical genres becomes more meaningful than gathering solely on musical parameters. For example, in measures 131–136 of Sonata Op. 58, a juxtaposition of the nocturne and *stile antico* is observed, which then transitions into a march within just two and a half measures. This reorganization of established musical topics within the Sonata opens up new expressive possibilities and highlights the importance of exploring their cultural significance. Such exploration invites further interpretive approaches, including narrative analysis, following an initial topical evaluation.

In the context of Romantic music, Chopin holds a canonical status comparable to Bach and Beethoven, setting him apart from composers tied to tradition like Mendelssohn and Schumann or those deemed modernists, including Berlioz and Liszt (Samson 2001b). Samson attributes this to Chopin's music being both unique and stable, serving as a model for late nineteenth-century composers. Chopin's oeuvre is esteemed as an innovative contribution to the evolution of Romantic pianism, laying a pivotal groundwork for the idiom. Thus, examining Chopin's compositions deepens our insight into his artistic legacy and offers an invaluable perspective for understanding broader Romantic musical topics.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Liszt (DeLong 2016) had elevated the nocturne to a collection of topics including lied and bel canto. This expansion incorporated the intimacy and text-music relationship of the lied with the flowing, ornate melodic lines of bel canto, enriching the nocturne's expressive palette. The nocturne was thus viewed as a source of instrumental music

capable of portraying subjective and profound affect while also serving as a social medium embodying Enlightenment ideals of individual liberation. Liszt described the nocturne as transcending established categories, allowing feeling and melody to reign supreme, “freed from the trammels of coercive form” (DeLong 2016, p. 220). According to Ratner’s definition, this dual nature as both genre and style positions the nocturne as influential in the reorientation of musical expression – responsive to evolving social contexts and shaping post-classical stylistic trends (Horton, 2014). Although John Field was instrumental in popularizing the piano nocturne with his eighteen pieces, it was not until the 1830s that Chopin solidified its topical significance (Dickensheets 2012).

The Character of The Secondary Theme from Chopin’s Sonata Op. 58

The secondary theme in the first movement of Chopin’s Sonata Op. 58 has been the subject of diverse interpretations, reflecting its complex nature and the evolving perspectives on Romantic music. This section examines the various characterizations of this theme, tracing scholarly discourse from early studies to contemporary analyses.

Early commentators focused on the theme’s expressive qualities. Niecks (1890/1902) and Shedlock (1895/1964) described the melody as impassioned and tuneful, emphasizing its emotional impact. Huneker (1900/2008) offered an intriguing interpretation, labeling the theme an aubade rather than a nocturne. This classification, possibly influenced by the theme’s tonality or its placement within the Sonata’s overall structure, suggests a morning serenade rather than a nocturnal piece, challenging conventional associations with Chopin’s nocturnes.

Mid-20th century analyses delved deeper into the theme’s structural and stylistic elements. Leichtentritt (1922), in one of the first comprehensive analyses of Sonata Op. 58 (Dammeier-Kirpal 1973), characterized the secondary theme as a song

with arabesque pattern, highlighting its lyrical nature and ornate texture. Chomiński (1960, p. 190-191) contextualized the theme within broader trends in Romantic music, arguing that “forms of instrumental lyricism” had infiltrated the sonata form. Chomiński viewed the secondary theme as exemplifying this trend, describing it as an appropriation of romance or nocturne elements within the sonata structure.

Recent scholarship has further expanded the interpretive framework. Tomaszewski (1998, p. 543) directly characterizes the theme as “lyrical, nocturne-like,” emphasizing its affinity with Chopin’s standalone nocturnes. Zukiewicz (2012) proposes a connection to Chopin’s instrumental ballad genre, suggesting a narrative or programmatic element. In a broader analytical context, Davis (2014) interprets the nocturne-like theme as signifying Arcadian imagery, linking it to Romantic ideals of pastoral serenity.

These varied descriptions – encompassing genres (romance, aubade, nocturne, instrumental ballad), expressive qualities (impassioned, lyrical), structural elements (cantilena, arabesque accompaniment), and symbolic associations (Arcadia) – underscore the theme’s multifaceted nature. While the prevalence of nocturne-like characterizations aligns with Chopin’s renowned contributions to the genre, reliance solely upon intuitive or sensory responses proves inadequate. Subjective interpretations offer valuable insights, yet critical evaluation remains indispensable for attaining objective knowledge. Semiotic analysis offers a framework for examining the theme’s logical construct and signification, providing constraints and support for our thinking of the musical topic.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A Case Study: The Nocturne Topic from Chopin’s Sonata in B Minor

This study employs Ratner’s (1992, p. 143) “rhetorical reduction” approach to analyze musical topics in Romantic music. Ratner (1992, p. xiii) argues that this ap-

proach, which centers on “sound figures as a factor,” suits the nineteenth-century musical style, where sonic qualities served as a primary means of communication. As Agawu (2001, p. 157) notes, this method addresses the congruent relationship between harmony, rhythm, melody, and musical topics in tonal works, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the music’s structural and expressive elements.

Ratner’s rhetorical reduction involves two main treatments: melodic and textural reduction. Melodic reduction simplifies the original music while retaining its fundamental structure, stripping away ornamental elements to foreground the core sonic qualities. Textural reduction, on the other hand, presents the music as a harmonic counterpoint, proving particularly insightful for compositions in a strict style. Crucially, Ratner (1992, p xviii) stresses that this approach aims not to recreate the composer’s intentions but rather allows analysts to “identify the unique processes and gestures that characterize the original that it retains something of the quality of the original – its melodic manner, its affective stance, its integrity as a musical statement.”

The analysis presented here concentrates on spotlighting topical markers and their surrounding signification within Chopin’s Sonata Op. 58, specifically examining the secondary theme in the first movement (mm. 41 onwards) identified as a nocturne topic. The analysis adopts Ratner’s suggested analytical granularity at the phrase or period level to effectively demonstrate the character of the topic within the composition.

In Figure 3, the nocturne’s accompaniment preserves its morphological characteristics while reintroducing the plucked string quality emblematic of the genre. We perceive the nocturne topic holistically through its individual components (representamen): simplified texture, song-like melody, *sostenuto*, and serene expression conveyed through musical movement. These musical signifiers, coupled with associated connotations such as

“‘freedom’, ‘otherness’, ‘eroticism’, ‘fine weather’” (Grimalt 2020, p. 238), allow us to infer an interpretant for this specific musical gesture. Juxtaposing this passage with the preceding agitated dominant preparation highlights its function as an indexical sign representing a nocturne topic. The stark contrast in musical character – from turbulent to serene – reinforces the nocturne’s signification. At this juncture, the topic itself becomes a sign. Having established it as a nocturne topic through Peirce’s triadic model, we can now interpret it in light of its associated extra-musical sources and historical context.



Figure 3. Topical reduction of nocturne topic to Sonata Op. 58, measures 41–49 (adapted from national urtext edition, 2009a [1844])

Should these expressive surpluses not carve out a critical space for the communicative rationality Horton (2020) discusses in his widely explored text, further examination of the topic is possible through the lens of the taxonomic-empirical approach to semiotics proposed by Agawu (2001). *Sostenuto* is marked in these topical markers by virtue of its cyclical recurrence throughout Chopin’s oeuvre. Investigating its appearance across Chopin’s various genres and passages – taking in numerous Nocturnes, the Prelude in D-flat Major, the B section of Scherzo No. 2, and the posthumously published work WN 53 – uncovers the “intimate, quiet character” (Grimalt 2020, p. 237) that typifies the genre, informing our evaluation of the topic.

It is crucial to note that topic evaluation relies on a holistic impression formed by diverse musical elements within a com-

munity of listeners. To further elucidate this process and demonstrate the nuanced distinctions between related topics, let us compare the nocturne to another lyrical genre, the barcarolle.



Figure 4. Topical reduction of barcarolle topic to Barcarolle Op. 60, measures 6–9, 39–43 (adapted from national urtext edition, 2009b [1845])

Figure 4 presents a topical reduction of the opening and middle sections of Chopin's Barcarolle Op. 60. The accompaniment in Barcarolle features a pedal drone in fifths and a rocking rhythm. The subdominant harmony in measure 3 reinforces the pastoral atmosphere (Hatten 2018). The repetitive gesture may evoke "the oar, or to the boat's movement" (Grimalt 2020, p. 242) or be interpreted as "a wavelike bass line" (Parakilas 2017, p. 238). The *cantabile* melody suggests the ideal barcarolle performance (Fallows 2001), while lilting rhythms and accented intonation further manifest the genre's character. The double thirds melody, arranged as two voices, conveys a duet-like quality inspired by Venetian water scenes.

The A major section (measure 6) introduces features typical of the *siciliana* genre: consonant intervals, iambic rhythm, and simple tonic-dominant harmony symbolizing naturalness and tranquility. These elements contribute to the barcarolle's distinct topical identity, differentiating it from the nocturne despite their shared ly-

ricism. From the second half of measure 7, we hear suspensions in the harmonic movement (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Harmonic reduction of measures 7–8

This technique, belonging to the *stylus gravis* tradition of ecclesiastical music (Ratner 1992), is followed by imitation between the soprano and lower voice during remaining beats within the measure, reminiscent of the duet form often found in barcarolles, such as Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*. Such dramatic approaches reflect the genre's close connection to Romantic opera (Dibble 2016).

While both nocturne and barcarolle topics share lyrical qualities, their distinct cultural associations result in contrasting representations. The barcarolle's fluctuating accompaniment is particularly marked, leading Grimalt (2020, p. 239) to describe it as an "aquatic variant" of the *amoroso* topic. These differences in musical gestures and cultural connotations – such as the nocturne's association with night and introspection versus the barcarolle's evocation of Venetian gondoliers – allow us to distinguish between these related but distinct topics. This comparative analysis demonstrates the nuanced process of topic evaluation in musical semiotics, highlighting the importance of considering both musical features and extra-musical associations in identifying and interpreting musical topics.

CONCLUSION

This paper affirms Agawu's (2009) view that topical identification, though often perceived as a preliminary analytical step, holds interpretive significance. Rather than adhering to fixed methodo-

logies, it embraces Agawu's suggestion to immerse oneself in the sonic textures of eighteenth-century music, fostering heightened awareness over prescriptive labeling (Klein, 2022). In this spirit, musical topics are understood not merely as discrete labels but as dynamic correlates (Peirce, 1896; Hatten, 1994) that shape listeners' orientation and interpretation.

Musical meaning emerges from both syntactic and non-syntactic features – timbral nuance, articulation, and expressive gesture – all contributing to the topical surface. Surface transparency, as Allanbrook (2002, 2014) argues, reveals deeper logic and expressive intention. Thus, Peirce's semiotic distinction between dynamic and immediate objects (Hausman, 1987) offers a framework for evaluating how topical impressions are formed and understood.

While topic theory aids in mapping expressive structures, Bellman (1995) warns of the risks of misinterpretation when topics are overlooked. Future research should explore the balance between topical expressivity and musical fact, including in non-tonal works, to refine topical analysis as a tool for interpretation.

Ultimately, as Peirce suggests, musical surface and structure are distinct yet inseparable – “form” as potentiality and “fact” as manifestation (CP 1.422–1.423). Recognizing this duality allows for a more holistic grasp of how topics articulate meaning within the fluid context of musical works

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