*Eighteenth-Century Music* 2/1, 113–124 © 2005 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S1478570605000278 Printed in the United Kingdom

ESSAYS

# ON THE RELATION OF MUSICAL *TOPOI* TO FORMAL FUNCTION

WILLIAM E. CAPLIN

The theory of musical *topoi* (or topics) has emerged in recent decades as a powerful tool for the analysis of musical expression within tonal repertories. Largely originating in Leonard Ratner's ground-breaking treatise *Classic Music* from 1980, it has since been considerably developed and extended by some of his students, especially Wye Allanbrook and Kofi Agawu.[1] The theory has also stimulated considerable interest from music semioticians such as Robert Hatten, Márta Grabócz and Raymond Monelle, who find it a major resource for the investigation of extra-musical referentiality and meaning.[2] Indeed, topical analysis may well be considered one of the success stories of modern musicology.

Yet despite its widespread acceptance, one perceives in the musicological literature a certain unease at the limitations of the theory. It is well recognized that topics are highly fluid and that it is often difficult to pin down their range of application. But even where topics are readily identifiable, some of the theory's strongest advocates have betrayed qualms about the extent to which a topical analysis can transcend such identification and reveal how topics interact with each other and with other musical processes. As Agawu notes in connection with an analysis of the introduction to Mozart's 'Prague' Symphony,

> While topics can provide clues to what is being 'discussed' in a piece of music . . . they do not seem to be able to sustain an independent and self-regulating account of a piece; they point to the expressive domain, but they have no syntax. Nothing in Ratner's scheme tells us *why* the singing style should come after the outbursts of sensibility, or why fanfare is used toward the conclusion of the period.[3]

This boils down to the question of what motivates or constrains the *succession* of various topics within a work. Are there, in fact, rules or motivating forces that guide the ordering of topics?

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A shorter version of this paper was read at the Seventeenth International Congress of the International Musicological Society, Leuven, Belgium, August 2002. Support for research on this paper was generously provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I thank François de Médicis for his helpful suggestions in the course of preparing the article.

1 Leonard Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer, 1980); Wye J. Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: Le nozze di Figaro and Don Giovanni* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); V. Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Though Ratner and his followers seem to suggest that topic theory is rooted in the listening habits of composers and their audiences of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such an implicit claim has yet to be entirely established. The present essay therefore addresses the experiences of modern-day listeners without necessarily suggesting that topics were heard similarly in those earlier times.

2 Robert S. Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Márta Grabócz, 'A. J. Greimas's Narrative Grammar and the Analysis of Sonata Form', *Intégral* 12 (1998), 1–24; Raymond Monelle, *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

3 Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 20.



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At times, scholars are sceptical. Thus Allanbrook concedes that 'we have not yet been able to contribute a topical syntax, in which principles for the combination of topics are laid out, and I have some doubt that such a thing is possible'.[4] At other times, however, scholars seem unable to let the matter rest, and they betray a continuing urge to find some means for explaining topical succession. For example, in reviewing Agawu's book, Vera Micznik wishes that 'instead of just a "neutral" identification of topics, one could aim at finding possible principles according to which topical discourse (or even narrative) might influence the course of a piece'.[5] And Agawu himself recognizes that a combination of topics might give rise to a kind of *plot*, 'something like a secret agenda, a coherent verbal narrative that is stimulated by both the types of [topics] and the nature of their disposition'.[6] For instance, he suggests that 'we might speculate on a plot' for the first movement of Beethoven's String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132, whereby 'the succession of topics reveals a gradual shift from metric instability to metric stability'.[7] The idea of a topical plot is also proposed by Elaine Sisman, who, as part of a 'tale of topics' for Mozart's 'Jupiter' Symphony, sees the exposition of the first movement progressing from topics that express a high style within the main theme, to a topic of singing style for the subordinate theme, finally descending to topics that project a popular or comic style in the closing theme.[8] Harold Powers not only accepts Sisman's interpretation for this work but also extends it to other symphonic first movements of the time.[9]

In linking certain topics to specific thematic sections, Sisman and Powers offer what might seem a promising way for the succession of musical topics to participate in the logical unfolding of a musical discourse – namely, by relating topic to form. Indeed, Agawu picks up on this in a recent article on the 'Challenge of Semiotics':

> It seems clear that in Classical instrumental music . . . , certain *topoi* occur characteristically at beginnings of pieces, while others are used in closing situations. . . . To recognize this normative congruence – to say, in short, that *topoi* give a profile to more fundamental structural processes – is in part to recognize the possibility of *playing* with them.[10]

This essay explores the implications of Agawu's challenge by examining how *topoi* might relate to form. I first discuss the necessary conditions that must obtain for such a relation to arise, then work through some specific cases, with the goal of testing the limits that such a relationship might offer for music analysis.[11] As will become apparent, my conclusions tend toward the negative, for I find the link between topic and form rather tenuous. None the less, probing the interaction of topic and form can foster a greater understanding of the individuality of each of these musical domains.

We can begin by asking how it could even be possible for a given musical topic to enter into a conventional association with form. I would argue, along with many theorists and historians, that musical form does not consist of pre-existing containers that mold the musical materials in determinate ways, but

4 Wye J. Allanbrook, 'Two Threads Through the Labyrinth', in *Convention in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Music: Essays in Honor of Leonard G. Ratner*, ed. Allanbrook, Janet M. Levy and William P. Mahrt (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon, 1992), 170.

5 Vera Micznik, review of *Playing with Signs* by V. Kofi Agawu, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 45/3 (1992), 532–533.

6 Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 130.

7 Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 117.

8 Elaine Sisman, *Mozart: The 'Jupiter' Symphony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 47.

9 Harold Powers, 'Reading Mozart's Music: Text and Topic, Syntax and Sense', *Current Musicology* 57 (1995), 5–44.

10 Kofi Agawu, 'The Challenge of Semiotics', in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 156. My emphasis.

11 Following the practice of most of the scholars I cite, I will draw my examples from familiar works of the three leading Viennese composers of the late eighteenth century – Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven – music that today is regularly thought to exhibit the essential features of 'the classical style'. I have limited my examples to instrumental compositions in order to avoid the additional semantic issues that necessarily arise from texted music.


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rather that music itself gives rise to – expresses, so to speak – its own formal interpretation. In my own research I have developed and extended Arnold Schoenberg's and Erwin Ratz's concept of *formal functionality*, whereby a listener is able to discern the formal disposition of events within a work by means of specific musical criteria, largely based on harmonic-tonal relations but also involving processes of grouping structure, melodic directionality and texture.[12] The various formal functions that I have defined relate to the three traditional categories of temporal expression – *beginning*, *being-in-the-middle* and *ending*. In addition, some framing functions express the sense of *before-the-beginning* and *after-the-end*.[13] If form is conceived as a succession of functions at multiple levels in the hierarchy of a work, then an essential condition for relating a given musical topic to a given formal function is that the topic itself embody specific form-defining characteristics. In the absence of such characteristics, how can we even speak of topic relating to form?

Table 1 'Universe of Topics' (after Agawu and Monelle)

| 1 No formal relation | 2 Possible formal relation | 3 Likely formal relation |
|---|---|---|
| alla breve | brilliant style | *coup d'archet* |
| alla zoppa | cadenza | fanfare |
| amoroso | fantasia | French overture |
| aria | horse | horn call (horn fifths) |
| bourrée | hunt style | lament |
| gavotte | pastoral | learned style |
| march | sensibility (*Empfindsamkeit*) | Mannheim rocket |
| military | | musette |
| minuet | | *Sturm und Drang* |
| ombra | | |
| opera buffa | | |
| recitative | | |
| sarabande | | |
| sigh motive (*Seufzer*) | | |
| singing style | | |
| Turkish music | | |

Consider the extensive list of *topoi* shown in Table 1, which is based on Agawu's 'universe of topics' and supplemented by additional topics cited by Monelle.[14] With respect to the topics in the first column, it is questionable whether any of them could enter into a definitive association with a specific formal context. In

12 William E. Caplin, *Classical Form: A Theory of Formal Functions for the Instrumental Music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, ed. Gerald Strang and Leonard Stein (London: Faber, 1967); Erwin Ratz, *Einführung in die musikalische Formenlehre: Über Formprinzipien in den Inventionen und Fugen J. S. Bachs und ihre Bedeutung für die Kompositionstechnik Beethovens*, third, enlarged, edition (Vienna: Universal, 1973).

13 A highly generalized model of beginning–middle–ending functions is proposed by Agawu in *Playing with Signs*; however, unlike the model that I present in *Classical Form*, Agawu's account does not distinguish the nature of these functions at various hierarchical levels of a work or propose specific musical criteria for identification of these functions at a given level.

14 Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 30; Monelle, *Sense of Music*. This listing hardly exhausts the possible topics to be found in eighteenth-century music. In a recent study Wye J. Allanbrook refers to a group of eighty-six topics that she has personally compiled; 'Theorizing the Comic Surface', in *Music in the Mirror: Reflections on the History of Music Theory and Literature for the 21st Century*, ed. Andreas Giger and Thomas Mathiesen (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press: 2002), 196.


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most cases their musical features are so general as not to connect them with any particular sense of a beginning, middle or end. In fact, many of these *topoi* have the potential to be used throughout an entire movement, as was typically the case in the early eighteenth century for the dance-derived topics, such as minuet or sarabande. As for those in the second column, a particular manifestation of the topic could possibly yield a specific formal association, depending upon which of that topic's characteristics are being exploited. I will return to these topics after looking in more detail at those of column three, where we are more likely to find some definite connection of topic to form.[15]




Example 1 Mannheim rocket: (a) Beethoven, Piano Sonata in F minor, Op. 2 No. 1/i, bars 1–4 (b) Mozart, String Quintet in C major, K515/i, bars 1–7

Take, for example, the Mannheim rocket, two instances of which are shown in Example 1. This topic is almost always associated with an initiating formal function. At the level of the phrase, that function emphasizes the stability of root-position tonic and typically employs ascending gestures that open up melodic space. The rocket topic includes both of these characteristics in that it always consists of an upward thrusting arpeggiation that prolongs a single harmony, usually the tonic.[16] Another topic typically used at the very beginning of a piece is the *coup d'archet*, shown in Example 2. Once again, the characteristic features linking this topic to an initiating formal position are tonic stability and ascending melodic gestures. But sometimes the *coup d'archet* also embodies a *textural* feature that further relates it to the sense of formal initiation: the rhythmic discontinuity that arises through the rests separating the individual bow strokes. As a general rule, disruptions to the ongoing rhythm yield to continuity in the course of a theme or between thematic units. Thus at the start of a sonata, the main theme is often rhythmically disjunct, whereas the transition that follows often brings a more continuous flow.[17] A sense of rhythmic disjunction may also help

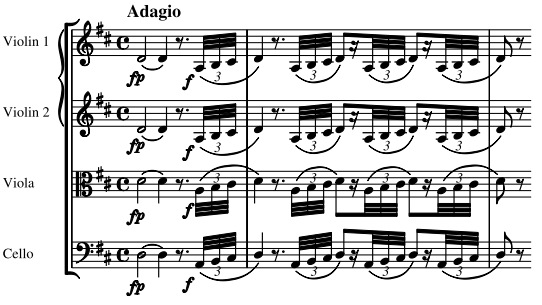
15 Just as the topics themselves are far from fixed and secure in their definition, so too the threefold classification presented in Table 1 is not meant to be a rigid scheme, and an overlap of topics between the columns could well be imagined.

16 Agawu identifies 'the strident figure with which the cello opens' Example 1b as 'reminiscent of a Mannheim rocket' (*Playing with Signs*, 86), though some critics might question whether the gesture is sufficiently 'upwards thrusting' to qualify as an instance of the topic.

17 See Caplin, *Classical Form*, 197.


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explain why the topic of French overture, with its characteristic (double-)dotted rhythms, frequently occurs in an initiating position, such as at the very opening of Beethoven's 'Pathétique' Sonata.[18]




Example 2 *Coup d'archet*: Mozart, Symphony No. 38 in D major ('Prague'), K504/i, bars 1–3

The fanfare topic is related to both the rocket and the *coup d'archet* but has more generalized characteristics. Its arpeggiated melodic configurations create a degree of harmonic stasis appropriate for a formal beginning. But the potential for fanfare motives both to ascend and to descend also makes them useful in other formal contexts. Thus Agawu notes of Example 3 that 'the clarifying function of the cadence is underlined by a descending arpeggiation in the form of a fanfare',[19] and indeed fanfare gestures seem frequently to lead to a cadence, especially in Mozart. To be sure, the descending gesture of this particular fanfare makes it appropriate enough for use with cadential function, but we could also recognize that such arpeggiation may represent the last stage in a broader process of motivic liquidation, which, as Schoenberg has stressed, typically accompanies the drive to thematic closure.[20]




Example 3 Fanfare: Mozart, Symphony No. 38 in D major ('Prague'), K504/i, bars 15–16

Another topic from column 3, the musette, promotes harmonic stasis. Like the rocket, *coup d'archet* and fanfare, the musette is especially appropriate as a formal initiator (see Example 4a). Yet since the musette emphasizes tonic harmony in *root* position, the topic is also associated with post-cadential formal

18 Aside from the dotted rhythms, it is not clear that any other specifically musical characteristics associate the overture topic with a particular formal position. For this reason it is perhaps more appropriately classified in column two of Table 1 rather than column three.

19 Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 20.

20 Schoenberg, *Musical Composition*, 58.


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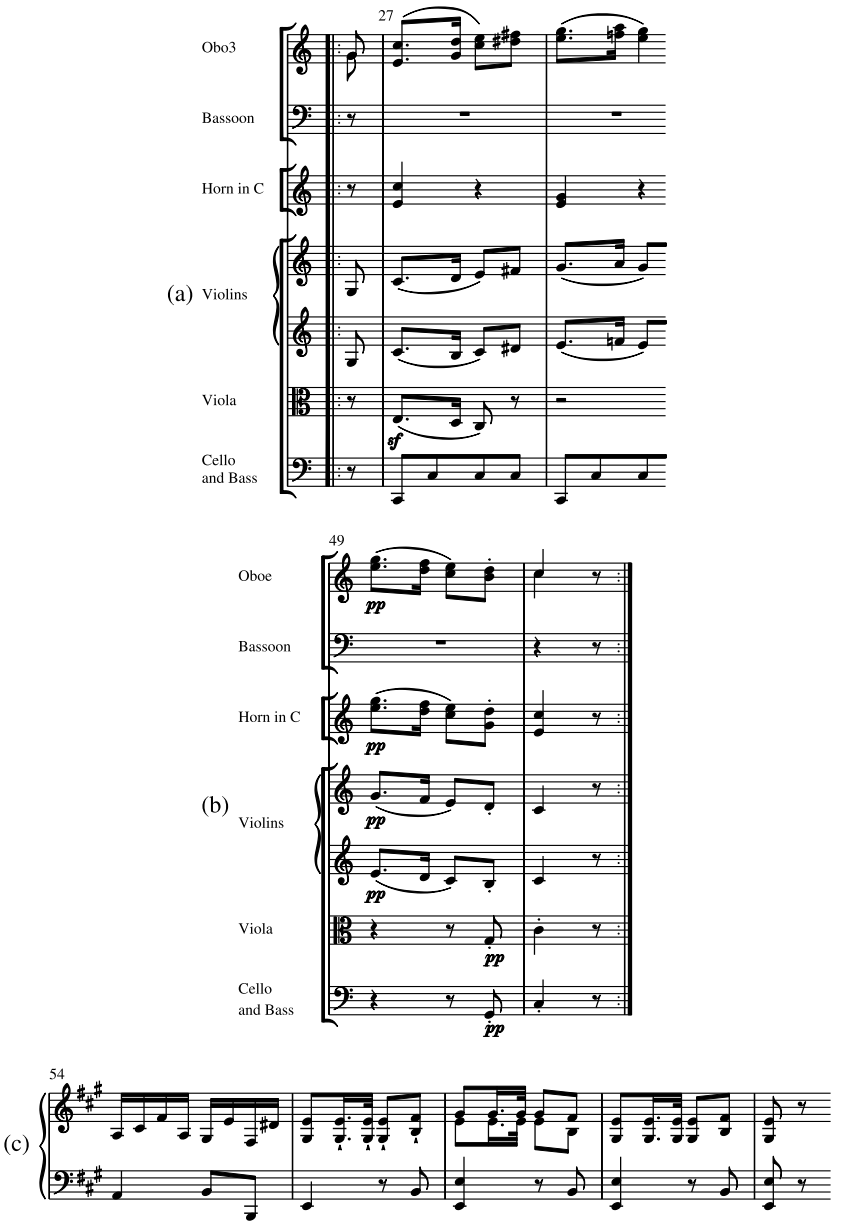

Example 4 Musette: (a) as opening, Haydn, Symphony No. 104 in D major/iv, bars 1–9 (b) as post-cadential, Mozart, String Quintet in G minor, K516/ii, bars 82–90

function, as shown in Example 4b.[21] In this connection, let me clarify a point of terminology: when referring to a specifically cadential function, I mean the music that *precedes* the cadence and is thus responsible for effecting formal closure. In contrast, post-cadential function *follows* the point of cadential arrival and is typically expressed by codettas that emphasize a root-position tonic. Cadence is an ending function; codetta, an after-the-end function. By prolonging the final tonic of the cadence, a post-cadential codetta emphasizes that harmony in root position; the cadential function that precedes a cadence, on the other hand, emphasizes the tonic in first inversion along with the pre-dominant and dominant harmonies that lead to the final tonic of the cadence.[22] The emphasis on root-position tonic imparted by the musette thus makes it particularly useful in post-cadential situations, but inappropriate for cadential articulations.

21 The musette can also evoke the pastoral, a topic listed in column two of Table 1; however, the former is more specific in its musical features than the latter. The emphatic drone bass, especially, is an essential characteristic of the musette, yet it is not necessarily present in all instances of the pastoral.

22 This distinction between cadential and post-cadential functions is developed in greater detail in William E. Caplin, 'The Classical Cadence: Conceptions and Misconceptions', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57/1 (2004), 52–117. Failure to attend to this fundamental distinction has led to many serious conceptual and analytical misunderstandings.


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Example 5 Horn call: (a) as opening, Haydn, Symphony No. 103 in E flat major/ii, bars 27–28, (b) as cadential, Haydn, Symphony No. 103 in E flat major/ii, bars 49–50, (c) as post-cadential, Haydn, Piano Sonata in A major, HXVI:30/i, bars 54–58

The topic of horn call is, as Agawu notes, 'normally associated with announcements and opening gestures' (see Example 5a).[23] But unlike the others discussed so far, this topic brings with it a distinctly more active harmonic environment, the motion from tonic to dominant and back again to tonic. As a result the horn call adapts itself easily to a variety of other functions, including both cadential (Example 5b) and post-cadential (Example 5c). Indeed, Agawu has pointed out how horn signals 'have a dual, somewhat

23 Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 40.


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paradoxical signification in eighteenth-century music. Although they are often heard as signifiers of beginnings or as curtain-raisers, they also function frequently as parting signals – that is, as signifiers of ending'.[24] Such dual potential probably arises from the fact that, like the fanfare, a horn call can either ascend or descend, the first being appropriate to initiation and the second to closure.

The remaining three topics listed in column three of Table 1 – lament, learned style and *Sturm und Drang* – exhibit varying degrees of instability and so tend to relate more readily to medial formal functions, such as the continuation phrase of the sentence form, the B section of ternary form, the transition of an exposition or the development section of sonata form. Such functions generally serve to undermine the relative degree of formal stability achieved by the beginning and to motivate the reestablishment of stability by means of a cadence or a recapitulation of the opening material. Thus *Sturm und Drang*, one of the more widely discussed topics in the literature, brings extensive chromaticism, agitated rhythmic impulses and the representation of highly charged emotional states, all of which foster formal destabilization. The learned style is appropriate as a formal middle particularly for reasons of texture: as Ratz has pointed out, polyphony, especially in connection with motivic imitation, creates an effect of instability in relation to more homophonic or melody-and-accompaniment textures.[25] Finally, the lament topic, with its descending chromatic bass line and implied harmonic sequence, also has a natural affinity with medial functions, particularly within a given thematic unit (as in Example 6).[26]

In light of the specific musical characteristics we have now developed in connection with the topics of column three of Table 1, we can briefly return to those listed in column two. As already mentioned, an individual manifestation of any one of these topics may prove more or less appropriate for a specific formal function. For example, if a particular instance of the pastoral style emphasizes root-position tonic (in the manner of the musette), the topic might be used either to begin a theme or to follow a cadence. Or, if a given case of the brilliant style brings about a general liquidation of motivic content, then that topic might lend itself well to a cadential function.

But now we confront a troubling reality that haunts any discussion of the kind that we have been pursuing thus far. For every case that we find of pastoral functioning as a formal initiator or brilliant style as a cadential close, it is easy to find cases of these topics appearing in almost any other formal position. And it is not difficult to identify specific musical characteristics that justify these varying relations of topic to form. The problem is especially acute with respect to the topics listed in column two, which permit a wide range of harmonic, melodic and rhythmic possibilities. But some of those listed in column three are, as discussed, subject to the same variability. What, then, are we to make of cases where a topic seems to occupy a non-standard formal position? According to Agawu, such situations might reflect the composer 'playing with the listener's expectations'.[27] To what extent, however, is the formal variability of topic truly a reflection of this notion of 'play'? The question requires considerably more investigation, but the following general

24 Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 59.

25 Ratz, *Musikalische Formenlehre*, 25.

26 To be sure, the lament bass line in this example literally starts at the beginning of the theme with a prolongation of the tonic scale degree. Yet it is not until the bass first moves to the lowered seventh degree at bar 5 that we perceive the descending stepwise sequence which is the defining characteristic of the topic, and this moment is what associates the topic with a medial formal function. There are of course many cases – especially in ground bass works – where an entire thematic unit is supported by the lament topic, rendering mute any distinctions between beginning, middle and ending functions. Seeing as the chromatic melodic figure lying at the basis of the lament appears so pervasively throughout music of the late Renaissance to the mid-twentieth century (as documented by Peter Williams, *The Chromatic Fourth During Four Centuries of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997)), many instances of that figure do not necessarily project the affective attributes of sorrow, mourning and so forth that are typically associated with the lament as a genuine *topos*.

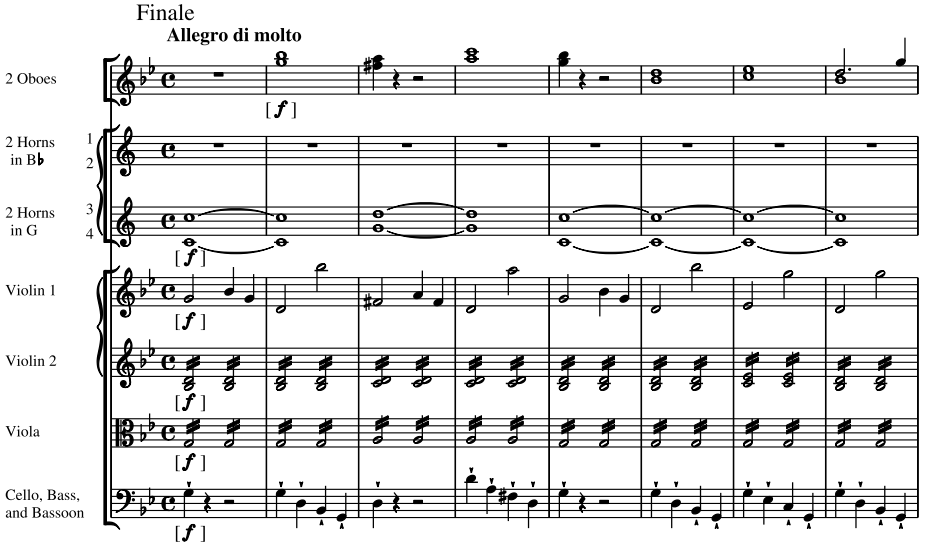
27 'It is worth stressing that although certain topics are appropriate at certain points of the musical discourse . . . a composer is just as likely to use an "inappropriate" topic and, by so doing, draw attention to the compositional procedure by playing with the listener's expectations'(Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 47).


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Example 6 Lament: Mozart, String Quartet in D minor, K421/iii, bars 1–10

principle might help govern further study: if we can identify that a given topic is displaced from its conventional formal position, yet the topic also displays musical characteristics that are suitable for the formal position it actually occupies, there is little reason to believe that the composer is toying with our expectations on the relation of topic to form, even if that relation is not as typical as some other one. To illustrate, consider Example 7.




Example 7 Haydn, Symphony No. 39 in G minor/iv, bars 1–8


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Here an obvious *Sturm und Drang* topic occupies the most initiating position possible within a movement. Since this topic most often denotes a formal middle, do we have the impression that the work is beginning, so to speak, *in medias res*, as often occurs in some romantic compositions, say, by Schumann? I am inclined to think not, for the very reason that despite those musical characteristics that might be appropriate enough for a middle, there are even more prominent characteristics that make the passage entirely suitable for its formal position as a beginning – a strong sense of tonic stability and a two-bar grouping structure. To be sure, I do not want to deny that the appearance of this topic in an opening position generates a particular *expressive* effect, one that is indeed associated with a group of works participating in a sub-style of Haydn's symphonic oeuvre traditionally termed *Sturm und Drang*. And by its placement at the beginning of the movement, this topic is clearly marked in a special way; but not, I believe, in such a manner as to create a sense of formal disturbance or any particular play on the relation of topic to form.




Example 8 Beethoven, Piano Sonata in E flat major, Op. 81a/i, bars 1–2

By contrast, consider Example 8. Here the topic of horn fifths occurs at the very beginning of the work, yet its particular characteristics are precisely those more naturally associated with closure: the melody descends and the harmonies are those used in a deceptive cadence. In comparison with the previous example, it is easier to say 'this music is in the wrong place'. And thus we are prompted to explore the aesthetic effect of this disturbance and even to consider whether the *Lebewohl* idea will eventually find its more appropriate formal position as a cadence.[28] In such a case we can probably recognize and agree with Agawu's notion of play, because there arises a distinct sense of dissonance with respect to how the topic expresses it formal meaning. It needs to be stressed, however, that the sense of play does not simply derive from the choice of topic per se. For, as we have already seen, it is perfectly possible for a horn call to be used as an initiating gesture without its giving rise to any sense of incongruity between topic and form. Rather, as is generally the case with our experience of formal functionality, the specific musical parameters are the defining moments, not necessarily the generalized topical reference that may ensue from those collections of characteristics.

Let me now raise an additional issue that further complicates the relation of *topoi* to form – the importance of distinguishing among the various hierarchical levels of a musical work. At any given moment there may be conflicting expressions of beginning, middle and end, depending on the level of structure under consideration. For example, the music that follows the end of a main theme group of a sonata exposition can be viewed as expressing a formal 'beginning of the transition'; but that same music, by virtue of belonging to the transition, could also be considered 'being-in-the-middle of the exposition' (that is, the transition fulfils a medial function by standing between the main and subordinate themes). To illustrate this interaction of

28 In fact, the *Lebewohl* idea seems never to create a clear cadence: in the course of the rest of the movement the motive largely occupies initiating formal positions, until, at the end of the coda, it participates in 'after-the-end' codetta gestures. It is not until the beginning of the slow movement ('Abwesenheit') that horn fifths are used as cadential figures (bars 3–4, 7–8) within the main theme. For more on the affect associated with the initiating position of the *Lebewohl* motive in the first movement see Leonard B. Meyer, *Explaining Music: Essays and Explorations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 243–245.


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Example 9 Mozart, Piano Sonata in F major, K332/i, bars 21–30

levels, consider the transition from the first movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata in F major K332, a work that has enjoyed considerable attention from topical analysts (see Example 9).[29] It is generally agreed that the sudden shift to D minor at bar 23 initiates a passage of *Sturm und Drang* expression; Agawu sees the topic of fantasia exhibited here as well. Formally, the section from the upbeat to bar 23 initiates the transition of the exposition, and so, when viewed from the perspective of the entire exposition, the appearance of these topics is entirely fitting: 'Since transitions are inherently unstable, composers are likely to employ in those sections topics that are themselves inherently unstable. Both fantasia and *Sturm und Drang* are united in being characterized by the absence of stability, and this alone makes their appearance in the present context appropriate'.[30] But from the perspective of the structure of the transition itself, the appearance of *Sturm und Drang* directly from the opening phrase associates that topic with a sense of formal beginning.[31] Would this, then, be an example of an 'inappropriate' relation of topic to form, similar to that discussed in connection with Example 7? And if not (since none of the commentators on this piece suggest any incongruity between topic and form here), would we then be led to privilege the higher-level formal expression (*Sturm und Drang* as a medial, transition function) over that of the lower level (*Sturm und Drang* as initiating phrase)?



Example 10 Mozart, Symphony No. 36 in C major ('Linz'), K425/i, bars 42–47

A counterexample suggests that we should not assume too quickly that a higher-level relation of topic to form has greater status than a lower-level one. Consider the beginning of the transition from Mozart's 'Linz' Symphony, K425 (Example 10). Here the fanfare topic is expressed with great force and vigour: that it occupies an initiating formal position at the level of the phrase suggests an entirely suitable topic–form relationship. But the appearance of this topic within the transition as a whole (indeed, much of the rest of the transition continues to occupy itself with fanfare motives) could be seen to engender a potentially inappropriate relationship of initiating topic to medial formal function. But nothing seems so out of the ordinary

29 Allanbrook, 'Two Threads', 130–145; Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture*, 6–8; Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 44–48.

30 Agawu, *Playing with Signs*, 47.

31 Using the analytical system developed in my *Classical Form*, the structure of the transition can be described as a loosely organized compound sentence, whose initiating formal function (bars 23–26) is a compound basic idea.



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here – all of the other parameters, especially the *forte* dynamic and the continuous quaver movement, support transition function – and I doubt that Agawu, for one, would want to claim a 'play with expectations'. And so in this case should we privilege the appropriate lower-level relation of topic to form (fanfare as initiating phrase) over the inappropriate higher-level one (fanfare as medial transition)? To all of the questions raised by this example and the previous one, definitive answers seem not to be forthcoming: whereas we can recognize that multiple levels of organization come into play when considering the relation of *topoi* to form, it seems impossible, a priori, to determine which level will provide the appropriate connection. As with our previous considerations, we are led to the sense that formal functionality and expressive topicality tend to enter into informal, ad hoc relationships, ones that must be analysed on a highly individual basis.

What then can we conclude from this brief survey of ways in which musical *topoi* relate to formal function? Altogether, it would seem that the results are somewhat discouraging. Looking once more at Table 1, we find that only a handful of topics have a determinate formal function and that, even with these, a given topic can reflect a good deal of formal variability. Perhaps the only topic for which it is difficult to find variant formal positions is the Mannheim rocket, whose powerful associations with beginnings make it generally unsuitable for other formal contexts. With regard to the possibility of topical play, as suggested by Agawu, I suspect that genuine cases of such play arise infrequently, though we need more extensive empirical investigations before a definitive conclusion on that issue can be reached.[32]

Finally, a word about what I discern as a kind of anxiety that some scholars betray when considering the possibility of defining a syntax for musical topics. Might the urge to discover principles of topical succession originate in some need to legitimize the general practice of topical analysis? After all, most of our successful analytical models – be they harmonic, metric or formal – are grounded in powerful syntactical principles. But if we find in the end that topical analysis has little, or even no, syntactical basis, there is no reason for regret. Many modes of musical organization, such as timbre and dynamics, are clearly nonsyntactic, yet they are no less significant forces for musical expression.[33] Even if the relation of *topoi* to form is ultimately a fragile one, this in no way invalidates the potential that topics may have within their primary function as bearers of conventionalized musical meaning. The recent work of Monelle, for example, shows how topics may be investigated in depth quite independently of formal considerations, and the kinds of semiotic/cultural studies that he has undertaken represent a most promising path for further research on topical theory. Thus the issues I raise here should not be taken as a means of inhibiting investigation into topical analysis but are instead offered with the intent of highlighting some of the thorny issues attendant on that worthy task.

32 If the specific play of topic and form is relatively limited in late eighteenth-century instrumental compositions, other kinds of formal play, especially involving conventionalized figures, are none the less widespread throughout those works.

33 On the importance of nonsyntactic modes of musical organization see Leonard B. Meyer's distinction between 'syntactic' and 'statistical' parameters in *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 14–16, 208–211.


https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478570605000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press