

Motivic Structure - A Principle of Musicological Analysis

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Abstract: *The architectural aspect of a work is usually focused on the transformation and evolution of the themes. The identification not only of the methods used in musical research, but also of the themes (motifs) their provenance and their expression, and also their ways of grouping, structuring inspired by linguistics, mathematics or semantics are important considerations in the application of musicological methods all of which open up fresh opportunities for carrying out comparative analyses.*

Key-words: *Motivic structure, Thematic transformation, Variational technique, Thematic principle, Thematic analysis*

In Bach's music or in the counterpoint style of previous centuries, inversion, recurrence, augmentation, and various such processes have been consistently used in composition form and structure. Although some modern analysts argue that, starting from classicism, these technical processes have largely been abandoned² (applied occasionally only when referring to the pre-classical forms), however, a closer examination of classical techniques proves that these contrapuntal procedures means have not been forgotten. The composition techniques have developed in two directions: one is expressed by the specific pattern to the contrapuntal period, in which the variation and imitation represents the basic structural agent and the second is expressed by the thematic technique (the classical or classic-romantic period), in which transformation becomes the main building factor.

Rudolph Réti outlines in his work *The Thematic Process in Music* a new theoretical discipline, able to express through a new approach the compositional phenomenon, where traditional disciplines have failed to clarify this phenomenon. Thus, the content of a musical work develops through thematic formation. In the same way as a play develop the fate of the main character as a consequence of its own character, also the narrative of a symphony or any musical work is centered on a structure in which all emotions evolve from a musical idea.

The author attempts to demonstrate by many examples that in the great works of musical literature, the different parts of a musical composition are connected to a thematic idea, an idea that is determined not only by a state affinity but by the construction of themes from an identical³ musical substance. In addition to this thematic homogeneity, the different themes of a part are variations of an idea. For example, the first and second theme of a sonata is usually considered to be in contrast. In reality, *they are different on the surface, but alike in*

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² Rudolph Réti, *The Thematic Process in Music*, Faber & Faber Limited, London, 1961.p.5

³ Rudolph Réti, p. 4

*kernel*⁴, an idea based on the internal development of the musical structure of the last centuries.

The idea of reiterating themes in changed versions has often been valid and practiced since ancient times. Over time, this method has intensified and has become stronger, particularly evident in the field of opera music production at the beginning of the 17th century. At the same time, some of the structural effects characterizing the symphonic period appear in anticipation. It should be noted that at the height of the contrapuntal era, when imitation and variation were the dominant principles in musical construction, there appeared a series of expressions that proved to be more than simple variations, the true predecessors of the transformation process, the structural basis of the time which followed.

The artistic force and attraction of these construction principles are largely based on the ability to repeat the thematic forms in various combinations, thus building a unitary, convincing way through its expressiveness and variety. According to Réti, the composer does not want to conceal the fact that his next expression is a repetition of the previous one, but he even attempts to emphasize this fact because the attempt to change the original form instead of repeating or imitating it will destroy the idea and the spirit which this type of composition wishes to express. In a sonata or symphony, the spirit of the structure is complete only if the forms are transformed in such a way that the new themes look completely different from those which they were derived.

Lerdahl and Jackendoff point out that the musical meaning of the transformation term is different from linguistic and mathematical, which in both cases has a limited number of transformations, while in music the meaning is more general, meaning any thematic, motivique change in such a way that the result of the transformation is recognized as a modification of the earlier state of the theme.⁵

Réti states that there are two forces in the form of the form: an inner one, compressing the thematic phenomena and the second external, shaping the form, being represented by a grouping method.⁶ By grouping, dividing and demarcating the continuous course of a work or part of the work in sections and segments, is obtained the way through which the composition assures its comprehensive forms. The musicologist argues that most analysts only consider this second method of construction. They perceive the architecture of a work by the outer form by proportioning and dividing its parts. If these simple methods of grouping (framing the work in certain patterns) would be the essence of the whole phenomenon of musical form, then anyone could randomly take five different pieces, relate them to each other by a tonal plan and get a single work. But the great composers invariably develop the true form of their creation, that form that is at the same time content and essence through the inner structure, the evolution and the relation of the thematic material. When composing a musical piece, the composer intends to express his thoughts so that the listener can understand them. Depending by his artistic intentions, each composer decides how clear or *obscure* must be the architecture of the play. In addition, he will choose expressions that will be based not only on form, most often correlated with the harmonic structure, but also on the content as a result of the association of musical ideas in a unitary whole.

⁴ Rudolph Réti, p. 5

⁵ Fred Lerdahl, Ray Jackendoff, *O teorie generativă a muzicii tonale*, Editura Arpeggione, 2011, p. 292

⁶ Rudolph Réti, p. 109

In the compositional process, the musical form is the result of a dual phenomenon, which works from two architectural directions closely related.⁷ On the one hand, it refers to the process of external grouping, and by the other hand to the process of inner thematic evolution. In fact, there is no line of division between them, the transition being easy. Thus, the architecture of a work must be understood as the result of a complex process that reflects at the same time the inspiration of the composer.⁸

In general, any section or part of a work develops through a succession of sub-sections (segments or sub-segments) in which the composer models the material so that it is melodic or rhythmic emphasized, in order to achieve a clear, well-defined expression. Perceiving these segments is easier and more transparent for the listener if it is the carrier of a musical idea. Thus, a broad musical piece, even of symphonic proportions, can be regarded as a succession of sections theme-bearing.

By grouping, it can be distinguished certain basic schemes necessary to obtain specific forms corresponding to basic concepts: binary, ternary form, etc. By applying these schemes to various rhythmic structures, tempo and architectural proportions in various combinations or vocal and instrumental arrangements, an abundance of specific forms is born. The most common example is that of the sonata form, whose construction pattern is used mainly for the realization of parts of small or large works such as sonata (genre), symphony, quartet, instrumental concert.

A random combination of parts or sections very clearly grouped according to external shape patterns, and without their association to a common trunk of musical ideas, would make the architectural ensemble not unitary. However, if the groups at the beginning of the work resume identical or varied towards the end of the piece, then the listener will be able to finally unite into one entity the similar groups and the parts between them. This thematic resumption or theme recapitulation forms one of the most used and most effective means of modeling musical discourse in an intelligible whole. The process, often used in the composition technique, is called by Réti *thematic resumption*⁹.

Referring to the construction way of the musical works, the musicologist presents three fundamental principles of form:

1. Grouping (segmentation of the paper in sections)
2. Segments used as topics (use of sections or sub-sections to highlight thematic identity)
3. Thematic resumption (the resumption of the previous groups which constitute the fundamental principle from which the theoretical models of the musical form are developed).

Thus, the content of a musical work is developed not only by external formation as a grouping of segments, but also by thematic evolution. The narrative of any piece is centered on the structure, this being the means by which all emotional possibilities evolve from a musical idea. The fundamental purpose of subsequent exposures of a musical idea is to express any emotional and structural possibility that exists in the substrate of the original idea. An intense form of expression of the thematic idea can be found, for example, in a sonata form, where the main themes are resumed in development through a multitude of changes and variations, and in the course of the whole course of the movement is synthesized, certain ideas

⁷ Rudolph Réti, p. 113

⁸ Rudolph Réti, p. 114

⁹ Rudolph Réti, p. 111

is appearing in a different version from that of the exhibition. The aesthetic description of the musical content of a work and its meaning permits either philosophical transcendence, or a programmatic deviation or a poetic one. Occasional works that have attempted to explain in technical terms the dramatic evolution of a composition proved to be inefficient, even more so than poetic, because this theory (particularly concerned with the architectural structure of musical pieces) hardly provides any firm technical basis on which a dramatic or aesthetic interpretation can be based. Only the thematic evolution of the composition provides a sensitive technical basis for understanding the dramatic course.

The architectural aspect of a work is usually centered on the transformation and evolution of the themes. The interconnections presented as the basis of the architectural plans in the papers analyzed by Réti prove to be based on the affinities between the whole themes and not those between the motivating cells.

The themes are built by motifs and the characteristic features of the motifs lead to the *structural consistency* of the work. *If the composer then wishes to maintain his work's structural consistency, his technique has to be centered largely on motivic transformation rather than transformation of themes.*¹⁰ This will allow that the original musical idea to be recognizable in subsequent variations, being more evident than the thematic transformation that brings a continuous process of evolution by creating new themes.

The size that a musical structure should have to function as a theme can't be precisely defined. Its size and importance is determined directly by the composer. From the point of view of the outer proportions of the composition, a theme is that structure around which a section of the work is centered. In terms of thematic development, however, the theme is the basic musical idea from which the subsequent expressions of the work are derived, through constant transformations and evolutions that can lead to the final solution. Thus, there are two separate concepts, which make visible the distinction between the external form and the inner form: the grouping and the thematic evolution. We see how structural and emotional forces coincide. This simultaneity becomes the compositional vital force, applied to the thematic forms in which the transformations not only achieve the plan of the work, but lead to the conclusion and the thematic solution.

Réti believes that the development of a complete picture of structural consistency can even arise from two motivational cells with a structural fermentation status. His analysis of the first part of the Quartet op. 135 by Beethoven, highlights this idea. The work, although divided into segments and thematic sections, has no clearly defined themes. Réti considers that Beethoven chose in the first part of the work a short and concise thematic idea, the size of which becomes difficult to distinguish between the phrase and motif. Starting from this idea, he develops the complex drawing of the entire section. The allegorical-dramatic idea of the work is based on the differentiation and transformation of the concept of training, from the motivational concept into a thematic one. The themes reappear as the main characters and lead the "drama" to fulfillment. The final transformation of the original motif is used to personify the programmatic idea of the work.

The factor that ensures indirectly the variety of different thematic ideas encountered during a large scale work is called *thematic consistency* by Réti. In other words, *Full thematic*

¹⁰ Rudolph Réti, p. 193

*consistency can be created among independent shapes if they are linked by contributory features*¹¹.

In general, the process of structural formation is concretized through the convergence of several stages of construction, which comprise a complex range of phenomena ranging from musical ideas that display a perfect identity to those that do not indicate any common denominator. Grouped together, they can be imagined as:

- 1- Imitation, repetition of an idea presented by inversion, recurrence or transposition;
- 2- Variation, change of forms in an easy way to follow;
- 3- The transformation that creates new forms while preserving the original substance;
- 4- Indirect affinity, which produces a match between independent forms through common features.

Between the first and the last category there is a whole range of features that encompasses all degrees of structural relationships. Starting from *imitation* and *variation*, the musical idea evolves gradually until it becomes *transformation*, thus forming the most concentrated expression of the *thematic phenomenon*¹².

Indirect affinity cannot be limited to organic bonds. By this notion is meant any transformation in which the matches between forms appear less obvious, less clear than ordinary ones. Thus, two profiles that have nothing in common can become parts of an architectural whole with the help of a third profile linking the two expressions as a mediator.

In romantic creation, the motif structure can be interpreted from the perspective of two directions: one is reflected in terms of relations (between themes, parts) but also as a process of successive development and transformation over time.

In modernity, the idea of thematic homogeneity almost disappeared or, rather, was eclipsed by the fascination of the new harmonic concept which, by its orchestral color and effect, became the center of compositional interest.

In the music of the last decade one can see a return of the thematic thinking by resuming some older patterns of construction, belonging to works such as passacaglia, ricercars, concertti grossi. These efforts are an attempt to regain the key to success by substantiating the musical expression on the structural and thematic formation.

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¹¹ Rudolph Réti, p. 239

¹² Rudolph Réti, p. 240