

Teaching Agency and Narrative Analysis: The Chopin Preludes in E Minor and E Major

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In a recent issue of this journal, Gordon Sly argues that typical undergraduate training in harmony and counterpoint fails to fully prepare students for upper-level analytical work: "...when we ask students to make an argument about a work's striking qualities, its particularly beautiful or eccentric events, about what gives it its special character...the typical Freshman-Sophomore sequence proves largely inadequate as a preparation for analysis."¹ To address this problem, he proposes that we encourage students to develop "an analytical point of view" by telling the story of a particular "musical agent."²

Sly's suggestion is a good one; a focus on agency and musical narrative is, I believe, the best way for students to engage the most striking, expressive, and human characteristics of most Western music. And a good narrative analysis will inevitably build upon crucial foundational issues (such as chord and key analysis, counterpoint, and form). But although there's much that I value in Sly's analysis, his engagement with the concept of agency fails to emphasize the important physical and emotional connections that we tend to make with musical agents.³ And such human connections are precisely why we should encourage a focus on agency in the first place. This paper, then, offers an alternative approach grounded in recent research on agency and musical narrative. I begin with an overview of the topic and then proceed with some brief suggestions for readings and class discussion. I then conclude with narrative

¹ Gordon Sly, "Developing an Analytical Point of View: The Musical 'Agent,'" *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 19 (2005): 51.

² Sly, 51.

³ Sly defines musical agency as "the capacity of some musical element or idea to influence the course of events" (52), and identifies the tone D $\flat$ /C $\sharp$ 5 in the Chopin Mazurka in F minor, Op. 68, no. 4 as an example: "it acts as a point of reference, remaining frozen as the musical context changes around it, and, bound as neighbor to C5, defines the voice-leading motion that characterizes much of the piece" (54). This analytical approach is perfectly valid but does not correspond to most current conceptions of musical agency as discussed below.

analyses of the Chopin Preludes in E minor and E major, which offer case studies for the value of emphasizing agency in the music theory curriculum.

TONE CREATURES AND TONAL ENVIRONMENTS

At its root, musical agency involves animism and anthropomorphism: the interpretation of musical pieces (or elements within) as if they were sentient beings with goals, desires, actions, and intentions.⁴ Rudolph Arnheim creatively referred to such agents as “tone creatures,” arguing that “tones are perceived not as objects but activities, generated by some source of energy.”⁵ That humans would interpret music this way is unsurprising. We view much of the world animistically and anthropomorphically and have been doing so for generations.⁶ Indeed, recent research in music cognition confirms what we already know: listeners naturally and reflexively attribute agency to musical motion.⁷ We

⁴ Theorists have been ascribing agency to music for centuries, but most recent research on the subject arose from Edward Cone’s seminal work, *The Composer’s Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974). Contemporary conceptions of agency also resonate with the “energetics” of earlier theorists such as Kurth, Schenker, Halm, and Zuckerkandl. For a summary of their contributions, see Lee Rothfarb, “Energetics,” in *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. by Thomas Christensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 927-955.

⁵ Rudolph Arnheim, “Perceptual Dynamics in Musical Expression,” *The Musical Quarterly* 70/3 (1984): 296.

⁶ Some of the best research on animism and anthropomorphism comes from books on religious belief. Stewart Elliot Guthrie’s *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) provides a strong historical summary of Western philosophical views on the topic, especially during the Enlightenment. Justin Barrett partly ties religious belief to humans’ innate “hypersensitive agent detection device” (HADD): “It seems that all that is needed for HADD to identify something as an agent is for the object to move itself (or in some other way act) in a way that suggests a goal for its action.” See Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Altamira: Walnut Creek, 2004), 32.

⁷ See, for instance, Zohar Eitan and Roni Y. Granot, “How Music Moves: Musical Parameters and Listeners’ Images of Motion,” *Music Perception* 23/2 (2006): 221-247 and Roger J. Watt and Roisín L. Ash, “A

talk about music leaping, striving, yielding, or interrupting not because these are convenient descriptive metaphors, but because we often experience the music as if such actions were real. Even our most basic musical metaphors—steps vs. leaps, high vs. low—imply musical agents moving about in a particular space. They may not be *literally* real, but—as Mark Johnson would remind us—they are *experientially* real.⁸

According to Arnie Cox, the explanation for such agency attributions lies in mimesis: when we hear sounds produced by the physical gestures of a performer we identify with them in a process that ultimately projects an ideal agent onto the musical actions. This process is rooted in imitation, which can involve anything from “subvocalization” (re-playing the sounds of the piece in our heads) to overt physical imitation (singing along, dancing, conducting, and so forth). What is most important for Cox is that we respond to the “exertion dynamic” of music in a way that ultimately produces a sense of musical agency:

One result of...mimetic participation is that we enact the role of a character or persona—that of an ideal gesturing performer...At the same time, however, the otherness of the gesture remains...it remains an ideal agency that is not-us. We call this agent ‘the music’, and its genesis might follow this pattern: (1) the sound-producing actions of the performers are (2) heard/seen and imitated by a listener, which (3) motivates a participatory agency within the listener, which (4) is then projected outwards toward the original source but which (5) cannot be identified directly with this source and so remains ideal.⁹

Psychological Investigation of Meaning in Music,” *Musicae Scientiae* 2 (1998): 33-54.

⁸ Mark Johnson, “Embodied Musical Meaning,” *Theory and Practice* 22-23 (1997): 99.

⁹ Arnie Cox, “Hearing, Feeling, Grasping Gestures,” in *Music and Gesture*, ed. by Anthony Gritten and Elaine King (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), 53. For more on this, see Cox, “The Mimetic Hypothesis and Embodied Musical Meaning,” *Musicae Scientiae* 5/2 (2001): 195-212. For an alternative explanation of agency attributions, see Eric F. Clarke, *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

This explanation suggests a highly personal basis for agency, rooted in our own, individual physical responses. Agency, then, is just as much *in us* as it is in the music.¹⁰

Yet the fact that we identify with music in such natural and reflexive ways does not make the process uncomplicated. Listening, after all, involves imaginative acts and these imaginative acts not only change from one listener to another, but from one *listening* to another. As Fred Maus puts it in an oft-quoted passage:

The claim is not that *different listeners* may interpret the music differently (though they undoubtedly will), but rather that a single listener's experience will include a play of various schemes of individuation, none of them felt as obligatory.¹¹

Agency, in other words, is a slippery concept. When we imagine the source of a particular musical gesture, we often draw from a wide range of possibilities: performers, composers, conductors, or even ourselves (e.g. the air guitar phenomenon). This flexibility is especially clear in the way we *write* about music. Agency is frequently attributed to any number of sources, including the composer (e.g. "Beethoven moves from C minor to C major"), the work ("the movement begins with a rapid acceleration toward the dominant"), the performer/instrument ("the violin ascends to a high C"), a fictional character ("Figaro disrupts the metrical pattern"), or any number of smaller musical elements, such as themes, motives, notes, and chords—all of which can be imagined as sentient beings in and of themselves (e.g. "B $\flat$ refuses to resolve as expected"). Obviously, such attributions are sometimes purely rhetorical—in many cases, writers do not *really* ask us to hear the music according to their ever-changing musical agents; they simply

¹⁰ Eero Tarasti warns us that, when attributing agency to musical actions, "We run the risk that the subject we have found in the music is none other than ourselves" (Tarasti, as quoted in Robert Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 230). This is only a risk, however, if it leads to written, individualized interpretations that fail to resonate with a broader audience. But self-discovery in music is not a bad thing. And in most cases, what pieces tell us about ourselves will undoubtedly apply to others as well.

¹¹ Fred Everett Maus, "Music as Drama," *Music Theory Spectrum* 10 (1988): 68

shift agency from place to place for the sake of variety. But this style of writing nevertheless reflects a basic reality: *something* has to be the source of musical action, even if agency rapidly shifts from one location to another.¹²

This inevitable *indeterminacy* of musical agents, especially in instrumental music, does not mean that we cannot construct—and *encourage our students to construct*—compelling musical narratives based on the actions of various imagined agents. What this requires, though, is careful thought not only about the agents themselves, but also about the virtual environments in which they live. Steve Larson, for instance, argues that tonal motion is largely defined by three principal “music forces:” gravity, inertia, and magnetism.¹³ And Robert Hatten has wisely associated such forces with agency and musical gesture. As he puts it, “the deformations attributable to field forces reveal the profile of an agent’s actions and their relative strength.”¹⁴

This formulation is fundamental to my own approach, but we should take care not to assume that tonality always provides a specific, pre-ordained vectoral space that agents pass through. Several scholars, such as Larson, Lerdahl, and Brower have productively defined musical environments in the abstract, with tonal distances, tendencies, and attractions mapped out in advance.¹⁵ But hermeneutic analysis always depends upon context and creativity. Thus any determinations about abstract virtual environments—usually based on cognitive studies and general assumptions about intersubjectivity—are only useful to a point. Consider, for instance, Larson’s concept of magnetism, a force that pulls unstable notes to the closest stable pitch (and grows stronger

¹² For an excellent discussion of the relationship between these different types of agents in analysis, see Seth Monahan, “Mahler’s Sonata Narratives,” Ph.D. diss. Yale University, 2008.

¹³ See, for instance, Steve Larson, “Musical Forces and Melodic Patterns,” *Theory and Practice* 22/23 (1997): 55-71 and “Measuring Musical Forces,” *Music Perception* 23/2 (2005): 119-136.

¹⁴ Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*, 103.

¹⁵ In addition to Larson’s work (cited above), see Candace Brower, “A Cognitive Theory of Musical Meaning,” *Journal of Music Theory* 44/2 (2000): 323-379 and Fred Lerdahl, *Tonal Pitch Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

as the distance gets shorter).¹⁶ This metaphor—experienced as a ‘real’ force—offers a powerful explanation for our perceptions of leading-tone energy, and there are, indeed, many cases where we might interpret leading tones as passive objects that are magnetically ‘pulled up’ to the tonic. But there are also times when we might experience leading tones in terms of an agent’s upward striving—an individual will acting *against* a musical force (such as gravity or inertia). And there is no reason why any particular leading tone would have to be experienced consistently one way or another. We shift between metaphors as we see fit. And the metaphors that work best depend entirely upon context as well as our individual sympathies, preferences, and imagination.¹⁷

Agency and musical forces, then, are subjective, indeterminate, and context-dependent (even if they are rooted in common, evolutionary perceptual strategies). And the process of identifying agents and their environments is inherently circular: we determine agents based on the forces that constrain their movement (as Hatten suggests), *but we determine the forces based on the fact that movement is constrained*. For that reason, it is best to conceive musical forces not as something that exist independently of any given piece—as features of some abstract tonal space, waiting for specific agents to pass through—but rather as something that can change from piece to piece, a variable feature that composers evoke and manipulate for dramatic purposes (or—to avoid attributing compositional intention—something that we *experience* dramatically).

This, then, raises the important question of musical narrative, a crucial issue in developing a student’s approach to analysis. The recent work of Byron Almén is especially useful here.¹⁸ Almén counters earlier critiques of musical narrative by showing that they are based on an unnecessary comparison with literary narrative. He establishes instead a “sibling model” in which *narrative proper* exists as an abstract concept with several related manifestations, such as literature, drama, and music:

¹⁶ Magnetism, as well as gravity and inertia, are defined in Larson, “Musical Forces and Melodic Patterns,” 102.

¹⁷ Marion Guck expresses a similar point of view in “Analytical Fictions,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 16/2 (1994): 217-230.

¹⁸ Byron Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

I will understand narrative as articulating the dynamics and possible outcomes of conflict or interaction between elements, rendering meaningful the temporal succession of events, and coordinating these events into an interpretive whole...Using our sibling model... we can conclude that literature, drama, and music share a potential for meaningfully ordering events in time, but differ with respect to their degree of referential specificity.¹⁹

Adopting the models of Northrop Frye and, especially, James Jakob Liszka, Almén defines narrative archetypes in music in terms of “hierarchies in crisis,” where a transgressive agent typically struggles against a governing order. He identifies four archetypes—comedy, romance, irony, and tragedy—each of which engages two basic questions: 1) Does the narrative emphasize victory or defeat? And 2) for whom do we sympathize (the transgressor or the transgressed)?

Ultimately, the specific complexities of Almén’s narrative approach may not apply to the typical undergraduate classroom, but suffice it to say that any analysis that tracks the behavior of various agents will inevitably raise issues of narration and musical plot.²⁰ Students will need to give careful thought to a number of basic questions: How many musical agents do they imagine operating within a given piece? Do they prefer to view the piece as a single agent attempting to complete various goals? Or do they hear multiple agents interacting with one another, potentially in conflict? And what are the characteristics of these agents? What are their goals? Do we sympathize with certain agents as opposed to others (protagonists vs. antagonists)? And if there is conflict, what is the result? Also, does *genre* shape our expectations with regard to musical movement and tonal trajectories? How do the constraints of the instruments—including timbre, tessitura, and dynamics—affect our sense of agency? These are all complicated questions, and students will have difficulty answering them without some

¹⁹ Almén, 13-14. This formulation is the principal way that Almén defends the idea of musical narrative against earlier critiques by scholars such as Carolyn Abbate and Jean-Jacques Nattiez.

²⁰ For a discussion of musical plot, especially with regard to Beethoven’s “Appassionata,” Op. 57, first movement, see Gregory Karl, “Structuralism and Musical Plot,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 19/1 (1997): 13-34.

preparation. Thus, before moving on to a discussion of the Chopin preludes in E minor and E major, the following section offers a few possibilities for readings and discussion that might help acquaint students with recent approaches.

A FEW PRELIMINARY PEDAGOGICAL SUGGESTIONS

In my experience, it has not been a challenge to get students to think about music in terms of agency and narrative—most of them seem to do so intuitively. The real challenge is not to compel them to think in those terms, but to help them ground their thoughts in detailed, convincing music analyses. As emphasized above, ascriptions of agency and musical narrative are inherently subjective. But that, of course, does not legitimize an ‘anything goes’ approach to analysis. If we want to participate in a community of scholars and musicians, we need to make our interpretations convincing, meaningful, and interesting to others, no matter how personal our own response might be. And to do so, we need to build our narratives on a secure foundation of relatively objective musical observations.

A good starting point is to consider how specific musical details can convey a sense of character and narrative in text-based works. A simple, effective example is Schubert’s “Der Tod und das Mädchen,” a song that features a dialogue between Death and a young girl. The music provides clear, defining qualities for each character: slow, funeral-march rhythms and monotone melody for Death, and anxious, rhythmically active, dissonant fragments for the maiden. And there is a strong sense that the song carries out a series of distinct dramatic events: (1) Death appears with the opening piano introduction, (2) the girl reacts with terror, (3) Death subdues her, perhaps making physical contact in mm. 16-19 when the funeral march rhythm intrudes into her musical space, and (4) Death attempts to console her by tonicizing various major-mode harmonies, ultimately leading to the D-major conclusion (presumably signifying a peaceful death, perhaps even a vision of heaven).²¹

²¹ Carl Schachter argues that, in the end, “the music, like the maiden, is at peace.” See Schachter, “Motive and Text in Four Schubert Songs,” in *Aspects of Schenkerian Theory* ed. by David Beach (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 70.

There is obviously far more to be said about this song and here is not the place to delve into detailed analysis, specific lesson plans, or alternative interpretations. What is most important for our purposes is that it offers a short, powerful example of how music can create a sense of agency and narrative action, one that corroborates, but is not dependent on, the text. Indeed, the instructor can easily demonstrate how these features would still hold even if we experienced this music without knowing the meaning of the German poem. Though we would lose the referential specificity—the scenic depiction of Death and a young girl—we could still intuit an ominous, dread-inducing presence at the opening, an anxious response, and an eventual resolution, all based on relatively objective musical features (rhythm, tempo, keys, chords, tessitura, and much else). Even without the text, the essential narrative elements and a vague sense of character would remain.²²

This could then lead to an exploration of agency and narrative in *instrumental* music. Unfortunately, the best scholarly work on agency and narrative often tends to veer off into jargon and complexity that isn't suitable for early undergraduate reading assignments; thus, it is often best to focus on isolated passages that students can study and discuss in class with the guidance of the instructor. Instructors might begin, for instance, by introducing a brief passage from Almén's *A Theory of Musical Narrative* that discusses Jérôme-Joseph de Momigny's 1805 analysis of a fugue by Handel.²³ Almén quotes a section in which Momigny imagines the fugue's contrasting elements as an argument between a father and daughter. The passage, along with Almén's thoughts on it, is quite brief and uncomplicated (although Almén eventually ties it in with other terms from the text that teachers will either have to bypass temporarily or explain to the students). The passage serves both as an example of why narrative analysis can be effective, but also how it can be problematic. And it addresses a genre—baroque fugue—that isn't typically dealt with in terms of detailed narrative interpretation (at least compared to, say, late nineteenth-century symphonies). Teachers might have students listen to the fugue with score in hand (ideally with Momigny's motives identified on the score) and then ask them to identify things that they find either

²² The use of this material in Schubert's D-minor "Death and the Maiden" quartet might be relevant here, though it doesn't feature the same binary oppositions that we find in the song.

²³ Almén, 16-20.

convincing or unconvincing.²⁴ Most students will undoubtedly find fault with Momigny's imaginative leaps, especially when it comes to oddly specific ascriptions of meaning (e.g. "The two-part canon [mm. 63-66] is a portrayal of mother and daughter lamenting their inability to soften the heart of the wrathful father").²⁵ And even if we discard the specific personae in Momigny's analysis, there is reason to find fault with some of the descriptive adjectives as well (Almén, for instance, understandably questions whether the opening phrase is really "pleading.") But students might also appreciate Momigny's imaginative way of drawing together disparate musical elements into a memorable, coherent story—one that is far more interesting than a simple, dry accounting of the fugue's form.

After discussing the pros and cons of such an approach, Momigny's analysis can be usefully contrasted with Almén's extended narrative analysis of Schubert's Piano Sonata in B $\flat$ Major, D. 960, first movement.²⁶ This analysis is too laden with narrative-theoretical jargon to assign as complete, independent reading—especially without some mediation on the part of the instructor—but it can be used as a positive model if the instructor simply presents an overview of Almén's narrative with occasional samples from specific sections. Almén fashions a narrative in what he calls "the psychodynamic rhetorical mode," where the music depicts an individual with a hidden flaw (suggested by the famous trill at the end of the opening phrase, among other things). The narrative events occur as conflicts arising within a single persona, with the individual passing through a number of states over the course of the piece, from an opening "pastoral-heroic" space into "vacillation," "mitigated fulfillment," "illusory victory," and ultimately "regret." Obviously, these are all subjective terms that some might dispute—not everyone will hear the ending as marked with "regret," for instance—but what makes this a good model is that every stage in Almén's narrative is bolstered by specific musical details: topics (such as pastoral vs. heroic), key relationships, phrase structure, metric accents, and much else. And Almén is always attuned to the sense of physical agency in the music; indeed, he argues that

²⁴ Students should be made aware that this is a supplement to a more objective, formal analysis of the fugue and does not represent Momigny's sole approach to music analysis.

²⁵ Momigny, quoted in Almén, 17.

²⁶ Almén, 141-161.

“the question of how much or how little force should be exerted to achieve a goal” is “the central problem of the movement.”²⁷

Robert Hatten offers a similar approach in an analysis of Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” Sonata, Op. 106, third movement, in *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation*.²⁸ As with the Almén analysis, much of this will be too complex for undergraduates in their first few semesters of theory, but brief sections can be usefully introduced in class with help from the instructor, particularly pages 13-16, which emphasize the importance of grounding musical narrative in binary oppositions and their possible correlations (Hatten, for instance, argues that “minor vs. major correlates with tragic vs. nontragic in the classical style, and distant vs. closely related tonality correlates with extremity vs. normalcy”).²⁹ I find especially helpful Hatten’s distinction between “willed” vs. “unearned” events.³⁰ In several passages, Hatten identifies a sense of physical effort, the music as an agent yearning toward a certain goal. In mm. 39-44, the piece appears to achieve an intended goal through palpable effort (e.g. prolonged chromatic ascent, which suggests an upward strain against gravity), but in the case of the early, sudden shift to the key of G major (the Neapolitan) the suddenness of the key change suggests a “mystical transformation,” rather than an achievement, as if an outside force granted some type of benediction on the central protagonist.³¹ As with Almén, the analysis presents narrative events—in this case, a transformation from tragedy to transcendence—without defining specific programmatic characters.

Together, these readings reinforce two basic suggestions for students: (1) they need not develop specific, elaborate programs for instrumental music (their job is not to imagine a movie for which the assigned piece might be a soundtrack), and (2) their subjective responses should be grounded in objective phenomena, just as Hatten’s description of the “mystical” shift to G major is bolstered

²⁷ Almén, 148.

²⁸ Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 11-28.

²⁹ Hatten, 11-13.

³⁰ Hatten, 18.

³¹ Hatten, 18.

by details regarding harmony, texture, and topics.³²

Throughout these discussions and analyses, instructors can—and should—raise issues regarding performance. This is a crucial theme with regard to agency and musical narrative—one to which many students will immediately relate. Conductors, for instance, often posit fictional agents in order to influence their orchestras. Georg Solti, when conducting the Overture to *Tannhäuser*, suggested that his performers embody the characters from the opera: the cellists should “sing” the lines of Tannhäuser, the trombones must become an immense choir, and the instruments should fade out at the end like pilgrims leaving the scene.³³ And we often hear similar suggestions about agency when performers instruct their students. In a recent master class at Carnegie Hall, Leon Fleisher listened to a student perform the Andante from Schubert’s B♭ Major Piano Sonata and after hearing increased accents in his performance said, “When you get louder, the character changes. Your plaintive, yearning creature, your nymph or naiad, is turning into some horrible, saliva-dripping alien.”³⁴ Particularly interesting is Fleisher’s assumption that the agents aren’t determined by Schubert’s piece; rather, the piece creates a virtual world that allows for a wide range of fictional agents, which can be created, transformed, or even destroyed by the performer.

These sentiments raise obvious and important questions for our students to ponder. Most importantly: How much can a performer affect the musical narrative? Consider, for instance, the role of Death briefly discussed above in “Der Tod und das Mädchen.” We might imagine two distinct versions of this character: (1) Death as a truly benevolent figure who at first appears terrifying to the young girl, but ultimately reveals his true intentions: to bring her peace and, perhaps, salvation; (2) Death as a deceitful, villainous character, whose modulations to the major mode are no more than a trick to subdue the young girl and keep her from resisting. We

³² Another short passage that would be valuable in this regard is Michael Klein’s discussion of the opening measures of Chopin’s First Ballade in “Chopin’s Fourth Ballade as Musical Narrative,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 26/1 (2004): 36-37. This passage brings up several critical narrative issues, including the possibility of a “past tense” in music. And every aspect of the narrative is grounded in specific musical details.

³³ *Georg Solti in Rehearsal*, DVD (Stuttgart: Arthaus Musik, 1966).

³⁴ Leon Fleisher, quoted in Alex Ross, “The Sonata Seminar,” *The New Yorker*, April 19, 2004.

might find one of these interpretations more or less convincing, but it would be impossible to identify either as being objectively correct or incorrect. Performers, however, have considerable power influencing the narrative one way or the other, and instructors would do well to have their students consider the options: What could the singer do to emphasize one interpretation over the other? What could the accompanist do?



Example 1. The final measures of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*, op. 102, no. 2, mm. 28-30

For a more specific situation—and one from an instrumental work—consider Example 1, the end of Mendelssohn's Op. 102, no. 2. This piece is in the key of D major, but features several modulations to the key of F# minor. It would be far too much of a digression to launch a complete narrative for the piece here, but suffice it so say that Mendelssohn stages several moments of conflict between the major and minor mode. This ending, then, is particularly interesting. As the music settles into the final D-major chord, the chromatic passing tones in the inner voices suggest a weak, hidden 'tonicization' of F# minor *within* the D-major tonic (the E# and G# have motivic significance throughout the piece—as does the common-tone relationship between D major and F# minor). Much like the characterization of Death above, Mendelssohn's piece allows for both a positive and negative interpretation. On the one hand, we might imagine the music as an agent that gently contains or subdues F# minor by subsuming it within the stable, idyllic D-major conclusion. On the other hand, we might hear this subtle turn toward F# minor as a genuinely subversive moment, the re-emergence of doubt within the work's central character, quietly undermining the stability of D major with a suggestion of more conflict to come. And ultimately, the performer has considerable power over these possibilities. Simple choices with regard to tempo, dynamics, and articulation could produce drastically different

possibilities: one where the outer voice Ds are emphasized and sustained, keeping the tonic strongly in our ears; and one where the inner-voice motion toward F#minor is emphasized, with the outer voices nearly silent by the time we arrive on the final dyad. We could, of course, imagine non-committal, ambiguous performances as well. But no matter what choice she or he makes, the performer takes on a special role with regard to the musical narrative.

OPPOSITE EXTREMES: THE CHOPIN PRELUDES IN E MINOR AND E MAJOR

The Chopin preludes in E minor and E major help demonstrate the pedagogical value of agency and musical narrative for several reasons. They are short, familiar pieces that are often taught (and performed) in undergraduate and graduate curricula. Moreover, both pieces pose challenges with regard to harmonic analysis, voice-leading, and tonicization/modulation—challenges that make them ideal for any discussion of chromatic theory. These issues, however, can lead to an analytical myopia of sorts, in which local problems—“What chord is this? What key is implied?”—begin to overshadow the obvious pathos and expressivity of the two pieces. As can happen with any in-class analysis, we run the risk of missing the forest through the trees.

A focus on agency and musical narrative recognizes the complete dramatic trajectory and illuminates subtle details only as they pertain to the overall story. For the E-minor prelude, the best starting point comes from two seminal articles by Carl Schachter.³⁵ As Schachter points out, the opening first inversion E-minor tonic suggests the presence of a gravitational pull: “the part of the tonal field that lies below the G is gravitationally charged, as it were, and becomes a presence in the piece even before we hear any of it.”³⁶ Schachter then links this gravitational force, quite convincingly, with a program of impending death. As he argues, we not only hear pervasive use of lament topics (descending chromatic bass, emphasis on $\hat{6}$ - $\hat{5}$ motion, etc.), but we also associate the texture—

³⁵ Carl Schachter, “The Prelude in E Minor Op. 28, No. 4: Autograph Sources and Interpretation,” in *Chopin Studies II*, ed. by John Rink and Jim Samson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 161-182 and “The Triad as Place and Action,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 17/2 (1995): 149-169.

³⁶ Schachter, “The Triad as Place and Action,” 150.

right-hand cantabile melody and left-hand accompaniment—with song, an “instrumental song” which, for him, presents, “a vision of death, perhaps the imagination of one’s own death.”³⁷ As Schachter points out, however, the death narrative is not simply a result of generic topics:

...the Prelude’s overpowering pathos also inheres in the way it reveals its tonal field, in its governing tonic at first cast adrift without anchor and then pulled further and further down until it finally hits bottom.³⁸

These quotes are, of course, highly suggestive from the standpoint of musical narrative. But Schachter himself never addresses agency in any extensive way; one gets the sense that the piece simply involves a passive yielding to the force of gravity rather than the actions of any specific agent (Schachter’s analysis mainly addresses Schenkerian concerns rather than hermeneutic interpretation).

But what if we imagine the melody of the E-minor prelude (the “voice” of Schachter’s “instrumental song”) not in *passive* terms, but as an *active* agent—a “tone creature”—that resists the overwhelming gravitational pull? Such an interpretation reveals a tragic narrative for the piece: an agent (whom we presumably sympathize with) attempts to resist the prevailing downward force but fails to do so.³⁹ The focus, then, is not on the obvious descending motion, but rather the human drama of the musical agent as it strains upward against the unyielding force of gravity (which Schachter—for good reason—associates with death). This reading gives us an immediate way into the piece that engages crucial dramatic issues, while avoiding the tedium of simple chord/key analysis.

³⁷ Schachter, 152.

³⁸ Schachter, 152.

³⁹ Chopin’s autographs for this piece feature an odd notation in the melody: nearly every note is stemmed down, even those well below the middle line of the treble clef. Schachter discusses this in terms of continuity in “The Prelude in E Minor,” 180, but it’s also worth noting that it visually reinforces the sense of gravity. It’s as if the melody is so strongly pulled down that even the stems are affected.

Imagined Melodic Goal (Unattained)

Melodic agent strains upward above B... Yielding descent...

expressivo *p*

Resistance... Upward surge fails to stop descent... A second surge fails to reach high E but at least interrupts the descent to the final tonic...

Vigorous resistance to gravity...

Melodic agent strains upward above B...

Bass imitates opening melody, delays final tonic...

f *pp*

A# in Paderewski Edition

Example 2. Chopin, Prelude in E minor, Op. 28, No. 4, with annotations

Consider, for instance, how it might affect our students' views of the opening measures (see Example 2, which reproduces the complete prelude with brief narrative annotations). The opening octave leap establishes an initial sense of effort and—as is the case with leaps in general—the expectation for a subsequent descent.⁴⁰ Chopin magnifies that expectation here with the unstable, first-inversion tonic and the subsequent descending chromatic harmonies of the left-hand, which seem to weigh down the melody like an anchor (the consistent use of 7-6 suspensions initiates a

⁴⁰ Schachter points out that the opening octave leap was a last minute addition in the compositional process. This offers a good question to pose to our students: Why did Chopin add the octave leap? How does it affect the overall narrative of the piece?

pattern of resistance followed by yielding descent). Yet the melody, the main ‘voice’ of the prelude, counters the gravitational force by painfully and repeatedly stretching up to C5 only to continually fall back down. Thus the eventual descent to B♭4, the first sign of yielding in the melody, takes on added significance: it is marked with a sense of resignation and re-appears at several crucial points later in the drama, including m. 16 (written as A♯) where it triggers a violent and ultimately futile shift to the upper register, and m. 23 (spelled as B♭ or A♯, depending on the edition) where it appears in the bass and precipitates the tragic conclusion.

This interpretation of the opening not only imagines the melody as the actions of a tragic protagonist that stretches, strains, and eventually yields but also assumes that upward motion is desirable in this case—and that the agent has a particular goal in mind. Admittedly, positing a specific goal for an imaginary agent requires a stretch of the imagination; it is natural to conceive musical motion in terms of a fictional agent, but it is not necessarily natural to determine what a fictional agent ‘wants.’ Nevertheless, we are guided by the positive and negative associations of basic musical dichotomies: major vs. minor, up vs. down, stable vs. unstable, and so forth. In this piece, as Schachter argues, we have good reason to view downward motion—along with the prevailing minor mode—in negative terms. It is not hard, then, to imagine the agent’s goal as the opposite: to rise upward, presumably affecting a change to the major mode. We can thus imagine a hypothetical, and ultimately unattainable, melodic goal, in which the virtual agent resists gravity and rises up to the stable, upper tonic, with a corresponding shift to the major mode (shown above the upper staff in Example 2). As we will see, this is essentially the same path that the E-major prelude will take, but in the E-minor prelude it is nothing more than a mirage (once we’ve heard the piece, the idea that it could actually carry out the hypothetical upward motion is absurd).

Still, the existence of the upper tonic as a desired goal powerfully affects our interpretation of the piece. Consider, for instance, the poignant D♭ in m. 12. As previously mentioned, the opening octave establishes B4 as an upper boundary, and the repeated Cs in mm. 1-3 can be heard as an attempt to rise above scale-degree six, only to continually fall back down. The D♭ in m. 12, then, is an especially desperate moment. After considerable chromatic descent, the melody urgently stretches upward to scale-degree 7 over dominant harmony. But it only reaches D♭, not D♯. Thus, although it manages

to get above the heavily weighted scale-degree 6, it does not quite reach its desired goal (D $\sharp$ to E). The dissonant clash between D $\sharp$ and D $\sharp$ emphasizes the failure, the fact that upward motion, however frenzied, cannot overcome the relentless pull of gravity.⁴¹

This narrative also helps explain the problem of the ‘gapped’ 5-line, an issue that inevitably arises in any class devoted to Schenkerian approaches. As several scholars have pointed out, the melody of the E-minor prelude features unremitting stepwise descent from B4 to E4. Yet the line is significantly ‘flawed.’ In the first part of the prelude—mm. 1-12—the melody descends from B4 to F $\sharp$ 4 without any stable arrival on scale-degree 3. In the second part, mm. 13-25, it descends from B4 to E4 with an even greater disruption: there is no obvious structural $\hat{4}$, and the structural $\hat{3}$, if it occurs at all, is displaced into the upper register (m. 17). Justin London and Ronald Rodman explain the problem by appealing to genre—since this is a prelude, we do not expect structural completeness. In other words, the gaps go with the territory.⁴² However, it is more meaningful to hear these ruptures as an act of resistance. For instance, there is no $\hat{3}$ in the first part because our agent, however we might imagine her/him/it, tries to overcome the gravitational pull in mm. 8-9 by avoiding G $\sharp$ 4 with a desperate

⁴¹ In “The Prelude in E Minor,” 166-169, Schachter points out that the first autograph of the E-minor prelude was sketched on a piece of paper that contained drafts for the E-minor Mazurka, Op. 41/2. He reveals several similarities between the pieces, but misses a potentially significant connection: the Mazurka features a D $\sharp$ upper voice pedal in the middle section that dramatizes, in an extreme way, the desired upward resolution to the higher octave. This becomes especially poignant when it leads to two climactic failed resolutions at m. 33 and m. 57 of the Mazurka. Both pieces, then, feature a drama in which an agent struggles—and fails—to reach the upper tonic with stable harmonic support.

⁴² Justin London and Ronald Rodman, “Musical Genre and Schenkerian Analysis,” *Journal of Music Theory* 42/1: 101-124. London and Rodman present an in-depth discussion of the gapped line and offer a variety of alternative views. Also, as they point out, Schachter comes up with a fascinating solution by analyzing the *Urfinie* as an undivided 5-line that ultimately concludes in the bass register (“The Prelude in E Minor,” 172). Though this raises pressing questions about obligatory register it solves the problem of the gapped line and also reinforces the sense of gravity, which thus drags the *Urfinie* down along with everything else.

change of direction: G# to A. This sparks the first 'breakout' moment where the agent temporarily throws off its shackles and hurls itself upward. The escape attempt fails, of course, but it is powerful enough to leave a gap in the structural line—a gap which becomes even wider and more disruptive to the *Urlinie* with the vigorous upward surge that occurs later in mm. 16-18. It is also worth noting that the G# in mm. 8-9 does not just resist the force of gravity; it resists metrical forces as well. Though there has been scant research on metrical forces, scholars such as Hatten and Lerdahl suggest that the same forces that we identify in the realm of pitch might also apply to meter (inertia, gravity, and magnetism/attraction).⁴³ The first eight measures of the E-minor prelude create a recurring metric pattern in the melody, with the fourth beat continually falling into the downbeat. The accented G# thus disrupts the pattern by resisting the inertia and gravity of the metrical field (as well as the gravity of the tonal field). Even before it changes the melodic direction, we sense the agent's willed effort against the prevailing forces of the musical environment.

All of this reinforces the overall tragic narrative. It also forces us to rethink the affect of tonal closure. Jeffrey Kresky describes the prelude as "a two-part story, an incompleteness at the end of part one motivating the 'second try' that leads to a successful outcome."⁴⁴ But in what sense is the end a "successful outcome"? The music enacts a hopeless struggle against gravity and fails. Closure, in other words, need not be equated with success.⁴⁵ Kresky's description of the deceptive resolution in m. 21 is similarly unconvincing. He writes that the C in the bass "replaces a chord so longed for, and so painstakingly prepared over the previous few measures... the actual granting of the tonic pitch in the melody intensifies the disappointment, for we actually hear the note we seek, but misharmonized."⁴⁶ Yet if, like Schachter, we interpret the final tonic as a confirmation of death, the deceptive resolution has to be

⁴³ See Hatten *Interpreting Musical Gestures*, 115 and Lerdahl, *Tonal Pitch Space*, 288-97.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Kresky, *A Reader's Guide to the Chopin Preludes* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994), 19.

⁴⁵ Candace Brower ("A Cognitive Theory," 331) makes an important distinction in this regard between endpoints and goals (the latter as the target of an agent's effort and intention).

⁴⁶ Kresky, *A Reader's Guide*, 23.

reconsidered. What makes it especially powerful is that it involves an imitation of the opening melody in the bass, such that the C still represents a vain, but hopeful, attempt to rise up. It is not a “disappointment” in that it *delays* the final tonic, but because it cannot prevent the final tonic. And the fact that the melodic ‘voice’ is now echoed in the bass renders it especially pathetic. Our ‘tone creature’ has been dragged to the depths. And when the melody again yields to gravity and falls to B $\flat$ in m. 23, as it had done several times before, we are confronted with one of the bleakest moments in nineteenth-century music: the cavernous silence that prepares the final cadence.⁴⁷

There is, of course, much else to say about this prelude, but I introduce it here simply to point out some of the ways that a focus on agency can illuminate specific details in service of a larger expressive narrative. The same is true for the E-major prelude, but with an opposite narrative outcome. Whereas the E minor is tragic, the E major is comic (in the classical sense of a protagonist overcoming various obstacles to achieve a goal). Both preludes begin with pronounced melodic emphasis on $\dot{5}$ and both evoke the idea of an agent struggling to rise up against the force of gravity. But whereas the E-minor prelude presents a narrative of failure, the E-major presents a narrative of success.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ The chord in m. 23 raises several interesting pedagogical questions, mostly related to whether or not the bass should be spelled as B $\flat$ or A $\sharp$ (As Schachter points out in “The Prelude in E Minor,” the two autographs clearly show that Chopin wanted a B $\flat$). The bass eventually leads up to B, behaving like an A $\sharp$ in a diminished-third chord. But the B $\flat$ spelling better captures the heavy resignation of the bass ‘voice’, especially as it echoes the opening melody. And the spelling even suggests a possible harmonic turn toward a dark Neapolitan region. The ambiguity clearly allows room for debate.

⁴⁸ To my knowledge, nobody has specifically analyzed these preludes as narrative opposites. Charles Smith suggests that they represent a pair in that both fill in the gap between B and E, one downwards and one upwards, but he doesn’t elaborate beyond that (See Smith, “On Hearing the Chopin Preludes as a Coherent Set: A Survey of Some Possible Structural Models for Op. 28,” *In Theory Only* 1/4 (1975): 5-16). Fred Lerdahl analyzes the two in terms of their different motions through pitch space, but does not explain them in terms of opposite narrative trajectories. See Lerdahl, “Pitch-Space Journeys in Two Chopin Preludes,” in *Cognitive Bases of Musical Communication*, ed. by Mari Riess Jones and Susan Holleran (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1992), 171-191.

Reduction

Largo

Melodic agent struggles upward...

Attains melodic goal, lacks tonic support... *

Responds with yielding descent...

f

Agent struggles upward...

Attains melodic goal, lacks tonic support... *

Attains alternate but unacceptable goal... *

Responds with yielding descent...

ff

Agent struggles upward...

Success!

p

ff

Example 3. Chopin, Prelude in E major, Op. 28, No. 9, mm. 1-12, rhythmically reduced with annotations.

The E-major prelude—shown in Example 3 in reduced form—begins from the same low register that defined the end of the E minor. However, the melodic agent now rises in the major mode like a phoenix from the ashes. Like the E minor, it begins with melodic emphasis on B ($\hat{5}$), but it never sinks below that note. Indeed, the opening bass register, with a sturdy, root position tonic, creates the opposite effect of the E-minor prelude; instead of a vast gravitational field below the opening tonic, we sense nothing but open space above. The texture, of course, is somewhat different: whereas the E-minor prelude involved a song-like texture in which the harmonies were clearly distinct from the melody—and acted, in a way, as an anchor that weighed down the melodic agent—the E-major prelude features an upper-voice melody that extends from the harmonies in a way that suggests the will of a single, fused

harmonic/melodic musical agent (despite several moments with stepwise contrary motion between the outer parts). And whereas the E-minor prelude is a two-part form featuring a struggle against the inevitable descent to the tonic (successful in the first part, failing in the second), the E-major prelude is a three-part form featuring a struggle to ascend to the tonic (failing in the first two parts, successful at the end). What makes the E-major prelude especially dramatic, however, is that the protagonist (the piece-as-musical-agent) ultimately takes on the burden of the E-minor prelude, rising up through chromatically inflected scale-degrees toward its eventual victory. The basic elements of the narrative unfold as follows.

The upper voice of the first two measures involves a vigorous ascent that reaches the tonic—the desired goal of the piece—on the downbeat of m. 3. It occurs, however, over submediant harmony, and the deceptive resolution triggers a weighted descent, which, with a series of suspensions and seventh-chords, begins to sound eerily similar to the accompanying harmonies of the E-minor prelude. What this suggests is that a stable, peak note—even the tonic pitch—cannot fully escape the pull of gravity without stable harmonic support. At m. 4, the upper voice begins another ascent, but is now weighed down by the minor mode. And when the upper voice reaches E in m. 5, it is completely removed from the major tonic (it occurs atop V7 of $\flat$ -II). The melody hangs on to that E for four successive beats and ultimately reacts to the lack of harmonic stability by rising *beyond* the target, all the way up to $A\flat$ (enharmonically scale-degree 3) in m. 8—a climactic arrival, but not a stable goal and not the correct key. Again, in response to failure, the music descends in a manner quite similar to the E-minor prelude, with weighted, stepwise descent. The final upward trajectory, beginning in m. 9, is, of course, successful. But it is heavily dramatized in that it requires an ascent through natural scale-degrees 6 and 7 before finally reaching the leading tone and ultimately the tonic. What we experience is an agent with a particularly heavy load. Instead of gliding up through a traditional major-mode pathway (B, $C\sharp$, $D\sharp$, E), the agent must pass through *the very notes that blocked upward ascent in the E-minor prelude* ($C\flat$ and $D\flat$).⁴⁹ Indeed, all of the surface

⁴⁹ One of the things that links the E-Minor and E-major preludes is that they both feature complications with regard to a potential *Urlinie*. The E-minor prelude features the problematic gaps discussed above. The E-major prelude begins with what appears to be a strong scale-degree 5 *Kopftön*, but only *ascends* from that pitch and ultimately rises to the tonic in an irregular way. In both cases, the musical narrative helps explain

elements of the piece, including a variety of metric and rhythmic complications, are subsumed in the embodied narrative: an agent struggling to rise against the persistent force of gravity.⁵⁰

A FEW CLOSING THOUGHTS

These interpretations of the Chopin preludes are, of course, incomplete. But they nevertheless demonstrate how an agency-based approach can fuse detailed music analysis with a larger, meaningful narrative. Such an approach validates our natural tendency to hear music in terms of the ‘willed’ efforts of virtual agents moving through a particular musical environment. It also validates our students’ subjective identification with musical gestures and actions and does so in a way that nevertheless draws upon the more objective realities of a given piece.

Obviously, not every composition allows for the fairly straightforward interpretation of the Chopin preludes given above. Indeed, even these short preludes could be interpreted in a more complex manner, identifying other agents, forces, and sources of conflict. And some pieces will not yield much in terms of agency and musical narrative at all. As Anthony Newcomb suggests, “Even the most ‘expressive’ music...at times simply swirls or dreams or chugs along in its decorative function.”⁵¹ Moreover, even with fairly simple pieces, students (and instructors) should always be aware of the dangers of over-simplification. Narratives sometimes impose a simple, teleological structure on pieces in a way that might illuminate some aspects, while obscuring others. (If the narrative

the complication: the struggle against gravity creates distortions in the melodic movement. For some thoughts on the possibility of an ascending *Urlinie* in general, see David Neumeyer, “The Ascending ‘Urlinie,’” *Journal of Music Theory* 31/2 (1987): 275-303.

⁵⁰ My reduction obviously obscures the rhythmic complexity. For more on the metric and rhythmic complications, see Kresky, *A Reader’s Guide*, 47-51 and Wallace Berry, *Structural Functions in Music* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976), 394-97.

⁵¹ Anthony Newcomb, “Action and Agency in Mahler’s Ninth Symphony, Second Movement,” in *Music & Meaning*, ed. by Jenefer Robinson (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 133. See also Steven Rings, “*Mystères limpides*: Time and Transformation in Debussy’s *Des pas sur la neige*,” *19th-Century Music* 32/2 (2008): 178-208, which brilliantly demonstrates a situation in a Debussy prelude where agency seems “to slip away, or flicker in and out of focus.” Rings, 186.

suggests that the piece is all about “A vs. B,” then what happens to C, D, and E?). These disclaimers, however, simply reinforce a basic principal of music theory pedagogy in general: that we choose our pieces wisely and offer clear guidelines for analysis.

We should also recognize that a focus on agency and narrative does not necessarily require a complete, coherent story (although that may very well be the result). Sometimes it simply clarifies a specific moment—the way a certain passage struggles to modulate to a new key, for instance, or the way a piece builds toward climax. It is thus important to encourage a specific analytical process that can account for anything from complete works to single, isolated sections. The following three steps might serve as a useful starting point:

- 1) Have students determine moments where they feel a strong sense of agency. Where are the agents located and what are their central characteristics as defined by specific musical details: tempo, texture, range, dynamics, mode, consonance vs. dissonance, steps vs. leaps, use of topics, and so forth? (Note that students should first be exposed to multiple possibilities in this regard—hearing an entire piece as a single agent, hearing various themes as agents, and so forth.)
- 2) Have students determine the relationship between the agents and their virtual environment by indentifying any potential boundaries and limitations with regard to musical movement as well as any distinctions between active, “willed” motion vs. passive, “Newtonian” motion (as determined, for example, by Larson’s forces: gravity, magnetism, and inertia).
- 3) Have students determine important sources of conflict (whether between multiple agents or a single agent operating against the constraints of its environment) and see if they can fashion a narrative based on the outcome of whatever conflicts arise.

Again, for this process to work well, students need to be exposed to some of the literature on agency and musical narrative in advance (the readings suggested above are a good start, but there are many other possibilities). It is also worth restating that student interpretations always need to be supported with specific musical details and analytical insights. Students need to know, for instance, that they cannot simply identify one theme in conflict with another without explaining specifically how such conflict manifests in the piece (How do the themes contrast with one another? Does one theme continually interrupt or invade the space of the other? What, in other words, are the musical realities that support the proposed narrative?).

One of the main benefits of this approach is that it will undoubtedly produce multiple, competing interpretations for any given piece and thus provide solid ground for discussion. This is not usually the case, of course, when analysis focuses entirely on taxonomic concerns—chords, keys, formal units, etc.—where answers tend to be more cut and dried, without much room for debate. This does not mean that taxonomic issues are not relevant—in fact, students should have a strong sense of the harmonic, formal, and contrapuntal structure of a piece before they begin thinking in terms of agency and narrative (though, in truth, the process is inevitably circular: our sense of the harmonic, contrapuntal, and formal structure will affect our sense of agency and narrative, which will in turn affect our sense of certain chords, formal areas, and so forth).

We should also remember that agency will always be an issue whether it is addressed explicitly or not. It is crucial to the way our students perform, critique, and listen to music, even if they are unconscious of that fact. Indeed, most analyses generate narrative claims even if agency and musical narrative are not addressed on the surface. What is important is that we have the opportunity to make agency a central issue early on in the curriculum, whether with readings, in-class analyses, short exercises, or large-scale papers and presentations. Such an emphasis will put our students in a position to appreciate analysis not as a grim autopsy of a dead work, but rather as an act of imagination, addressing the most vital aspects of music.

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