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**A Semiotic Approach to Musical Metaphor:**

**Theory and Methodology**

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**A Semiotic Approach to Musical Metaphor:  
Theory and Methodology**

by

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**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of the University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Music**

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2010

For my parents

## ABSTRACT

### **A Semiotic Approach to Musical Metaphor: Theory and Methodology**

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The idea that music acts in part as a vehicle for meaning is a truism in both popular reception and music scholarship. The language used to speak and to write about music is replete with words that describe it metaphorically. Melodies *descend*; rhythms *speed up*; timbre is *smooth*. Certainly, we use these terms for communicative facility, yet by applying this language to music, we create metaphors that, according to Ludwig Wittgenstein, act as frames that direct interpretation. In the paper, I put forth a theory that views metaphor as the process of semantic transfer or substitution in which a non-musical concept stands in for a musical feature, effectively enabling us to hear music as more than simply sound. The use of certain metaphors receives inspiration from previously heard music, programs, a perceived similarity with non-musical phenomena, or a combination

of these. The methodology that I propose coordinates these metaphors—places them within a single frame—and enables them to interact with one another and to create a more palpable musical experience for the listener. I use Chopin's E minor and A major preludes from Op. 28 as the primary models for expounding this hermeneutic.

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## **A Semiotic Approach to Musical Metaphor: Theory and Methodology**

### ***Introduction***

The integration of semiotics into music analysis that has occurred gradually over the past few decades has provided music with a systematic method for achieving interpretive ends. Semiotics, replete with highly theorized and structured methodologies, enables us to address two things: *what* music means and *how* music means. Music scholarship has done well in both endeavors; for example, theories of topic (Ratner 1980; Allenbrook 1983; Agawu 1991; Hatten 1994; Monelle 2002) and narrativity (Abbate 1991; Maus 1991; Almén 2008) examine structural foundations of meaning and offer us tools for taking hermeneutic approaches toward music. Yet in spite of these interpretive gains, metaphor has been subjected to less scrutiny and research that explores metaphoric mechanisms is somewhat disconnected to that which takes on interpretive pursuits. Previous studies of metaphor are endeavors that by and large have sought to reduce out the metaphoric surface—the metaphors themselves—in order to reveal underlying structures and mechanisms (Zbikowski 2002; Larson 2004; Johnson and Larson 2003). Although much of musical semiotics aims to elucidate musical meaning, there exists only a small body of work that seems driven toward systematically generating meaning with the help of these underlying mechanisms; Michael Spitzer, in *Metaphor and Musical*

*Thought* (2005), takes the most recent and most direct approach to this task. The reductivist approach to metaphor in music mirrors the state of metaphor in linguistics. The field of linguistics has shown a proclivity toward metaphor largely due to language's ability to signify with exactitude, and perhaps it stops short of taking on generative (read: interpretive) pursuits for fear that poetics would loosen an objectively observable approach to meaning; music, however, lacks the articulate and conventional quality of signification found in language to the point that its ability to signify is often debated.<sup>1</sup> Thus, music longs for a theory that integrates studies inward toward metaphor (*how* it means) and outward from metaphor (*what* it means).

A number of elements guide the interpretation of a piece of music; I place these into two general categories: pretexts and intertexts. *Pretexts* are texts that are specifically given to a piece of music for the purpose of guiding or framing our listening experiences.<sup>2</sup> Examples of these include programs, inscriptions, epigraphs, liner notes, and suggestions of the composer. These texts often appear as written or spoken words but can also be cued by their placement with the object or event they represent, much like a

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<sup>1</sup> In language words and concepts are tightly bound together and cataloged in dictionaries that serve both as descriptions of word/meaning unions in language and as authorities that prescribe use. The closest analog in music are "dictionaries" that appear in early sound-film (Repee 1925; Seredy 1929) to help musicians to add music quickly to moving pictures. Such catalogs or repertories of music and meaning, however, are certainly not commonplace like actual dictionaries.

<sup>2</sup> In defining texts, Roland Barthes writes: "We know now that a text is [...] a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (1977: 146). However, we can broaden this conception of "text" to include any represented collection of information; in addition to written words, texts exist as audio recordings, paintings, oral traditions and other semiotics that organize and communicate a body of knowledge.

*leitmotif* within an opera. In short, a pretext provides information that pertains to a particular piece of music in order to direct its conception. *Intertexts*, however, are a bit more complicated. As first described by Julia Kristeva (1969), intertextuality is the process whereby a text exists within a network of other texts that project a mutual influence upon one another. These texts could be anything from a specific book to a philosophical tradition to a piece of music. The signification of an intertext need not be quite so clear as that of a pretext; in fact, intertexts that are sources of interpretation often occur *a priori* in the work in question. Accordingly, the text exerting influence upon another does so in a broad sense, often without specific reference to the influenced text. Whereas a pretext, acting as a source text, projects influence onto a piece of music under investigation, the influence of an intertext in most instances *is drawn* from a source text. Topics, genres, and stylistic norms are examples of such musical intertexts. We can identify a march during a concert as a representative of the genre because we are familiar with previous marches; we then think of military bands due to our knowledge of literature and the military tradition. Armed with pretexts and intertexts as hermeneutic guides, we are capable of generating convincing interpretations that are profitable to music analysis.

In the absence of both a specific pretext and a sufficient intertext, finding meaning within a piece of music can be a difficult hermeneutic pursuit for the analyst, a problem that I take steps toward solving by using metaphor as an interpretive tool. In this paper, I follow others in the fields of linguistics and musical semantics by exploring the

mechanism of metaphor and proceed from them by contributing a more refined and capable hermeneutic. I use this as the foundation of a methodology for putting this theory into practice, and in doing so, I enable the articulation of interpretations that make musical meaning more conceptually palpable and suitable for discourse than previous methods have permitted.

### ***Metaphor, Discourse, and Theory***

In a post to the blog Musical Perceptions in November 19, 2004, music theorist Scott Spiegelberg (2004) provides a description of Chopin's *Prelude in E minor*, Op. 28, no. 4 (Figure 1) that weaves musical terms together with commonplace musical metaphors to create a closer relationship between sound and meaning.

It starts innocently enough with a simple tonic chord, though the E is not in the bass so the chord is slightly unstable. The melody lifts up to an upper neighbor (m. 1), creating dissonance and signalling a change of harmony to come soon. The next chord is the dominant chord, though with a suspension: the E refuses to let go. When this suspension does resolve, Chopin "misspells" the chord with an Eb instead of a D#. The melody turns this dominant chord into a diminished seventh chord (m. 2, beat 2), which resolves as a common-tone chord (m. 3) to a secondary French augmented-sixth chord! By this point, only the third measure, the listener is quite confused as to where tonic is, even though the chords progress by very small steps with many common tones.

The augmented-sixth chord does not resolve correctly, instead shifting to a chord progression that fits best in the key of A minor: iiø43 - viio42 - V7. By half-steps the dominant chord gets transformed, leading us back to the key of E minor. A minor is hinted at several times, and the final cadence of each phrase (there are only two phrases in the 25-measure prelude) includes an oscillation between the dominant B7 chord and the A minor triad.

Spiegelberg goes beyond simply describing the work's musical features (melody, harmony, form); he colors, animates, and links them together with metaphors to create a verbal discourse. In his analysis, he describes an "innocence" in the opening tonic harmony; a spatial movement ("lifts up") of pitch; a desire within the melody ("the E refuses to let go"); and an "oscillation" of the subdominant and dominant harmonies. An interpretation such as this seems to require an aesthetic leap of faith because Chopin provides the listener with no specific pretext for any of the preludes within this collection, yet they appear to project a character that yearns for interpretation. Much like Spiegelberg, Hans von Bülow fulfills this request by ascribing epithets to each prelude, naming *Prelude in E minor*, "Suffocation" (Schonberg 2006 [1963]: 136-37). When placed within this context, it is possible to understand what von Bülow hears: the melody, as a character, is slowly asphyxiated by the encumbrance of the left hand; it struggles several times to break free (most notably in mm. 9, 12, 16-18) but is drawn down by the inevitability of the powerful accompaniment. Although von Bülow offers this prelude only a single descriptive word and Spiegelberg's description is brief, the entailments of

these readings clear a path for further interpretations *ad infinitum*; those above are a mere taste of this potential.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of perception is intimately tied to metaphor and helps us to understand metaphor's value as an interpretive tool. In *Philosophical Investigations* (1953: 165-78), Wittgenstein writes about two forms of visual perception, one purely perceptual (pre-conceptual) and the other interpretive (conceptual). He constructs two verbal exchanges to demonstrate their differences:

[There are] two uses of the word "see". The one: "What do you see there?"—"I see *this*" (and then a description, a drawing, a copy). The other: "I see a likeness between these two faces."—let the man I tell this to be seeing the faces as clearly as I do myself (165).

In the first type, the visual phenomenon is perceived as a stimulus devoid of representation and structural hierarchy, what we will refer to as simply "seeing." Here, Wittgenstein points to a drawing of a face but describes its perception as only curved lines and dots. The viewer does not understand the relationship between the drawing's elements nor does he know which represents more essential or less elements of a real face. We understand, however, that those lines creating the nose, for instance, are less necessary to representing the face than those of the eyes and mouth. In the second bit of dialogue, the object is understood representationally; that is, a likeness is drawn between the face on the paper and an abstract face conceived within the mind. We refer to this

mode of perception as “seeing-as” because this perception leans toward a specific representation.

Roger Scruton seems to proceed directly from Wittgenstein in *The Aesthetics of Music* (1997: 80-96) when he considers music by definition to be highly representational, stating that “[m]etaphor describes exactly *what* we hear, when we hear sound as music” (96, italics mine); essentially, Scruton claims that music is an artificial construct. He puts forth the thesis that music—to be considered music—presupposes the existence of an organizational entity, understood by Scruton to be tonality. Music, then, is not tonal by perception but tonal only by conception. In adopting Wittgenstein's language, tonality requires the *hearing-as* paradigm. By projecting tonality onto sound, we employ a metaphor of structural hierarchy that organizes sound and permits the conception of sound as music. Our knowledge of the aesthetic allows us to continue to organize the sound into more highly structured conceptual constructions such as pitch, harmony, tonality, motifs, gestures, and topics. Some of these aesthetic framings are so ubiquitous that it seems impossible for one to revert back to the pre-representational stage. Just as we can no longer observe the lines and dots without conceptually creating a face, it is difficult not to hear low-level musical conceptualizations (e.g., beat and pitch). Other representations, such as topics, work at higher-levels and demand less well-known musical competencies. That the melody within *Prelude in E minor* descends is intuitive;

however, it is far less likely for a listener to recognize that the minor mode and chromatic harmonies reflect the *Empfindsamkeit* aesthetic of the eighteenth century.

As I will explain in detail below, metaphor involves the transfer of a familiar area of knowledge into an unfamiliar one in such a way as to expose congruencies in both content and function, the same type of framing described by Wittgenstein. For instance, one may understand the details of electric flow (unfamiliar) by drawing parallels between it and the flow of a river (familiar). Often the conjoinment of these areas of knowledge is established through an explicit pretext, as in the statement: "Electricity is a river." In music, such pretexts often come in the form of titular epithets (*Eroica*, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, *The Planets* ) or a series of program notes, a practice that came into fashion with the rise of Romanticism and the interpretive privilege of musical authorship. Saint-Saëns' *The Carnival of the Animals* is an excellent example of such a pretext for framing our listening. Its fourteen movements comprise a program that evokes the sights and sounds of carnival featuring various animals and musicians. Figure 2 depicts mm. 3-7 of the fourth movement, which Saint-Saëns titled "Tortoises." Upon listening to this movement, one cannot help but sense a languid character projected by the slow tempo (*Andantino maestoso*), further achieved by the strings' duple beat divisions against the faster triple divisions of the piano. The thematic material, unmistakably lifted from Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*, is markedly slower than that which exists in the memory of the listener, thus furthering the characterization of the sluggish reptile.

The pretexts of programs and the intertexts that guide topical competencies enable us to frame our listening so that we can, for example, hear music either as animals (tortoises) or as a display of inward sensibility. Still, Spiegelberg hears desire and movement within the prelude, and von Bülow understands it as suffocation *without* any known pretext or musical intertext suggesting these interpretations. In the following section, I examine the mechanism of metaphor and explore its ability to enable musical interpretation.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the largest surge of publications in the field of linguistics since that of the Prague School of the 1930s. Reacting to the semiotic trends that focused primarily on sign relationships, semanticists such as D. A. Cruse (1986), Geoffrey Leech (1974), and John Lyons (1977) each wrote exhaustive texts that expanded on Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's *signifier and signified*.<sup>3</sup> In the midst of this scholarly activity, American linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson exposed the ubiquity of metaphor in a publication that straddled the line between scholarly and lay texts entitled *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). This work sparked a discussion of possible metaphoric mechanisms and proposed a new model for understanding language that resonated strongly in the following decades.

The mechanism of metaphor is grounded in semantic field theory, which was introduced and notably theorized by Jost Trier. Essentially, semantic fields are

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<sup>3</sup> According to Saussure's binary model of signification, the *signifier* is a sign that refers to an object or idea, the *signified* (1974: 67-68 [1916]).

repositories of concepts that are brought together on account of their semantic relationships to one other. Trier writes:

Fields are living realities intermediate between individual words and the totality of the vocabulary; as parts of a whole they share with words the property of being integrated in a larger structure and with vocabulary the property of being structured in terms of smaller units (quoted in Lyons 1997: 253)

More plainly, a semantic field is composed of a constellation of related concepts bound together by a *locus* concept that defines the field. Looking again to *The Carnival of the Animals*, Figure 3 shows that within the TORTOISE field exists those concepts closely associated with tortoises (e.g., animal, slow, shell) as well as those concepts that are relatively distant but maintain accepted associations with the tortoise (e.g., longevity, steadfast, coldblooded).<sup>4</sup>

In metaphor a unit from one semantic field is placed within another semantic field where it previously had not existed. For example, Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 4) note that elements from the semantic field WAR are commonly placed into the ARGUMENT or DEBATE field.

*Kennedy easily defeated Nixon in the first debate.*

The above sentence suggests that the debate between the two presidential candidates aims

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to understand that each element that exists in the periphery of one field occupies the center of its own field; however, the relationship among concepts is not exactly reciprocated within other semantic fields. In other words, "tortoise" is  $x$  distance from "longevity" in the field TORTOISE, yet "tortoise" is  $y$  distance, perhaps much further, from "longevity" with respect to the field LONGEVITY.

to determine a winner and a loser, not to generate a productive outcome through their interaction. Because we can identify congruencies between *war* and *argument*, we are able to import concepts from one field into the next and to coordinate them appropriately. Although WAR and ARGUMENT seem to have an obvious connection, our facility with metaphor permits us to transfer elements into fields that are less intuitively linked. For instance, when generally incompatible fields such as DOG and BOOK merge, the resultant meanings at first appear undecipherable.

He **barked** at the *book*.

*Rex* was **read**.

The **novel** played fetch.

But despite the irreconcilable nature between the units in these examples, we attempt to make sense of these blended fields. In the first example, one can imagine that someone provides a book with a scathing review. These interpretations are evidence of our desire to extract—even to create—meaning (e.g., *He barked at the book in his scathing review in the Times*.). Other appropriate means for bringing these fields together are not that difficult to construct. Our ability to make sense of "dog-eared pages" or "*Fido* turning a new page" also portray our competency with language and our desire to make and to understand metaphors.

The metaphor that occurs in Saint-Saëns' *Tortoises* involves elements from the field TORTOISE being placed within the field MUSIC, creating a blend of the two. The

slowness of the melody and its low register are projected onto the tortoise's pace and size accordingly. Perhaps the most notable work in music and metaphor comes from Lawrence Zbikowski (1997, 2002) who, proceeding from Lakoff and Johnson, claims that metaphor is accomplished through a process of unidirectional mapping. Zbikowski invokes the terms *source domain* and *target domain* in describing the substitution of a familiar and concrete domain (read: field) for one that is less familiar and abstract (201). In *Carnival of the Animals*, the music is arguably more concrete than the zoological abstractions; however the field TORTOISE is not necessarily more or less familiar than MUSIC. It is naive to think that the music brings the animals to life and forget that the knowledge and sight of these animals inspired the music. Because neither field is more familiar, it is preferred, then, to consider the semantic transfer as a blending of fields that permits the commutation of corresponding elements from each semantic field.

### ***Methodology***

Because metaphor is such a ubiquitous semiotic mechanism, it demands a procedure for implementation that restrains and guides its use; thus, I propose a two-part method that first identifies each field and then blends these fields through semantic commutation. These processes employ Wittgenstein's two modes of cognizance: pure perception (*hearing*) and framing (*hearing-as*).

As I mentioned above, Wittgenstein identifies hearing as a pre-conceptual process of perception that involves the intake of perceived stimuli. This is the sound of a bang just before it is recognized as a firing gun; it is only the bang, nothing more. Because the very act of hearing and studying music involves, at the very least, a basic level of framing, that of *hearing* sounds *as* music, I depart from identifying *hearing* as pre-conceptual perception and advance its scope along the perceptual process. Practically speaking, this means that what is considered to be hearing is placed at the level of domain and property identification, in other words, at the level that pitches, rhythms, timbres, and other musical elements are recognized as such and their qualities are evaluated.

The method I propose comprises four processes: 1) identification of oppositions; 2) ranking for salience; 3) placement into gradable and non-gradable categories; and 4) construction of a network of metaphors. In the first step, the music is excavated for oppositions that occur within a single musical domain. For instance, within the domain of pitch, a spatial up/down oppositions appears frequently; tempo may engage in a slow/fast polemic. These oppositions are implied in many cases such that one pole is represented in such a way that it can contrast with its opposite *in absentia*. The slow tempo of *Tortoises* is recognized by the remembered, though absent, quick tempo of the *Orpheus* theme.

Once the analyst identifies a sufficient number of oppositions, he or she then places them in a hierarchy organized by their perceived importance to the expression of the piece. For instance, pitch opposition plays an important role within the final

movement of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* at the opening of the *allegro energetico* where the alto's cantus firmus opposes the second species counterpoint realized in the soprano (mm. 1-9). Here, the soprano sings "*Freude schoener Goetterfunken*" ("Joy, beautiful spark of gods") against the alto's "*Seid umschlungen, Millionen!*" ("Be embraced, millions"), spatially representing through pitch the normative placement of the gods over mankind. This duality is an element of a pervasive thematic thread that binds the piece together and is, therefore, aptly considered an opposition of great expressive significance. However, registral opposition is of little interpretive potential in the opening of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 1*. The double bass and the flute occupy two registers that approach opposing boundaries with little interpretive consequence or conceptual salience because the voicing is commonplace among the corpus of Beethoven's music.

After the hierarchy of musical domains is determined, these domains are then placed into two categories: *gradable* and *non-gradable*, terms Steven Jones (2002: 12) uses to describe the relationships between opposites. For Jones, gradable oppositions represent those existing on a continuum that permits the increase and decrease in gradation of conceptual distance. Non-gradable oppositions lack this dynamism and are fixed in a dialogical, "either-or" relationship. Certain musical elements are frequently found in this relationship simply on account of their nature. The pitch and tempo of a segment of music can each be placed at a variety of locations within their respective spectra; pitches range from very high to very low and can be anything in between (and

beyond), just as tempos can be identified within a variety of ranges. Modalities, on the other hand, often exist as the binary opposition of major and minor that lacks a middle ground, creating a distinctively fixed relationship between the two. Jones' theory suggests that the gradable/non-gradable distinction can often become blurred, citing the notions of feeling "more alive" or being "extremely male" that challenge the usual view of *alive/dead* and *male/female* as binarism (12). A hypothetical example of an "extremely minor" melody would, perhaps, be one that repeatedly invokes  $\hat{3}$  and  $\hat{6}$ . As pitches that inform the listener of mode, their recurrent use may be intended to accentuate the "minorness" of the music. Gradable domains can, likewise, be directed toward yielding binary interpretations, as is apparent in the above description of *Symphony No. 9*, in which pitch gradations are reduced out in order to accommodate a simple *higher/lower* distinction. Once again the analyst is tasked with making interpretive decisions, which in this case are for categorizing the content of each domain.

The fourth and final step of the method involves framing the oppositions within a constellation of metaphors that permits a cohesive interpretation. Unlike the other procedures that largely rely on evaluating basic elements of musical sound, the fourth step requires us to consider music in terms of its representational qualities. I discuss procedures for guiding these decisions later in this paper.

Let us return at this point to Chopin's *Prelude in E minor* (Figure 1) in order to demonstrate the four-step process of the above method. In reading the piece and paying close attention to each musical domain, several oppositions are readily observable: high/low (pitch), slow/fast (tempo), major/minor (modality), and thick/thin (texture). The pitch of both the melody and accompaniment descend from the onset of the prelude until the downbeat of m. 12, interrupted only by a brief melodic ascent in m. 9. The melody again climbs quickly within m. 12, returning both melody and accompaniment to their original registral positions in m. 13. From here, another descent begins that continues until the final measure. The notably slow tempo (*Largo, espressivo*) is not dynamic; however, its placement near one of the extremes of the continuum places it in opposition to an absent fast tempo. The prelude's setting within the minor mode is also notable because this mode possesses an expressive meaning that is narrower than that of major (Hatten 1994: 36-38). This specificity is present in relation to the broadness of the more normative, yet missing, major mode, thus creating a dichotomy that is realized through an opposition that places major against minor. The texture also presents an opposition that involves an accompaniment of thick harmonies in close position against a single melodic line that demonstrates a greater independence. The accompaniment moves in an inevitable descent, while the melody has fleeting moments of melodic independence (mm. 3, 12, 16-18).

With these oppositions at hand (pitch, tempo, modality and texture), we now rely on musical intuition in order to make decisions about their rank or the salience of these domains within the musical setting. Although I recognize the potential shortcomings of such a subjective approach, I am confident that the underlying hierarchy of oppositions upon which metaphors are to be placed remains generally consistent from one interpretation to the next. In support of this, Leonard B. Meyer (1989: 14) identifies two orders of musical domains that organize both formal structures and listening practices, thus asserting that interpretation is intersubjective to a significant degree.<sup>5</sup> I noted above that the pitch opposition (high/low) plays an important role—the *most* important role—making two steady and generally chromatic descents in both the left- and right-hand parts. This pervading movement away from one pole and toward another is a unique and therefore notable characteristic of the piece. Furthermore, the pitch content bifurcates the prelude; once the chromatic descent slides into the dominant (m. 10) and rests there (m. 12), the prelude reaches an impasse. It is because of the melodic ascent in m. 12 that the piece restarts in the next measure. Ranked just below pitch, mode and tempo are notable features of this prelude on account of their expressive qualities. The mode distinguishes itself as atypical when compared to the normative major mode, while the slow tempo

<sup>5</sup> Meyer's "primary" and "secondary" parameters align with the domains identified in the above analyses. Primary parameters (pitch and duration) are syntactic in nature because they change, move, and progress continually. "Secondary" parameters (tempo, dynamics, timbre, etc.) are understood in terms of their qualitative, not relational, properties. Although this hierarchy undergoes some restructuring as newer styles depart from past conventions, it is merely Meyer's identification of such a widely understood hierarchy of domains that supports the intersubjectivity and value of the above interpretations.

draws our attention because of its position away from the center of the spectrum. Chopin was aware of the expressive potential of slower tempos by adding "*espressivo*," an instruction rarely attached to moderate or faster tempos. Now, although this slow tempo and the minor mode may be departures from the norm, they certainly are not nearly as rare or form-defining as the perpetual pitch descent. Neither tempo nor mode seems to be a greater force within the work; thus we need not worry about splitting hairs with regard to their rank.

At present we have a hierarchy of domains that places pitch at the top and has modality and tempo at relatively equal positions below it. We have determined that these three domains and the realization of their oppositions are notable components of the piece on account of their limited use in repertoire and expressive qualities. We must now find a place for our fourth opposition: texture. As identified above, an opposition exists between the thick texture of the left hand and the single melodic line placed in the right hand. Apart from their density, the two parts are also distinguished by their pitch content and rhythmic character; the lower voices enact a direct chromatic descent in persistent eighth notes, while the upper voice maintains a more relaxed rhythmic character and travels sinuously along a downward path. Although there is great interpretive potential to be found in the "melody/accompaniment texture" (lyricism, agency), these semiotics are much too highly structured to generate the foundational metaphors that we are presently seeking. As such, we must relegate the texture to a position below those domains we have

previously identified, completing for us the following hierarchy: pitch—modality/tempo—texture.

Our last step in pre-conceptual listening (Wittgenstein's "hearing") requires us to evaluate the oppositions present within *Prelude in E minor*, a task that can produce something of a challenge. The chromatic descents within the piece depict a shift in polarity from relative high to low points. The gradual movement across the pitch spectrum draws our focus toward the gradable quality of this opposition. The tempo possesses a similar opposition, increasing and decreasing slightly as dictated by "*espressivo*." But, still, the tempo only explores a small segment of the spectrum without ever crossing the spectral midpoint, the median tempo of Classical repertoire. Because of the tempo's placement both within a graduated spectrum and within a binary opposition to an absent, yet equally narrow, segment over the faster tempo, it possesses both gradable and non-gradable characteristics. Texture, too, permits both of these interpretations. On one hand, a binary opposition between thick and thin is maintained throughout the piece, but we should also be mindful that a range of imagined changes in the textural density of either part can still preserve their inherent opposition. For instance, the left hand could become more dense with the addition of three more voices while the two hand could have two voices, also increasing in density; yet, in spite of this change, the upper part remains thinner than the lower part. The prelude's minor mode, however, represents a clearly analogical opposition that is distinct from the others. Not only does

the minor mode exist in opposition to major, but the absence of the major mode implies the presence of the minor mode; they are a non-gradable *either-or* pair.

By identifying, ranking, and evaluating the oppositions of music's basic elements, we create an underlying structure upon which we can place a network of metaphors. We now depart momentarily from the prelude in order to discuss the "hearing-as" side of the method, the fourth step that coordinates the oppositions and aims to provide us with the appropriate metaphors to fit our structure.

Spatiality is perhaps the most widely used metaphor for conceptualizing and describing music. Pitches are *high* and *low*; developments *follow* expositions; and harmonies *move* the music *toward* cadences. Zbikowski (1997: 202-3) claims that the height-pitch association derives from the place of resonance in the singing body. Low pitches vibrate most intensely in the chest ("chest-voice") and high pitches strongly vibrate in the head ("head-voice"). Because the division of these semantic fields (pitch and space) predates any historical accounts, it might be assumed that the resonance location relative to the human body contributes to its existence as the most fundamental metaphor in music.<sup>6</sup>

The ubiquity of this conceptualization of music has led cognitive music theorist Steve Larson to extend the metaphor to associated physical properties. Larson's writing

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<sup>6</sup> In identifying spatial relationships in relation to the body, Zbikowski proceeds from George Lakoff (1987) and Mark Johnson (1987) in which they each identify a number of schemata that reference position in relation to the body.

on musical metaphor (1997-98; 2004) largely aims to describe and to prescribe expectation in music, particularly melodic expectation. Through empirical studies, he observes that directions in the change of pitch are often predictable; furthermore, melodic movements that run counter to common patterns are highly noticeable to listeners who are competent with the Western tonal idiom. He identifies three forces that contribute to melodic motion: *gravity*, a melody's tendency to descend; *magnetism*, a pitch's tendency to move from an unstable pitch (non-tonic triad member) to a nearby stable pitch (tonic triad pitch); and *inertia*, a melody's desire to continue in the same direction. These forces "act" on a melody in combination with one another to direct its movement from one pitch to the next. The degree to which each incites melodic movement is variable. Larson even devises a formula for calculating the degree of melodic expectation or inclination, suggesting our ability to identify nuances in musical motion on account of our experiences. At present, Larson's theory is limited in application; he discusses only three-note melodic patterns that participate in a larger melodic syntax (2004: 60) and avoids performing extensive musical analysis with these terms. In spite of these shortcomings, the point is well taken; properties of visually observable and bodily experienced phenomena are readily thrust upon music in order to understand the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar.

The process of extending metaphor can go farther than Larson indicates and permits us to create metaphors beyond those which he identifies. Just as Larson's theory

and his metaphor of gravity piggyback on Zbikowski's discussion of verticality, we can do likewise and create another metaphor by drawing together gravity with seriousness (e.g., *Please, understand the gravity of the situation.*). In doing so we have taken pitch/space, a metaphor for physical space, and through similarity have extended it to another domain, reflecting a character of solemnity. In a similar fashion, we conceive of tempo, a measure of time with regard to the recurrence of the beat, in terms of speed, a measure of distance in relation to time. We can speculate that such a metaphor receives motivation from the periodic element associated with physical speed. As a runner's speed increases, for example, so does the frequency of his or her footsteps, the runner's tempo. These two meanings of speed become bound by their collocation and, through repeated use, are no longer perceived as metaphoric; through convention, speed and tempo have become two sides of the same coin. To create a new metaphor for tempo, then, we might look to energy, which we can think of as an influence to speed and tempo; although, it is certainly less palpable than both. By invoking the metaphor of energy, we are better able to describe the relationship between changes in tempo and to paint a more detailed image of the music. Energy also opens the door to further entrainments, such as strength and agility, which other domains such as texture can reinforce. By hearing texture in terms of thickness and understanding it in combination with power or dexterity, we begin to create a network of gradable oppositions from different domains that offer possibilities for rich textual interpretation.

Framing non-gradable oppositions requires much less interpretive effort because the relationship between the two components is fixed on account of limitations imposed upon them. Unlike the metaphor of verticality, in which pitch exists in a variety of locations (e.g., high, very high, low, very low, etc.), elements in non-gradable oppositions occur in only one of two states. As identified in the analysis of *Prelude in E minor*, the major/minor duality exists because the piece is set within an idiom that places music within one of these two modes; it is what each of these modes represents that creates the opposition. At any given musical moment within the Classical style, the key is either minor or major, tragic or nontragic (Hatten 1994: 36-38). We can identify other features as non-gradable oppositions by appropriately framing less intuitively binary elements. For instance, as part of a formal theory, A. B. Marx views dominant and tonic keys as representing departure and return and finds these key relationships embodied as dominant and tonic harmonies (1852: Introduction). We see a similar dichotomy between dominant and tonic within the *Ursatz* of Schenkerian theory.

I view these non-gradable oppositions as embodying two parts of a dialogue in which the result is either constructive or destructive based on the maintenance or subversion of value within each pair. A constructive dialogue refers to the instance in which both elements of the binary pair work together to achieve a common goal. An example of this occurs in the duet "*Là ci darem la mano*" from Act I of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Elvira resists Giovanni's seduction at first and the two sing temporally distant

parts of the duet; Giovanni sings the antecedent phrase, a one-measure instrumental interpolation occurs, and then Elvira sings the consequent phrase. As the song proceeds and Elvira falls in love with Giovanni, she begins to finish melodic fragments sung by him, and in the end, the two sing together in harmony. Here, we observe two opposing entities—tenor and soprano—working together to create an aggregate that maintains the distinctiveness of each voice part. Destructive dialogues, by contrast, occur as a struggle between two oppositions, leading to an imbalance of power and value. Beethoven's overture to *Egmont* demonstrates this by beginning solemnly in F minor and ending triumphantly in F major. This transformation reflects its Goethean pretext in which the oppressed Dutch (minor) find a hero in Egmont who leads them to victory (major) over the Spaniards. Certainly the dramatic pretext that influences the music is not a dialogue or conversation in the most literal sense, but one is plainly seen when framed as such.<sup>7</sup>

Within *Prelude in E minor*, we have identified oppositions within four domains: pitch, modality, tempo, and texture. Identified as the most important of these domains functioning within the piece, we look toward pitch both to begin our interpretation and to guide the coordination of metaphors. The two pervasive descents that delineate the form of the piece reflect a downward motion, perhaps suggesting a succumbing to the effect of gravity. This is further portrayed in the melodic motion that occurs in mm. 9 and 12,

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<sup>7</sup> The structure of the destructive dialogue serves merely as a model which, according to William Echard (1999: 143), we can "dress up" as a number of things such as a war, a fight, an argument, or an athletic match.

where the melody exhibits a resistance to the gravitational pull through quick, energetic upwards bursts. Similar melodic motion occurs in mm.16-18. The range of the left hand in m. 17 is uncharacteristically large and shifts quickly between low octave Bs (B<sub>1</sub> and B<sub>2</sub>) on the downbeat to an F# diminished triad in the second half of the beat that reaches high into the fourth octave. On beat two of this measure, C<sub>6</sub> sounds in the right-hand part and represents the melodic high point of the piece. The combination of increased melodic motion and the sudden expansion of the range creates the most climactic moment within the prelude. From here, the melody traverses downward and the range narrows as the piece moves toward its conclusion. This resistance and submission to the metaphoric gravity that we project upon the piece implies that we hear a sense of energy existing within the music. This comes as no surprise because everyday physics tells us that both gravity and energy excite and move objects. Within music, gravity and energy *move* pitches to create melodic motion, or more appropriately, we perceive changes in pitch as motion enacted by the forces of gravity and energy.

Forces are interesting things because they cannot be directly perceived by the senses; rather, they are present only inasmuch as their effects are present. We cannot see gravity; however, we can see an object fall to the ground and use gravity to explain its downward motion. Gravity is no more (or less) present in music. We hear a falling melodic line, observe its motion, and explain away this motion with gravity. Because the forces themselves are only observable through the changes they enact in perceivable

"objects" (e.g., pitches), forces as metaphors are secondary in music. In other words, the act of hearing pitches as moving within vertical space permits us to entrain gravity and energy as associated metaphors. These forces do not act upon music; rather, music enacts them. We observe a similar entrainment with regard to the conceptualized position of emotions. Within this emotional space, *high* corresponds to happiness and *low* points toward a state of depression. Just as we hear high and low pitches, we can see joy in a person's smile or sadness in his or her tears. These are states that are observable by the senses and conceptualized by the mind; however, the influences or forces that motivate these emotions are not always perceivable, yet even without a clear context to inform us, we often correctly conclude that good news has caused joy while bad news has led to anguish. Thus, we see that a central metaphor (vertical pitch) suggests other associated metaphors (gravity and energy), enabling a broader interpretative reach that creates a much more tightly-bound network musical and metaphoric concepts.

The similarity between these vertical spaces that permits the commutation of pitch for emotional state creates deeper meanings within the piece than are available with only the physical metaphors of height and the forces of gravity and energy. With this, a downward melodic motion can now point toward a lowering of emotional state caused by, say, a death; however, we must look at other musical domains to strengthen this interpretation. Modality, we have identified, is the second most important musical domain within this prelude, and it is valuable to our interpretation. Although it contrasts with the

major mode by its use of lowered scale degrees ( $\hat{3}, \hat{6}, \hat{7}$ ), perhaps reflecting a metaphoric lowering of an emotional state, its placement within a countless number of tragic settings is much more convincing evidence that it complements the solemn character projected by the pitch.

The tempo *Largo* and its pairing with *espressivo* assist the minor mode in projecting a sense of tragedy with the prelude, but its association with tragic settings is a bit less directed. Certainly Chopin's funeral marches and Mozart's Requiem are solemn pieces with slow tempos, but it seems that it is their setting in minor and their societal function that does most of the heavy lifting, semiotically speaking. Minor keys ubiquitously indicate an emotional weight and indicate tragedy or death even when removed from a funeral or in the absence of a tragic text. Slow tempos, however, enjoy a much less restricted use in this repertoire. Slow court dances of the French Baroque such as the *sarabande* and the *courante* carry an air of seriousness (Little and Jenne 1991: 92-94, 114-15) when compared to their more lively counterparts, the *gigue* and *contredanse*; still, slow tempo settings, such as the Baroque aria, are not ostensibly bound to solemnity, although they do often indicate a lack of energy that the minor key can help to better direct toward tragedy.

We have already characterized the dense texture of the left hand in our above analysis, having identified the many notes within the lower register that crowd the sonic space. We observe this density also in the temporal space that is occupied by the eighth-

note rhythm. Yet in spite of these persistent chordal pulses, the harmonies transform rather slowly by comparison; the frequency of descent is generally one note per half measure. In following the entailments of this density and the slow harmonic movement, we understand a marked lack of dexterity within the music. In mm. 1-9 the voices of the accompaniment descend only by half- and whole-steps and make no upward motions. From this physical metaphor, we are able to move toward an emotional metaphor that permits the texture to more completely interact with the metaphors of solemnity and emotional weight by which we understand the pitch, tempo, and modality. When placed in this field, the indolence of the physical motion becomes a metaphor for the inevitability of a tragic outcome. The music cannot help but be somber.

Once put in place, we can validate—or find support for—our network of metaphors with the help of an existing pretext. As noted previously, Von Bülow's "Suffocation" is one of several epigraphs ascribed to the prelude that identifies an emotional weight existing within the piece and provides it with a greater degree of imagery.<sup>8</sup> To bring these metaphors into the same metaphoric space, we overlay our broad metaphor of an inevitably descending emotional state with von Bülow's more articulate image of suffocation. The integration of these metaphors is mutually beneficial. The process of suffocation enacts a physical depression, the lowering of the body, while the

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<sup>8</sup> George Sand provides another notable epigraph, "*Quelles larmes au fond du cloître humide*" ("What Tears within the Depths of a Damp Monastery") which also embodies the somber character reflected within the piece. (Eigeldinger 1986: 281n.19)

emotional depression reflects our observation of this dire state. The richness of this interpretation permits a more engaging experience and a more tenable image to emerge from the music. This creates a tapestry of blended fields that permits us to simultaneously invoke several metaphors within the same breath: "The *melody* (MUSIC) slowly succumbs to *gravity* (PHYSICAL) and reflects the *helpless* (EMOTIONAL) process of suffocation."

### ***Consulting Pretexts and Intertexts***

We must be careful not to assume that we are ever placing metaphors into vacuous musical settings. Every work, no matter how depleted of topics or programmatic material, contains some faint pretextual and intertextual traces for which metaphor acts only as a supplement. I have identified several common metaphors during my methodological explication and the above analysis of Chopin's *Prelude in E minor*. From this, I move on to another prelude from the same collection in order to examine the conjoining of metaphor with a clear intertext and pretext in an analysis of his *Prelude in A major*, Op. 28, no. 7.

We begin our analysis of *Prelude in A major* (Figure 4) by searching for oppositions within each musical domain, ranking their importance in defining the piece, and analyzing the nature of the oppositions. Now familiar with the methodology, we can

take a less didactic approach to the analysis and integrate these steps to create a more free-flowing discourse, the goal of the fourth step. We might view harmony as the primary organizing force within the prelude, noting the oscillation between dominant and tonic harmonies in two-measure intervals that comprises much of the work. Measures 1-2 contain the dominant, and mm. 3-4 follow with the tonic. The two musical units parallel one another in the character of their rhythm, texture, and figuration but differ primarily in their harmonic content, thus creating a dialogical relationship between the two. The first two measures of dominant harmony are left open and are subsequently completed by the second two measures of tonic; in a metaphoric sense, the dominant asks and the tonic answers. The conversation continues with the pick-up into m. 5 in which the dominant persists, this time with the added tension of a ninth ( $F\#_4$ ) that the tonic soon removes in mm. 7-8. The two harmonic units begin to draw closer together in this second section of dialogue. A fusion of the two-measure dominant and tonic units occur in m. 6 with the pick-up to m. 7 containing  $G\#_4$ , the missing third of the previous  $V^9$ . Their integration moves toward completion with the third utterance of the dominant (mm. 9-10) followed by a tonic response that suddenly transforms chromatically into  $V^7/ii$  in m. 12. With this, the syntactic roles ascribed to each harmonic agent are reversed, and the previously "responding" harmony transforms into a "questioning" quasi-dominant. Such a reversal obscures both the character and delineation of each two-measure unit and weakens the nature of their opposition. In m. 13, the supertonic triad resolves the chromatic tension of

the applied dominant, while acting as a predominant to  $V^7$  that occurs in m. 14. By mediating this harmonic space, the supertonic exists in a liminal state in which it both resolves dissonance and propels motion toward the dominant, thus embodying a sense of unity between the harmonic oppositions that is produced through their interaction.

Chopin makes a very transparent reference to the mazurka by invoking a unique rhythmic figure that is typical to the genre. The relationship between rhythm and meter, which places the emphasis on the second beat of a three-beat measure, is perhaps the most notable element of the mazurka and one that continuously occurs throughout the prelude. The resolution of harmonic instability and the completion of the texture that occur in beat two of each measure also contribute to the displacement of the metric accent. In Figure 4 we see the non-chord tones  $C\#_4$  and  $D_4$  of m. 1 resolve to the dominant in the following beat as the addition of  $E_3$  and  $E_4$  in the left hand and  $D_4$  and  $G\#_4$  in the right hand mediate the previously wide textural gap found in beat one. The genre is further represented by the major mode setting and the left-hand um-pah-pah accompanimental gesture that pervades the work. The placement of the prelude and the mazurka together in a single work creates a large intertextual network that combines two bodies of genre-defining texts. We bring the mazurka into focus within this analysis because it is both the imported style type and the one revealed by its most generic features.

The extent to which a purely metaphoric reading fits together with the intertextual

interpretation serves as the litmus test for the effectiveness of the methodology. Although early in this paper I ventured to develop an interpretive tool that could be implemented in the absence of any guidance from sources outside the music, its interaction with them is immensely valuable. As it is impossible for there to exist a single and true interpretation, our only goal is to put in place metaphors that create a highly viable reading that sufficiently elucidates meaning and makes the music more tenable for the listener. I now shift the focus toward integrating our network of oppositions with an analysis that places it face to face with intertextual information. In doing so, we not only evaluate the efficacy of our interpretation, but we are able to confidently extend metaphors, creating a richer interpretation of the music.

The mazurka finds its home in Chopin's own Poland as a folk dance performed by groups of paired couples that exchange partners throughout its unfolding. In addition to its distinctive rhythmic and metric features, the dance typically takes on an *AABBCC* formal structure and a rapid tempo. The dance itself reflects the music as the performers take a glide step on beat one that defers the weight of the body to the step on beat two. Because of the dance's brisk tempo, the suspension of weight during the first beat appears natural and projects a lightness and agility of the body. Although enough generic elements occur within the prelude to reveal the mazurka, its irregular tempo presents a significant stylistic departure. The tempo marking, *Andantino*, sets a pace for the dance that is far slower than even the most timid of danced mazurkas and permits an inward and

reflective character to emerge. The extended formal structure and the other couples are removed, placing just two dancers, realized musically as dominant and tonic, to engage in a private dialogue with one another as reflected in the metaphoric analysis above. By integrating the metaphoric reading of the harmonic dialogue with the topical reading that evokes the dancing couple, a hybrid interpretation emerges in which the constructed harmonic unity and the unity of the dancing bodies merge, transcending semantic fields and permitting a more palpable conception of the piece that enable a more expressive discourse.

### ***Conclusion***

In spite of the interpretive gains that metaphor enables, there remain some limitations to its effectiveness. First, our use of metaphor implies that music can mean something that is beyond the notes themselves. This supposition is taken to task by the formalist approach put forth in the nineteenth century that opts for a more positivist approach. Eduard Hanslick's assertion that music possesses "a beauty that is self-contained and in no need of content from outside itself" characterizes the aesthetic most succinctly.<sup>9</sup> For Hatten, this approach is symptomatic of the lack of a theory that connects

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<sup>9</sup> Robert W. Hall (1995) contends that modern scholarship has unfairly treated Hanslick as a whipping boy for formalism. Hall cites several instances within *The Beautiful in Music* and *Music Criticism, 1846-1899* in which Hanslick describes specific pieces with extra-musical imagery.

structure and expression, a situation that we have since moved beyond with advances in musical semiotics (1994: 228-29). Second, the importance or salience of musical features within a piece relies greatly on one's own intuition, yet with support from Meyer (1989: 14), I believe that these decisions lie on somewhat solid ground, stable enough to permit an intersubjective experience that analysts find valuable. Still, without a lexicon for musical metaphor or a methodology for universally structuring musical features, we must exercise caution in our interpretive pursuits to avoid inappropriately shoehorning a metaphor into a setting in which it does not belong.

Scholarship in semiotics has enabled interpretation to have a much wider grasp on music, to cover more area and to glean previously obscured information to engender new meaning. Studies of musical metaphor, however, seem to go a different route, looking inward toward structure and mechanism rather than outward toward interpretation. To be sure, musical topics and written discourse as intertexts and pretexts are in part the products of perceived similarities between musical and non-musical fields; they are essentially grounded in metaphor. We hear rapidly changing moods (*Empfindsamkeit*) in passages with long pauses and contrasting tempos and can see couples dancing before French royalty when we encounter the rhythms of *courantes*, *sarabandes*, and *gavottes*. However, the gaps that exist where these musical signifiers intersect make interpretation a daunting task. Delineating topics and fitting them together within a pretext in these instances can be quite disconcerting, and in the absence of a clear context, past methods

have made it all but impossible. By reintroducing metaphor into interpretation, we can seal together existing intertexts and pretexts and make the process of interpreting music more readily within our grasp.

# FIGURES

Largo.

4. *p* *espressivo*

4. *p* *espressivo*

8

12

16 *stretto* *f* *dim.* *p*

20 *smorz.* *pp*

C

Figure 1. *Prelude in E minor, Op. 28, no. 4* (Chopin)

**Andante maestoso**

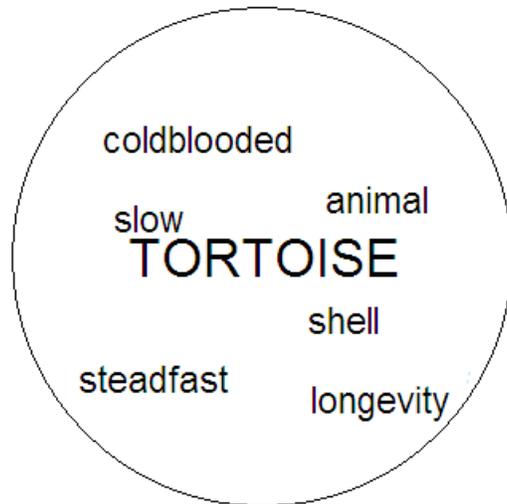
1<sup>er</sup> PIANO *pp*

3 4 5 6

1<sup>er</sup> VIOLON  
2<sup>d</sup> VIOLON  
ALTO *pp*

VIOLONCELLE  
CONTREBASSE *pp*

**Figure 2.** *Carnival of the Animals*, "Tortoises" (Saint-Saëns)



TORTOISE

**Figure 3.** Relationships within TORTOISE field

7. **Andantino.**  
*p dolce e semplice*

3 4 5 1 2

3 4 5 4 5 4 2

11 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5

Red. \* Red. \* Red. \* Red. \*

Figure 4. *Prelude in A minor*, Op. 28, no. 7 (Chopin)

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