

Music Theory, Music History, and Quicksand

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ONE OF THE ISSUES RICHARD TARUSKIN RAISES IN HIS essay on Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's influence on Russian composers—and especially on Igor Stravinsky—is the relationship between music history and music theory. In recounting the responses of music theorists to his discovery of antecedents of Stravinsky's compositional practice in that of Rimsky-Korsakov, Taruskin likens these theorists to creationists who refuse to believe that the exquisite order of the world could be other than it is: "The resistance to Rimsky and Russia as factors in Stravinsky's musical patrimony seems to me to be of a piece with the resistance of creationists to the prospect that mankind may have descended from lower primates, or that the species *Homo sapiens* may have originated in Africa."¹ Music historians, by contrast, are like evolutionists: rather than accepting the exquisite order of the world as a given they struggle to understand both how this order emerged over time and the various forces which shaped that which we now behold.

Although there would seem to be few possibilities for dialogue between such sharply divided world views, Taruskin takes heart from the work of Robert Gjerdingen and myself, which he sees as offering an approach to music theory of a more evolutionist bent. Indeed, Taruskin writes that I consider what he calls creationist music theory to be "built on quicksand." It should be noted, however, that quicksand is tricky stuff, and so it would be well to have ready to hand the complete passage from which that observation is drawn; it served as the opening paragraph of a paper I first delivered in Hamburg in 2005:

A number of years ago I came to the conclusion that the discipline of music theory was built on quicksand. Music theory was understood to be the study of the structure of music, but the structure of music appeared to have no existence independent of music theory. The structure of music was, in short, whatever music theory said it was. I didn't care for this conclusion, so I set about trying to find a firm foundation for music theory. I began with the question of where the structure of music came from. The answer that I arrived at is that the structure of music is a reflection of the cognitive capacities of human beings. On the whole, this is not very surprising, since music is a product of human beings and of human beings only. But the formulation had a profound impact on how I thought about music theory: its logical entailment is that music theory has to come to terms with the cognitive capacities of human beings, for it is these that make music—and musical structure—possible.²

For my part, I did not view the notion that musical structure was some sort of a given as being allied with the perspectives of creationists but with approaches to the study of musical

organization that drew on work in the sciences. While I could appreciate correlations between patterns manifested within the natural world and certain of the materials basic to music, I failed to see how the complex realities of musical practice could be compassed by such patterns—again, I understood music to be a product of human beings and of human beings only. And so a scientific or quasi-scientific approach based on the assumption that the organization of music was in some way similar to the organization of the natural world seemed to me the wrong way to go about things.

Two comments are in order here. First, I do not regard the foundation of ethnomusicology or of historical musicology as intrinsically any more secure than that of music theory: the view that musical structure is an inherent property of musical works is not one limited to the discipline of music theory. Second, the formulation of disciplinary crisis I offered is one borrowed from the linguist Ronald Langacker, who used it in a slightly different context. In the preface to the first volume of his *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar*, which appeared in 1987, Langacker observed:

There is no comprehensive and unified theoretical framework available that successfully accommodates our growing factual and analytical knowledge of language structure in all of its many aspects, treating it naturally and insightfully as an integrated whole. In short, the overall picture is one of fragmentation and confusion.³

Langacker went on to record his profound dissatisfaction with this state of affairs, and to remark, "Rightly or wrongly, I concluded some time ago that the conceptual foundations of linguistic theory were built on quicksand, and that the only remedy was to start over on firmer ground."⁴ Langacker's "starting over" eventually extended to five books and numerous other publications and, together with work by Bill Croft, Gilles Fauconnier, Adele Goldberg, George Lakoff, Len Talmy, and many others, created the core of the disciplinary focus known as cognitive linguistics. My own project is, of course, modest in comparison to these impressive efforts, and my attempt to provide music theory with firmer ground is, of necessity, at a more preliminary stage.

One of the key assumptions of the approach I developed is that musical understanding is organized around musical concepts, which I view as holistic cognitive structures resulting from processes of categorization. In *Conceptualizing Music*, my initial illustrations focused on musical motives, building in part on observations by Arnold Schoenberg on how composers

¹ Taruskin (2011, 180).

² Zbikowski (2008, 447).

³ Langacker (1987, 3).

⁴ *Ibid.*

needed to shape materials to make them comprehensible to the listener.⁵ I went on to observe that, while assorted motive forms provided a good account of the sort of holistic structures in which I was interested, I viewed musical concepts as quite various and extending to patterns very similar to those basic to the *partimenti* discussed by Robert Gjerdingen.⁶ I proposed that musical concepts, however they were configured, could be related to one another and to non-musical concepts through the process of cross-domain mapping, and that correlated musical and non-musical concepts were among the basic building blocks of the small-scale inferential structures (which I called conceptual models) fundamental to theories of music.⁷

It bears mention here that, within this context, the role of the listener is defined not by a particular set of competencies but as a position within a set of interpersonal exchanges. From this perspective—and bearing in mind the sort of shared intentionality basic to H. P. Grice’s model for intersubjective communication⁸—the distinction between the poietic and esthetic perspectives adopted by Jean-Jacques Nattiez and others seems rather forced: the composer, improviser, or performer needs to know, at least in its broad outlines, the listener’s perspective, as does the listener that of the producers of musical utterances, and this knowledge shapes the production and the reception of music. In each case, I understand this knowledge to be organized around conceptual models, which are shared by members of a musical community, something I set out in both *Conceptualizing Music* and later work.⁹

So where does this leave music theory? First, it offers an opportunity to reconfigure music theory as a richly humanistic discipline. Although it seems a curious fact, as a whole the humanities have often failed to acknowledge that to be human—to have language, literature, art, music, and the rest—is to be possessed of capacities that are simply beyond those of other species. This is not to say that these capacities are unrelated to those of other species, for in various other mammals—and particularly among primates and cetaceans—we see highly complex social structures and shared cultural knowledge. Nonetheless, we have at this point little evidence that even the most accomplished members of other species have the capacity for anything like the creativity and flexibility of thought that humans typically demonstrate by their third or fourth birthdays. I would argue that music theorists, with their interest and training in close readings of musical works, have the opportunity to show how the cognitive capacities of humans make possible the creation of uniquely communicative utterances. Put another way, music theorists have the skills and perspective to address the question of how music, as a product of human beings and human beings only, has come to be organized in the various ways that it has.

Second, reflection on the ways humans’ cognitive capacities shape musical utterances offers the possibility of developing interpretive models that are appropriate to specific repertoires. While it may be that there are certain organizational principles so pervasive in human musical expression as to be universal, I doubt that such principles are *musically* interesting in that they are also to be found in other forms of human communication. What *is* interesting are the ways in which musical materials are shaped to respond to historical and cultural contingencies—why, for instance, Johann Sebastian Bach’s mourning ode *Laß, Fürstin, laß noch einen Strahl* (BWV 198) of 1727 is so very different from Johann Ludwig Bach’s *Trauermusik* of 1724, or why Miles Davis’s version of “Bye Bye Blackbird” from 1956 sounds so very different from Gene Austin’s of 1926.¹⁰ Again, it is through close readings of musical works—and here I use the term expansively to include not only scores and recordings but also irreproducible performances and private imaginings—that we can find answers to such questions, making use of analytical tools that, on the one hand, can take advantage of broad commonalities across musical traditions but that, on the other hand, can be fine-tuned to capture the distinctive and idiosyncratic features through which a particular work or repertoire captures our passions.

Finally, thinking of theories of music as manifestations of humans’ more general capacities for organizing their understanding of the world offers the possibility of studying how musical knowledge is shaped and transformed over time. As an example, consider the history of symmetrical scale structures sketched by Taruskin: cyclic progressions used by Schubert and others caught Liszt’s attention and informed the compositional strategies he used in his first symphonic poem; these then became an object of study for Rimsky-Korsakov, who refined them into a set of compositional procedures which are all related to what we now call an octatonic scale. It should be noted that while the abstract notion of symmetrically organized pitch structures allows us to see similarities between Schubert’s compositional strategies and those of Liszt and Rimsky-Korsakov the connection is far from obvious, not least because what is as important as the shared conception suggested by these similarities are the other compositional strategies employed by these composers. In the terms I have developed, the notion of symmetrically organized pitch structures is only one of the conceptual models used by these composers. Worthy of study are the other models they employed (which informed both their working method and the music they produced) and the manner in which this complex of models was adapted and transformed over the course of the nineteenth century. In a similar fashion, one might explore the complex of conceptual models that shaped Rimsky-Korsakov’s and Stravinsky’s employment of octatonic scales, an exploration which might go some way toward

5 Zbikowski (2002, 25–26).

6 Ibid. (59).

7 Ibid. (Chapters 2 and 3, respectively).

8 Grice (1957).

9 The sharing of conceptual models among members of a musical community is discussed in Chapter 5 of Zbikowski (2002) and in Zbikowski (2004).

10 While I have not published comparative analyses of J. S. Bach’s *Laß, Fürstin, laß noch einen Strahl* and J. L. Bach’s *Trauermusik*, I did discuss the relationship between different versions of “Bye Bye Blackbird”—including those by Austin and Davis—in Chapter 5 of Zbikowski (2002).

understanding why some of Stravinsky's apologists construe his music as having little to do with that of Rimsky-Korsakov.

I am quite aware that the view of music theory I have outlined is very different from that which developed during the latter half of the twentieth century. It is, however, one in which the notion of musical structure is much more flexible, and which better reflects the organizational principles of different musical repertoires and the place of such principles within musical practice. Although there is, within this approach, an emphasis on grounding our conception of music in what is known about human cognitive processes, I do not think it is necessary for music scholars to drop the tools they currently hold and pick up those of the "hard" scientist. Much can be accomplished simply by becoming acquainted with what we now know about human cognition, and by bringing our accounts of music into conformance with that knowledge.

Perhaps the real problem of quicksand, as the analogy applies to musical scholarship, resides in the belief that one view of music is patently superior to others. In the same volume of *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar* to which I referred earlier, Langacker noted a problematic assumption that was at the core of many linguistic theories, which he called the exclusionary fallacy:

The gist of this fallacy is that one analysis, motivation, categorization, cause, function, or explanation for a linguistic phenomenon necessarily precludes another. From a broad, pre-theoretical perspective, this assumption is gratuitous and in fact rather dubious, in view of what we know about the multiplicity of interacting synchronic and diachronic factors that determine the shape and import of linguistic expressions.¹¹

It would seem well to avoid the exclusionary fallacy in the development of our theories of music (and here I use "theory" quite broadly, embracing the entire range of scholarly thought about music), not least because music has much to teach us still. Here I am thinking of an observation made by Michael Tomasello and Josep Call who, within the context of a collection of studies on primate gesture and in a consideration of the question of why humans are the only species known to have developed language, wrote that "Language is not one thing, but rather it is a complex mosaic of skills."¹² The same could be said of music. And so there remains a need for close readings of musical works of the sort many music theorists have pursued, as well as the accounts of music regarded as a historical practice developed by historical musicologists, and for studies of the social and cultural contexts of musical practice pursued by ethnomusicologists. In trying to avoid quicksand, and to provide a firm foundation for music scholarship, we should focus less on labels and artificial constructions of ideology and more on what matters most: the study of music as one of the truly profound and compelling creations of human beings.

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¹¹ Langacker (1987, 28).

¹² Tomasello and Call (2007, 235).